

THE EXILED FILMMAKER IN POST-REVOLUTION IRAN

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF
THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS)
AT JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

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2021

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THE EXILED FILMMAKER IN POST-REVOLUTION IRAN

Submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work, carried out under the Supervision of **Dr Manas Ghosh**, Assistant Professor, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University.

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the following people for their relentless support and contribution in translating my research into a PhD thesis. Over the years that I spent conducting my research and writing this thesis, I benefited greatly from the assistance of many Iranian filmmakers who kindly agreed to meet me and be interviewed in person, or via online platforms. My research would not have been possible without their generosity and support. I thank filmmakers Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, Bahman Ghobadi, Mohammad Rasoulof, Manijeh Hekmat, Mohammad Shirvani, Khosro Sinai, Kianoush Ayyari, for being generous with their time, sharing all their films with me, trusting me, and agreeing to appear before my camera. Their accounts provided me with first hand, primary and valuable research material without which a detailed analysis of exile in Iranian cinema would not have been possible.

I thank my supervisor Dr Manas Ghosh who sowed the first seeds of wonder for Iranian Cinema and poetry in my heart. While we were studying Film Studies as a masters discipline at Jadavpur University in 2011, Dr Ghosh taught us the module on Iranian Cinema. His classes and readings of the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad inspired me to travel to Iran. I wished to learn Persian and read Forough's verses in the original Farsi, and meet the filmmakers whose cinema showed the humane side of a country forever misrepresented by Western media. I express my sincere gratitude to him for the academic as well as mental support he extended especially during the lockdown in 2020-21.

I thank Professor Moinak Biswas for teaching us the values of research, discipline, and accountability to oneself. I consider myself fortunate to have had him as a mentor for over ten years since I was a student at the Film Studies Department. Professor Biswas repeatedly insisted on the importance of building a research community and created a space

for research activities at The Media Lab as an extension of the Film Studies Department. This is where most of my early encounter with film and archival research began. I express my gratitude to all the office, library staff and faculty members at the Department of Film Studies, for the encouragement and support they extended to me for all these years. I am grateful to Dr Anindya Sengupta for lending an eager ear and listening to my ramblings with patience and attentiveness. I thank Professor Abhijit Roy for readily offering advice on many academic and technical issues related to my work.

I extend my gratitude to the teachers at Dehkhoda, International Centre for Persian Studies at Tehran for their intensive Farsi learning program, and for creating an international space for learning, speaking and conducting research in Persian. On the first day of class, I was surrounded by students from Germany, France, Britain, Russia, Turkey, Italy, Lebanon, Syria and other parts of the world, all speaking in Persian. That surreal encounter filled me with gusto to learn the language. I thank my long-time friend Tania Bhattacharyya, with whom I travelled to Iran for the first time. The confidence with which she spoke in Persian helped me overcome my fears and inspired me to conduct most of my interviews without a translator.

Most of all I hold an immense debt of gratitude to Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani, my trusted friend, and interlocutor, who tirelessly helped me understand difficult Persian texts, helped me find references, assisted with Persian translations, and most importantly created a space for conversations, developing arguments centring around Iranian Cinema and Persian Poetry. He also continues teaching me Persian to this day. It is no exaggeration to say that my research would not have seen the light of the day without his immense encouragement and support.

Among others, I must thank all my friends and well-wishers in Iran who in their own ways have contributed to my research. Among them I must mention Farhad Kheradmand,

Taraneh Yalda, Mahsa and Parastou Narimisa, Samira Mohammad-Ali, Feyza Betul Aydin, Alice Cheyer Nozari, Baran Arsanjani, Aida and Mina Mohammadkhani, Golriz Irani, Mahyar Sadeghi, Samira Ettefagh, Ali Mostafavi, Ali Asaie, Kaveh Sabbaghi, Maede, Lieke Schut, Buna Alkhas, Nina Kadjar, Reza Karfar, Mobin, Matin, Mansoureh, Moein and Badri Saeedi, Mina Shafakha, Ali Moaddeli, and Maryam Parvaz. While some let me stay at their houses, some taught me how to speak in formal Persian, some introduced me to journalists and filmmakers in Iran, some provided endless cups of caffeine during rigorous work schedules in Iran, some helped me navigate the busy city by driving me to reach my interviews, fed me delicious Persian food, and most of all, all of them helped me retain mental peace by providing warmth and camaraderie during politically challenging situations in Iran. Doctoral research is supposed to be a lonely enterprise. I thank my friends at home and across borders for being in constant touch and never letting me feel isolated. I thank my friend Pradyatan Bera who spent a month in Iran assisting in my research and the audio-visual documentation of my work. I am indebted to Arijeet Mandal, Rupantara Das, Rajula Shah, Hemley Gonzalez, Debatri Sengupta, Meghna Hiran, Hiya Deb, Bappaditya Das, Debajyoti Banerjee, Pritha Biswas, Trisha Chatterjee, and Sreenjoy Dey for the love and trust they vested in my abilities.

Above all, I thank my family, my mother, Gargee Singh, and my younger brother, Sourjya Singh, for their love and unquestioning support of everything I have wanted to pursue. This PhD project would simply not have come through without their constant support, reassuring presence, labour and affection.

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PREFACE

The formation of the Islamic state in 1979, after the Revolution in Iran, and the opportunities it offered artists, especially filmmakers, saw the restructuring of organizations like the Institute of Intellectual Development of Young Adults (IIDYA) also known as *Kanun*, formed in 1965, and the Farabi Cinema Foundation formed in 1983 under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Visual Arts and Cinema have, since then, shared a rather contradictory relationship with the Islamic State. While the state encouraged and sponsored a new language of cinema, after the decades of Film Farsis, imitating the West, made in the era of the Pahlavi Dynasty, it also laid down ethical principles and censorship restrictions. Inspired by the works of Dariush Mehrjui, Ebrahim Golestan, Bahram Beyzai and Sohrab Shahid Saless, this period saw a radical change in the language of cinema, the cultural expression and development of individual identities, and the emergence of filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Bahman Ghobadi, Jafar Panahi- auteurs propelling Iranian cinema into larger transnational and global zones.

As the conflict between the state and these artists grew, innumerable cuts and restrictions were imposed on their works, resulting in a series of departures and exiles from Iran in the early 2000s. Several directors were exiled from their homes, many were arrested, their licenses seized; while a few chose to leave voluntarily in order to be able to make films. Those who remained were in no better position: fears of being uprooted made them stay on but only as internal exiles.

In my thesis I broadly divide the phenomenon of Exile into two forms, firstly, the politically banished artist, or the external exile, uprooted from the homeland and placed in unknown territories, and secondly, the internal exile, out of place within their own country, fighting for artistic expression. I evaluate the changes in cinematic expression in the works

of Mohsen Makhmalbaf – one of the founders of the Iranian New Wave, exiled in 2005, and Bahman Ghobadi, exiled in 2009. I also examine the films of Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof – both banned from filmmaking and arrested within Iran since 2010. With detailed contextual and textual analysis of the films made in exile, along with interviews of the exiled filmmakers, I probe how both conditions of exile, external or internal, alienates the *self* of the filmmaker from his immediate reality. I focus on the formation of that *self* and how it articulates through cinematic narrative, form and language.

Chapter 1: **Methodology and Literature Survey**

The first chapter of my thesis gives a detailed report (in the first person) of the methods adopted to conduct four rounds of extensive research and fieldwork in Iran. It also provides an elaborate survey of the available literature in English and Persian that I referred to in my thesis.

Chapter 2: ***Shahrefarang* and the Iranian Encounter with Modernity**

The second chapter charts the history of the arrival of the New Wave in Iranian Cinema through analyses of the film *Nasereddin Shah Actore Cinema* (1992) directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The film speaks of the Iranians' fraught encounter with modernity marked by the bringing of the still camera by Naser al-Din Shah. The chapter evaluates the journey of cinema itself (from the silent era, talkies, Film Farsis, vigilante films to the new wave) with a change of governing bodies (Qajar despots, the Pahlavi regime, and finally the Islamic Republic formed in 1979).

Chapter 3: **Exile and the Cinema of Bahman Ghobadi (in Exile)**

In this chapter, I contextualise three phases in the contemporary political history of Iran when a mass exodus took place in three distinct waves and analyse the historical and political conditions for this departure. Referring to Hamid Naficy's fourth volume in his *Social History of Iranian Cinema* series, I further classify exile in five forms. While Naficy's

work is detailed and all-encompassing until 2004-2005 (book published in 2012), charting a detailed journey of filmmakers who left by the early turn of the millennium, not much research is available of exiled artists like Ghobadi and Makhmalbaf who were exiled after 2005. While I have borrowed from his research, I add on to this by exploring the works of Bahman Ghobadi (exiled in 2009), and Mohsen Makhmalbaf (exiled in 2005) through a series of personal meetings and telephonic interviews.

In the fourth volume of his book *The Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Naficy classifies Iranian accented cinema into five overlapping categories: exilic, diasporic, emigre, ethnic and cosmopolitan. However, in the scope of this chapter, I restrict myself to studying in detail only the first and last of the categories - the exilic subject and the cosmopolitan subject. In my study of the exilic artist, I analyse the later works of Bahman Ghobadi - *Rhino Season*, (2012) made while he was living in Turkey and Greece, and *No One Knows about the Persian Cats* (2009) filmed underground in Tehran.

Chapter 4: **Bahman Ghobadi (Pre-Exile) and the Journey Narrative.**

While *No One Knows About Persian Cats* and *Rhino Season* dealt directly with exilic themes characterised by classic narratives of fear and panic with a desire for escape, reunification or return that tragically is never realised, often being consummated only by release in death; his earlier films made within Iran before his exile, ironically also dealt with themes of exile and a desire for reunification, stemming from his position and identity of being a Kurd, representing a community living in exile within their own country.

Hence exile for Ghobadi does not come with physical dislocation and geographical exile alone, but with his birth and identification as an Iranian Kurd, a community penalised, robbed of rights, marginalised, and violently erased from the national history of Iran. While the previous chapter discussed his later films, the focus of this chapter would be films made before his exile, namely *No Time For Drunken Horses* (2000), *Marooned in Iraq* (2002),

Turtles Can Fly, (2004), *Half Moon*, (2006). These films can be largely classified as journey narratives of identity, centring around borders regions of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. They involve local people living on the borders and films shot by border subjects themselves.

Borders determine life, stories and identity in the films of Ghobadi. Borders created by governments and dictators have divided and displaced the homogeneous people of Kurdistan into four countries of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, thereby making them exiles, within their host countries. Kurdistan remains a divided borderland, and a people of the same ethnicity and race, speaking the same mother tongue but severed and uprooted by man-made borders.

Along with an analysis of his films, this chapter charts the turbulent political history of border disputes in the region of Kurdistan dating back to the 16th and 17th century, aggravated by the rise of the Baath Party, the dictatorship of Saddam Hussain and his strained relationship with Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The chapter includes personal accounts of survivors who lost families and were emotionally and physically wrecked and displaced after the chemical bombing of the Iranian Kurdish region of Sardasht. Also included in the chapter is Ghobadi's account of the present condition of the region of Kurdistan.

Chapter 5: **The Cinema of Mohsen Makhmalbaf**

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of the pioneers of the Iranian New Wave cinema, began making films for the *Houzey Honari*/School of Art (an institution founded after the revolution to propagate Islamic ideas.) Like many others, he initially believed in the revolution and the promises the new government offered, but his gradual disillusionment led to his best films, *The Marriage of the Blessed*, (1989) *The Moment of Innocence*, (1996) *Gabbeh* (1996) and *Silence* (1998) among others. From repenting his allegiance toward the Islamic Republic in *The Moment of Innocence*, (where he re-tells a moment from his youth when he had shot a policeman working for the Shah- replacing violence with love signified by a flower pot and bread) to taking a radical humanist turn in *Gardener*, (2012)

Makhmalbaf's geographic shift resulted in a direct negation of the alliance of religion and state in his films.

Exiled in 2005, after making films in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Israel, Makhmalbaf remembered how the regime had dropped a war grenade on the set of his daughter, Samira's film *Two-Legged Horse* (2008) in Afghanistan. The film was completed, but they could never return home again. In an interview with me in London, he said, "The Iranian government sent a terrorist at the film set who detonated a war grenade injuring twenty crew members, killing one. We finished filming, but knew we needed to move farther away from Iran..."

Unlike Ghobadi, with exile and displacement Makhmalbaf embraces a 'universalism' in film language resisting all claims to leading a life in exile. Stressing more on the universal human predicament of displacement, he refrains from making films about specificity in race and culture or fostering nostalgia associated with home or Iranian community in exile. His films deny nationality and language associated with the original idea of home and universalises homelessness itself by situating his characters in foreign lands, telling stories of diverse communities, with characters speaking different languages (opposed to mother tongue Farsi/ Kurdish).

I analyse films such as *The Gardener* (2012) and *Margie and her Mother* (2019), made after his dislocation, where Makhmalbaf gradually makes a shift from being a rebellious artist to one who aspires to change the world through his philosophy deeply rooted in humanism and education. In this chapter, I chart a personal journey of the artist himself witnessing political upheavals in Iran and how they influence the language of his cinema. I do this by translating a collection of unpublished and untranslated poems of Mohsen Makhmalbaf written throughout his life. I use poetry to bring credibility and a personal note in the chapter. While writing this chapter I was also attending a workshop on the Art of

Filmmaking by Makhmalbaf online where he spoke about the memories associated with his cinema and the philosophy behind each of his films. The methodology for this chapter is observational and based on a study of the artist himself.

Chapters 6 and 7: **Internal Exile: The Cinema of Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof**

The sixth and the seventh chapters form the crux of my thesis. Here I bring attention to the condition of internal exile that filmmakers Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof have been subject to by the state. Tracing the political events that led to the arrest of filmmakers Panahi and Rasoulof after the Green Movement in Iran, I show how the two exiled filmmakers relate to structural oppression in their cinema. While Panahi treads on the interface between the reality of his imprisonment and the other diverse layers of oppression in society, Rasoulof depicts the systematic structure of oppression itself which may or may not directly make itself visible all the time but is embedded in the structures of governance. Rasoulof states that internal exile, isolation and imprisonment are the worst forms of exile. Even though his internal exile may not geographically displace him; in removing him from the cultural milieu of Iran, it makes him a non-entity within his own country. In an interview with me conducted online in November 2019, he says, “When you feel you are a stranger in your own country, it’s better to go to another country and feel you are a stranger there. I mean, in the cultural zone of Iran, I am a stranger. I am exiled.”

While internal exile for Panahi makes him physically step into his cinema, wherein he becomes his own subject thereby bringing in an element of the personal in his film language, Rasoulof begins shedding the caustic metaphors of indirect language to adopt a more direct language in his cinema. The chapter delves into the roots of indirection in cinematic expression in the structure of Persian language and the codes of decency and conduct, or *tarrouf*. The root of self-censorship in art stems from the codes of speech and

expression in the Persian language, which requires one to continuously censor him/herself and talk in an allegorical, and suggestive manner. Chapter 6 also includes interviews of filmmakers like Manijeh Hekmat, Mohammad Shirvani and Kianoush Ayyari who comment on the dangers of self-censorship and how it impairs art, expression and creativity in Iran. The structure of the sixth chapter is designed around the video interviews of Jafar Panahi taken during my fieldwork in Tehran between 2016-2018. It also has an in-depth film analysis of his cinema after his conviction in 2010. Chapter seven traces the shift in the cinematic language of filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof before and after his exile, from indirection to direction, laying bare the inherent contradictions in the position of the internally exiled filmmaker.

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Glossary of Persian Words

Latinized Persian	English	Persian
<i>Aabgusht</i>	A traditional persian dish comprising lamb stew thickened with chickpeas and potatos	آب گوشت
<i>Alam</i>	Flag; refers to a sign made out of wood or metal, with special symbols to commemorate Imam Hossein	علم
<i>Allah ho akbar</i>	God is greater [than can be described]	الله و اکبر
<i>Amir-al-m'umineen</i>	Commander of the faithful; a title given to leaders or kings in Islamic history; Among Shias Muslims this title is reserved only for Ali, the fourth Caliph and the first Imam	امیر المومنین
<i>Andarooni</i>	Private part of the house for family and servants	اندرونی
<i>Antar</i>	A breed of monkeys used in street performances	عنتر/انتر
<i>Aruz</i>	Prosody	عروض
<i>Arzel -el-omr</i>	A period after old age where one begins to lose memory	ارذل العمر
<i>Ashura</i>	10th day in the month of Muharram, or the day in which Imam Hossein was martyred in the battle of Ashura	عاشورا
<i>Atefeh</i>	Affection, emotion, sympathy	عاطفه
<i>Atiyeh</i>	Future	آتیہ
<i>Ayeneh</i>	Mirror	آینه
<i>Ayeneh sham daan</i>	Mirror and candle stands	آینه شمعدان
<i>Aziz os- soltan</i>	The title given to Malijak by Naser al-Din Shah, meaning 'the king's darling'	عزیز السلطان
<i>Ba qeyrat</i>	A man with honor and pride; one who is diligent in protecting female members of his family	با غیرت
<i>Bab</i>	Door; title of Ali Muhammad Shirazi, founder of Babisim	باب
<i>Bakri-eid</i>	One of two Islamic holidays commemorating Abraham trying to sacrifice his son	عید قربان
<i>Baseigi</i>	One of the five forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. During the Iran-Iraq war it was a title given to volunteer soldiers	بسیجی

<i>Bazaar</i>	Market	بازار
<i>Bibonyadi</i>	Baselessness	بی بنیاد
<i>Bozorgtar</i>	Older; bigger; greater	بزرگتر
<i>Burqa</i>	A covering for the face and body of women leaving a window for the eyes.	برقع
<i>Chador</i>	Tent; a long garment that covers the entire body of a woman	چادر
<i>Chahar diwari</i>	Four walls; house	چهاردیواری
<i>Chahar'shanbeh soori</i>	An Iranian festival celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before the Iranian New Year (<i>Nourooz</i>)	چهارشنبه سوری
<i>Chashm e ali</i>	A spring and a tourist spot in the south of Tehran.	چشمه علی
<i>Daf</i>	An Iranian percussion instrument	دف
<i>Daj-jal</i>	Anti-christ	دجال
<i>Defaye moqaddas</i>	Holy defense; a genre of cinema in Iran dealing with the Iran-Iraq war and other military confrontations	دفاع مقدس
<i>Dizi</i>	Stoneware crockery in which <i>aab gusht</i> is served; it also refers to <i>aabgusht</i>	دیزی
<i>Dushman</i>	Enemy	دشمن
<i>Dushman shenasi</i>	Knowing the enemy	دشمن شناسی
<i>Eslah garayan</i>	Iranian Reformist, a political party in Iran	اصلاح گرایان
<i>Faqih</i>	Juror; expert on Sharia law	فقیه
<i>Fatwa</i>	A formal ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar (known as <i>Mufti</i>) in Islam	فتوا/فتوی
<i>Forghan</i>	Name of a militia radical group active during the Islamic Revolution in Iran	فرقان
<i>Ghapani</i>	A torture device that was commonly used in the prisons of Iran	قپانی
<i>Gharbzade</i>	A person under the negative influence of the West	غریزه
<i>Ghatil-ol-abarat</i>	Killed by [of] tears; a title for Imam Hossein, the third Imam of the Shias	قتیل العبرات

<i>Ghazal</i>	A form of lyrical poetry in Persian comprising five to twelve couplets where the first and all the even lines must rhyme	غزل
<i>Gheyrat</i>	Honour, machismo	غیرت
<i>Ghorbatzadeh</i>	Discomfort of living outside one's homeland.	غریب‌زده
<i>Haji</i>	A person who has done Haj (annual pilgrimage to Mecca)	حاجی
<i>Haji firouz</i>	A character appearing a few days before <i>Nourouz</i> with blackened face and a red attire, dancing and reminding people of the arrival of spring.	حاجی فیروز
<i>Halal</i>	Permitted; opposite of haram	حلال
<i>Hammam</i>	Bath	حمام
<i>Haram</i>	Prohibited	حرام
<i>Howz</i>	Shallow pool	حوض
<i>Janas-e khat</i>	Literary device, pun	جناسِ خط
<i>Jesmane</i>	Of the body, carnal	جسمانه
<i>Kaboos</i>	Nightmare	کابوس
<i>Kaftar bazi</i>	Pigeon racing; a sport dedicated to the keeping and gathering of pigeons of high breed.	کفتریازی
<i>Kaftar-e-chahi</i>	The cheapest and most common breed of pigeons or rock dove.	کفترِ چاهی
<i>Kamanchehs</i>	An Iranian bowed music instrument with four strings	کمانچه
<i>Khaneh</i>	House; room	خانه
<i>Khas -o- khashak</i>	Trash	خس و خاشاک
<i>Khiyal</i>	Imagination; fiction	خیال
<i>Khojaste</i>	Auspicious; name for men and women	خجسته
<i>Kowkab</i>	Star; name for women	کوکب
<i>La illahe illa allah</i>	There is no god but God	لا اله الا الله
<i>Lenge-be-enge</i>	Mismatched	لنگه به لنگه

<i>Looti/Louti</i>	Gentleman; generous; free spirit; also refers to a man who trains a monkey to dance.	لوطی
<i>Machine</i>	Automobile; car	ماشین
<i>Maidan</i>	Square	میدان
<i>Maqna'eh</i>	Islamic scarf for women that entirely covers the head and neck, revealing only the face	مقنعه
<i>Mard-e-maidaan</i>	Pragmatic person	مرد میدان
<i>Masnavi</i>	A form of Persian poetry consisting of couplets with independent rhymes.	مثنوی
<i>Mazhar e tadjali</i>	Representation of God; title of Mirza Hussein Ali Nuri, the founder of the Baha'i Faith	مظهر تجلی
<i>Mo'azen</i>	A person who does <i>azan</i> , or the prayer call in a mosque	مؤذن
<i>Mokaber</i>	A person who helps others follow the Imam during prayer by saying <i>Allah ho Akbar</i>	مکبر
<i>Motefavet</i>	Different; new	متفاوت
<i>Mujahideen-e khalq</i>	An Iranian political-militant organization, active since 1965, it only functions actively out of Iran now	مجاهدین خلق
<i>Nafas</i>	Breath; name for women	نفس
<i>Naftkesh</i>	Oil tanker	نفتکش
<i>Nakh</i>	String	نخ
<i>Nakhoda</i>	Captain of ship	ناخدا
<i>Namaz</i>	Prayer	نماز
<i>Namus</i>	A female member of a family who must be supervised by a male member to retain the honour of the family; virtue, chastity, honour	ناموس
<i>Nazar kardan'</i>	Ill omen transferred through looking	نظر کردن
<i>Neyestan</i>	Reed land	نیستان
<i>Nokhte</i>	Dot; dots distinguishing different letters in the Arabic and Persian script	نقطه

<i>Nourouz</i>	Nourouz is the day of the vernal equinox and the Iranian New Year.	نوروز
<i>Ostad</i>	maestro	استاد
<i>Osul garayan</i>	Iranian Principlists, a political party in Iran	اصول‌گرایان
<i>Pa-pari</i>	A pigeon with decorative feathers on its feet	پاپری
<i>Paksazi</i>	Purge, purification	پاک‌سازی
<i>Pari/gin</i>	Interchangeably used in Persian to mean a kind of demon; although pari has positive connotations too.	پری / جن
<i>Parishani</i>	Disorder	پریشانی
<i>Pir</i>	Old man; wise; mentor	پیر
<i>Pourashub</i>	Chaotic	پراشوب
<i>Qahremaan</i>	Hero; winner of a tournament	قهرمان
<i>Qahvechi</i>	A person who is responsible for <i>Qahvekhaneh</i>	قهوه‌چی
<i>Qahvekhaneh</i>	Coffeehouse; in contemporary Iran these refer to old shops mostly serving tea and Hookah	قهوه‌خانه
<i>Qeble-i alam</i>	Pivot of the universe	قبلهٔ عالم
<i>Qormeh sabzi</i>	A traditional Persian dish comprising green leaf stew with chunks of meat usually served with rice	قرمه سبزی
<i>Rahmat</i>	Mercy; name for men	رحمت
<i>Rend</i>	Sly	رند
<i>Rowshanfekr</i>	Intellectual	روشنفکر
<i>Roze khan(i)</i>	A Shia ritual that involves reminiscing the passions of Imam Hossein in battle of Karbala	روضه‌خوانی
<i>Sabke-e nimai</i>	Poetry following the school of Nima Yushij, the father of New Poem	سبکِ نیمایی
<i>Salam</i>	Greeting, hello	سلام
<i>Saleq</i>	The one who has embarked on a spritual journey	سالک

<i>Sama</i>	Music; as a verb it refers to dancing with music; a practice common in Sufi communities.	سماع
<i>Savak</i>	National Organization for Security and Intelligence, secret police of the Shah's regime	ساواک
<i>Shagerd</i>	Disciple; student	شاگرد
<i>Shah jun</i>	A phrase Malijak used to refer to Naser al-Din Shah, meaning 'darling Shah'	شاه جون
<i>Shahid</i>	Martyr	شهيد
<i>Shahrefarang</i>	Peep box, peeping into which one could watch moving images or photographs in the early 19th century	شهرفرنگ
<i>Shath</i>	Words and phrases uttered by a Sufi mystic in his spiritual experience of unity with God. These utterances are not accepted in Sharia Law.	شطح
<i>Sher-e nou</i>	New Poem	شعر نو
<i>Sher-e sepid/ashare sepid</i>	Free verse	شعر سپید / اشعار سپید
<i>Sheykhiyes</i>	An Islamic religious movement founded by Shaykh Ahmad Ehsaei in the early 19th-century. Later a lot of Sheykhiyes converted to Bahaism.	شیخیه
<i>Sheytan</i>	Satan	شیطان
<i>Shirini</i>	Sweets; pastries	شیرینی
<i>Shurchashm</i>	A person with evil gaze	شورچشم
<i>Shurezaar</i>	Saline field	شوره زار
<i>Siah chal</i>	Dungeon	سیاهچال
<i>Siah namai</i>	Sordid realism	سیاه‌نمایی
<i>Simorgh</i>	A mythical bird living in the mountain of Alborz	سیمرغ
<i>Siqeh</i>	A renewable contract of marriage for a defined duration which does not involve transference of property rights	صیغه
<i>Sogholi</i>	Favourite wife	سوغلی
<i>Solouk</i>	Walking; spritual journey	سلوک

<i>Sursure/sursurak</i>	Slide	سرسره
<i>Tabaki</i>	Pretending to cry	تبایک
<i>Takhte nard</i>	Backgammon	تخته نرد
<i>Talar ayeneh</i>	Hall of mirrors in the Golestan Palace in Tehran	تالار آینه
<i>Tar</i>	An Iranian musical instrument with six stings in three double positions; also means string.	تار
<i>Tarrouf</i>	Greeting; offering something without meaning to; an offer that is expected not to be accepted.	تعارف
<i>Toghi</i>	A pigeon with a colorful patch over the neck	طوقی
<i>Ulama</i>	Plural for <i>alem</i> referring to theologians or jurors;	علما
<i>Umme abiha</i>	A title given by Prophet Muhammad to his daughter, Fatima, meaning ‘mother of her father’.	ام‌ابیها
<i>Zan-e-khaneh</i>	A woman who is proficient in the art of housekeeping	زن خانه
<i>Zananeh</i>	Feminine; part of the house reserved for women and children	زنانه

List of People Interviewed

Name	Profession	Method	Place	Date
Aida Mohammadkhani	Actress	In-person	Tehran	2018
Ali Rouhani	Professor At Art University Of Tehran	In-person	Tehran	2016
Bahman Ghobadi	Filmmaker	Email	-	2020
Behnaz Jaffary	Actress	In-person	Tehran	2018
Bijan Bijani	Singer, Musician	In-person	Tehran	2018
Buna Alkhas	Cartoonist, Translator	In-person	Tehran	2018
Farah Ossouli	Artist	In-person	Tehran	2015-2016
Farhad Kheradmand	Actor	In-person	Tehran	2016-2018
Gizella Varga Sinai	Artist	In-person	Tehran	2015-2016
Hamid Reza Sadr	Author, Film Critic, Sport Journalist	In-person	Tehran	2017
Hassan Saeidi Eslami	War Veteran	In-person	Shiraz	2017
Jafar Panahi	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran	2016, 2017
Khosrow Sinai	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran	2015-2016
Kianoush Ayyari	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran	2015, 2016
Mahtab Keramati	Actress	In-person	Tehran	2018
Majdeddin M. Arsanjani	Teacher At Soore University	In-person	Tehran	2015-2018
Manijeh Hekmat	Filmmaker, Producer	In-person	Tehran	2018
Mina Mohammadkhani	Actress	In-person	Tehran	2018
Mohammad Rasoulof	Filmmaker	Video Call	-	2020
Mohammad Shirvani	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran, Hormoz Islands	2016-2018
Mohsen Makhmalbaf	Filmmaker	In-person	London	2020
Morteza Farshbaf	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran	2015
Nasrin Sotoudeh	Activist, Lawer	In-person	Tehran	2015

Sabzali Shah Karami	Musician, Kamanche player	In-person	Shahriar	2018
Saman Salour	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran	2015
Sedigh Tarif	Singer, Musician	In-person	Tehran	2018
Seyed Hadi Mohaghegh	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran	2015
Tahmineh Milani	Filmmaker	In-person	Tehran	2015
Taraneh Yalda	Artist, Architect	In-person	Tehran	2016-2018

Chapter 1:

Methodology and Literature Survey

Introduction

As a student of critical humanities, I primarily followed a qualitative method of research. Yet it was never limited to a conventional survey of available literature and textual reading of films. I testified and expanded the knowledge I gathered from readings of secondary texts through four rounds of extensive fieldwork conducted in Iran. My first task was to learn modern Persian (which has been used in modern poetry, cinematic dialogues and intertitles) and its colloquial applications. Secondly, since the flow of information out from Iran is severely restricted by the government, I felt the need to visit the field to gather first-hand accounts of the people of Iran. Thirdly, since New Iranian Cinema has been informed by a kind of poetic realism based on a powerful observation of society, it was imperative that I encountered life as lived in contemporary Iranian society and interacted with commoners of the land.

Thus, along with filmmakers, film critics, professors, journalists, political activists, university students, film actors and crew members, I interacted with common people in the streets, markets, and social gatherings in Iran. I interviewed many filmmakers and personalities related to New Iranian Cinema in Iran. The list is long. Interacting with common people was both encouraging and insightful. Some of them indulged in lengthy conversations with me but requested me to keep it off- record, which I did. I could not accommodate many such conversations in my thesis. Nevertheless, the experiences gathered in Iran helped shape my understanding of Iranian Cinema and society. I have written an account of my journey to Iran, and the different people I interacted with below, in the first person.

My Fieldwork in Iran

My first encounter with the cinema of Iran took place in the second semester of the Film Studies (masters) course at Jadavpur University in 2011, where I remember watching Jafar Panahi's *White Balloon* in the first class. I had always been interested in poetry and a professor, (now my PhD supervisor), had suggested I read the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad. Farrokhzad's poetry and the impact it had on my viewing of the cinema of Iran, mostly Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's films, was significant. Her poetry seemed to speak in words what the films tried to evoke through its pauses, I couldn't look at one without referring to the other. I was drawn enough to the language to wish to learn it, understand the culture, and look beyond the films or the filmmakers that reached us through the global academia and the film festival circuit. I realised my initiation was from a point of distance, almost from the perspective of a distant outsider. My learning was limited, filtered. Surely, there was a lot more to Iranian Cinema than a few global names reaching Indian or the global circuits. I wished to probe deeper and understand the change in historical and political structures that led to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which in turn forever changed the language of cinema in Iran. I was enrolled in the PhD programme in the department of Film Studies at Jadavpur University where I began my serious engagement in my topic of research. I understood that knowing language was a primary condition for any engagement with Iranian cinema, as well as a viable gateway to enter into modern culture and social life of Iran.

I enrolled myself in an intensive Persian language course in the Dekhoda Lexicon International Centre for Persian Studies, of the Tehran University and travelled to Iran for the first time in December of 2015. I had attempted to learn Persian at a language school in Kolkata, but only upon arrival at Tehran did I realise how far behind I was. My new acquaintances were quick to warn me, 'You speak like Hafez and Sadi! No one speaks like

this anymore!’ I had to unlearn everything and start afresh. Learning Persian was essential as it gave me access to the inner world of Iran, which until now was only for us to view, in cinema.



Figure 1: Last day of the first term at the language classes in Dehkhoda. Tehran, March 2016

In fact, when I first came to Iran, I was overcome by a strange *deja vu*. As I looked out at the streets from the crowded morning bus, which I took every day to reach my Persian class, I was hit by a wave of familiarity. The alleys and the women surrounding me seemed familiar. Unaware, I would find myself staring at them for a long time. It felt as though scenes from Iranian cinema had suddenly come to life. I felt like a spectator marvelling at the film unfolding before my eyes.

As I began to speak in Persian, I found myself immersed in conversations with strangers, mostly women with whom I would travel every day. Suddenly, I found my position had shifted from that of a passive spectator to that of an active participant in the daily hustle-bustle of city life. I was suddenly included in the conversations centring around work, traffic, city, makeup, clothes, heels, lipsticks, men, marriages, food, or being an Indian in Iran. To my utter disbelief, I found myself mouthing broken Farsi sentences that seemed to make perfect sense to my encouraging Iranian co-passengers. Generally overcrowded with few seats, these autobuses, the way in which they were constructed symbolised the whole of Iran to me. On hopping into the women’s compartment I could see one half reserved

specially for men, far behind, separated by a divider. There was a clear divide between the two compartments. Often, lovers would stand on either side of the divide, managing to somehow be together. Sometimes I would luckily get the window seat. It was the best place to absorb all the stories. I looked forward to the bus journeys more than anything else.



Figure 2: Inside the woman's compartment of an autobus in Tehran, 2018. Photo taken by the author

These conversations in Persian with strangers along with the language classes I took imbued me with confidence and I soon found myself reaching out to Iranian filmmakers, activists, musicians and artists who opened up a world of struggle, constant negotiation and rebellion before my camera. I began filming my first feature-length research documentary *Toward Happy Alleys* based on their real accounts. Over the next few years, I pitched the documentary and it won awards and grants from global forums in DMZ Docs Korea, Sheffield Doc Fest, UK, and Docedge – Kolkata. It won a grant of completion from DMZ Docs in 2017 that allowed me to finish my shoot. The film is in the final stages of editing and is expected to be completed in 2021.

After doing four rounds of extensive fieldwork in Iran (between 2016-2018) I have collected first-hand research material comprising a series of personal video interviews of filmmakers, actors, banned artists, technicians, activists, and academicians. I have rare

personal accounts of exiled filmmakers Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof. I got an opportunity to interact with master filmmakers like Khosrow Sinai and Kianoush Ayari, and further on the journey, opportunities to interview Tahmina Milani, Mohammad Nik bin, Morteza Farshbaf, Saman Salour, Hadiye Moaghegh, Mohammad Shirvani came by– all of who have been struggling with the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Guidance since the revolution in 1979. During the Fajr Film Festival held in 2016, I met actors Reza Naji and Mir Farrokh Hashemian (the father-son duo from Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven*.) Soon, I got the opportunity to meet and interview filmmaker and producer Manijeh Hekmat in 2018, and interact with actors Mahtab Keramati, (actress in her film *The Old Road*), Pegah Ahangarani and Behnaz Jafari. I was fortunate to befriend Farhad Kheradmand, who acted in Abbas Kiarostami's *And Life Goes On* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and Aida Mohammadkhani and Mina Mohammadkhani (child actresses in Jafar Panahi's *White Balloon*, 1995 and *Mirror*, 1997 respectively) who contributed significantly to my research and understanding of Iranian cinema. Most significant of all, I met and interviewed human rights lawyer and activist Nasrin Sotoudeh in 2016 after she had been released from prison. In 2019, Nasrin was sentenced to 38 years of prison for taking up the cases of the girls who raised their scarves in protest against compulsory Hijab. She is presently in prison. I could also develop connections with professors from Tehran and Soore University who helped me gain access to libraries and online archives. My primary research materials comprise un-translated essays, excerpts from memoirs, accounts of filmmakers, and rare films collected from them.

In 2019, I could establish a connection with dissenting filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof who has been implicated by the Government of Iran since 2010. When I had started my research, little information was available about his cinema, and not much was known about his struggles with the censors and the Islamic Regime. I discovered his cinema only

in Iran. I was warned against meeting him as it could jeopardise my safety. Rasoulof along with filmmaker Jafar Panahi had been imprisoned after their participation in the Green Movement in Iran in 2009. Thereafter, Panahi and Rasoulof were both banned from filmmaking. Their passports were seized by the government and they were soon forbidden to leave Iran. Finally, in 2019, I wrote to Rasoulof and he agreed to give me an interview over Skype. Over a series of audio and video interviews conducted in Persian between 2019-2020 over Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp, I learnt more about him and his cinema. Rasoulof has served a jail term for every film that he has made since his ban in 2010, but he shrugged it off saying, ‘At least I’ll be back with a few good scripts’.¹ I could also establish connections with exiled filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi in 2020 via his assistant, my encouraging friend Golriz, who genuinely wished to help me out. He generously agreed to answer my questions over email.

Ever since I first embarked on my journey to Iran, I had dreamed of meeting Abbas Kiarostami. While chasing that dream led to many other fruitful meetings, insightful conversations and rich experiences that led to the writing of this thesis, the meeting with the master filmmaker could never be realised. When I was in Tehran in 2016, Kiarostami was away conducting a filmmaking workshop in Cuba. I had postponed my stay expecting him to be back any moment, but with the last few hundred tomans exhausted, I was beginning to lose hope. When I visited the office of *Film*, the popular film tabloid, the very kind Persian at my aid warned, ‘I can put you in touch with anyone for your research, just don’t ask for Kiarostami or Farhadi.’ That was when my friend Ali, a cinema buff himself, who also happened to be Kiarostami’s neighbour suggested he keep a watch at the local cigarette shop Kiarostami frequented often. I got a call one evening from a very excited Ali who told me

¹ Interview of Mohammad Rasoulof over Skype with the author in November, 2019.

that Kiarostami was spotted buying a carton of cigarettes. The next day I landed in the neighbourhood of Chizar.

Ali agreed to walk me up to his house. I decided to film the walk. A part of me hoped he would be standing outside his house, and I would go up to him and introduce myself. On the way to the ‘friend’s home,’ I kept wondering if it would be polite to ring the bell directly and introduce myself or just slide a letter under his door. When we reached the house, I just stood still; marvelling at the simplicity in the placement of a pretty two-storied house (covered entirely with green creepers) amidst tall buildings on either side. I asked,

‘Do you think he’s in there, Ali?’

– ‘No I don’t see his white car, perhaps he’s not in.’

‘Do you think it’s okay to ring the bell? Or slide in a note?’

– ‘Umm... not a great idea, I’m afraid.’

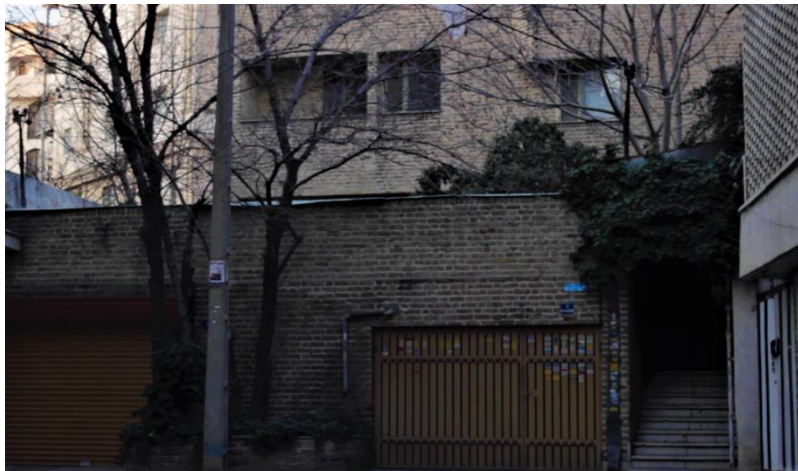


Figure 3: Abbas Kiarostami’s house in Chizar Avenue, Tehran, 2016. Photo taken by the author

I decided I’d write the perfect note and slide it under his door the next day, but it was too late already. Kiarostami was hospitalised, after being diagnosed with intestinal cancer. I was living at the house of Farhad Kheradmand that Spring. I remember Farhad broke the news to me with great despair. Recovering from a heart transplant himself, the news was brutal. We spent endless afternoons discussing cinema, Kiarostami and stories of a generation that had witnessed the revolution. Cinema happened to Farhad one day by chance when he caught Kiarostami staring at him at a party. Soon he was called for an audition for

Through the Olive Trees. I spent many afternoons with Farhad recounting memories of the days he spent with Kiarostami. The most striking one was during the filming of *And Life Goes On*. In the film, Farhad, enacting the role of the director, drives his son through the earthquake-stricken region of Manjil to find out if the characters of his earlier film *Where Is the Friends House?* (1990) are alive.



Figure 4: (Left) Farhad Kheradmand in a screengrab from the author's documentary, *Toward Happy Alleys* (Right) Farhad Kheradmand in *And Life Goes On*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1992

Farhad recounted that all Kiarostami ever told him was that he needed to look tense while driving through the barren streets. To achieve this he decided to replace the car in which Farhad had practised driving for over a month with an entirely different, uncomfortable one. Farhad was naturally tense throughout the shoot. This made him break into a sweat. Kiarostami was notorious for employing such tactics to get his best shots. All his actors had to undergo severe mental stress during filming as he would break out the harshest news while filming. Ali's walk towards the *ostads* house and Farhad's innumerable memories recounted on my camera were the closest I could get to knowing Kiarostami in his very own land.



Figure 5: Abbas Kiarostami's grave in Lavasan, Iran, 2017. Photograph by the author

One of the very first friends I made in the language school, Samira, a photographer herself, very generously introduced me to a friend she would ‘often have conversations on cinema’ with. Her friend Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani, a teacher at The Soore University at that time, would go on to become one of my most trusted friends, and someone whose patience, generosity and support would give my thesis real meaning. Not only did I bounce most of my ideas with him, but he also functioned as an interlocutor, introducing me to aspects of Iranian culture that would benefit my research. From a trusted acquaintance who generously agreed to accompany me as a translator to my early interviews, helping me understand the difficult Persian texts of Hafiz, Sadi and Rumi, and collaborating with me in all the translations centring around the thesis, I can safely say, without his contribution, my understanding of Iranian Cinema, poetry and literature would have been incomplete. With his tireless support, I found the strength to dig deeper into the vast body of untranslated Persian texts such as Sufi mystic poetry, Shia literature and classical Persian poetry. In a world dominated by Western media and its flawed portrayal of Iran, we consciously tried our best to avoid referring only to easily accessible literature in English and found Iranian counterparts to them. Despite my efforts to learn Persian and assimilate into the Persian

culture, my position will always be that of an outsider. At times I would be influenced by a news report I read, or history narrated by a particular westerner. Majdeddin sincerely checked every time I faltered and recounted the insiders' perspective. I am grateful for his care and generosity and the love he holds for Iranian cinema, poetry and music in his heart.

While I had the good fortune to meet many filmmakers in my two-month stay in Tehran in 2015-16, I was still waiting to hear from Jafar Panahi who I had been trying to contact for nearly two months. The journalist at the office of the *Film* tabloid had called him in front of me. It was a few days before *nourooz*, and Panahi was away at his villa by the Caspian Sea. All the filmmakers I met promised to put in a word to him for me. Even Nasrin had promised to call him. The second term at the language school was nearing an end, and our final examinations were due in a few days. My visa required me to leave within a week after appearing for my examinations. The night before my final examinations, I received a text on Telegram from Panahi. He had written in Persian, "Salam, welcome to Iran. Shall we meet tomorrow?" I was overjoyed, and I remember going to sit for my examination with a bag full of camera equipment, batteries and lenses. His house was close to my school. I picked up a huge box of *shirinis* (sweets) from the best sweet shop in Tajrish, Ladan Confectionery and reached before time. On reaching, the doorkeeper warned me that the lift was out of order and I'd have to climb up to the 9th floor. As I knocked, I saw an iguana crawl out the door. Panahi was waiting right behind it, smiling. He insisted I pat it on the head. He took the camera from my hands and began filming me instead. Somebody had come with a cup of tea, but he said, "Let's go outside, don't you want to film?"

As we stepped out of the gates seen in *This is Not a Film*, (2011) in his car, Panahi opened up to my camera, speaking about his earliest memories associated with cinema, working in the 1990s Iran with child actors, and a cast and crew of dedicated technicians of the industry before shifting to making more direct films which spoke of social ills. He spoke

about his involvement in the Green Movement that resulted in his official banning from cinema for 21 years and his eventual exile within the country. In 2010, Panahi was sentenced to six years of prison, and a ban from filmmaking that also forbade him from appearing for interviews, directing, writing scripts, and leaving the country for 21 years. Panahi confessed that speaking to me was the first interview he was appearing for after his ban. When I met Jafar Panahi, I had expected to see a portrait of a broken man, but Panahi came across as a vibrant, witty, energetic person who derived a lot of pleasure in his interactions with people of the society. While he spoke with calmness, his mind remained attentive to the world outside his car and he constantly found ways of directing life unfolding outside within my frame.



Figure 6: With Jafar Panahi, at a cafe in the North of Tehran, March 2016

While Panahi held total composure, the child-like innocence in him spilt out in public places such as the visit to the optician's store, where he expressed his sheer delight at having an Indian journey to Iran to interview him. While trying out his new glasses, he cheerfully informed the optician that I knew Persian songs. He spontaneously asked me to sing a verse from the old classic *Soltane Ghalbha* for the optician – but before I began, Panahi promptly turned to shut the door of the shop so the sound would not spill out. Women are not allowed to sing publicly in Iran or release recordings of their music. If they sing at all, their voices

must be at a lower pitch than the voices of men in chorus. After the formation of the Islamic Republic music was forbidden as a form of expression for women. Everyone I met asked me to sing Persian songs, as though desiring to fill the void of a feminine voice in a country, ever since the revolution.



Figure 7: (Left) Panahi posted a video of me singing “Soltane Ghalbha” on Instagram in March 2016. He wrote, “Miss Sreemoyee, after watching the cinema of Iran fell in love with it and embarked on a doctoral project on the cinema of Iran. She has been here for the last two months to conduct her fieldwork, and in this short time, for a better understanding of Iranian cinema she has learnt Persian in this manner...” (Right) Film poster of *Soltane Ghalbha* (1968) starring Fardin

I had learnt Persian more through the songs I picked up than the language classes I took. Often I would hear popular Persian songs of the 1960-1970s playing in the streets, cafes, parks, bazaars and restaurants. I connected to these songs instantly as their composition was very similar to the Hindi music of the same time that I grew up listening to. The tune of *Soltane Ghalbha* was glued to my ears; I seem to have heard it everywhere in Tehran. The famous song from the film *Soltane Ghalbha*, *King of Hearts*, (1968), was a huge hit in Iran as it starred Fardin, the greatest star of the Film Farsi industry. The song composed by one of Iran’s greatest composers, Anousiravan Rohani, reminded me of many

songs from the 1960-1970s in India, especially *Ajeeb Dastan*, from *Dil Apna Preet Paraya*, (1960), *Do Lafzon ki Hai*, from *The Great Gambler*, (1979), and other well-known compositions of the time. In fact, Film Farsis or the melodramas of the 1960s-70s Iran were deeply inspired by Hindi melodramas that were made in the Bombay film industry around the same time. The song and dance sequences mostly featuring stars like Fardin and Malekmotei were inspired by the song and dance sequences that centred around huge stars of Hindi cinema.

On the second day of our meeting, Panahi had something planned. He made a telephone call to someone and told her that he was on his way to fetch her. Later, he informed me that we were en route to meeting Aida Mohammadkhani, the child actress in his first film *White Balloon* (1995). Aida was about six years of age when she acted in Panahi's film. I calculated that she would be just about a year older than me. Panahi informed me that she was a student of cognitive neuroscience and that, we were on our way to her institute. She was waiting at the gates of the Institute when Panahi drove up to her and pulling down the car window, kissed her on her cheek to greet her. She smiled and said, "Don't kiss me in front of the guard, Mr Panahi!" He introduced us and then took us for lunch to a place further off from the city, amid winding roads interlocked by mountains. We reached a quiet traditional *kabab* joint situated beside a stream. While waiting for the food to arrive, Panahi reminisced memories of working in *White Balloon* and Aida recounted how he got her to cry for the serious scenes. In an intimate, spontaneous and intense moment, they re-enacted a special sequence from the film. Memories of the golden era of Iranian cinema or a time when he could freely work as a filmmaker surfaced.



Figure 8: With Jafar Panahi and Aida, Tehran, March 2016

In 2016, I had the opportunity of meeting and interviewing Khosro Sinai, one of the masters of non-fiction and avant-garde cinema in Iran. For me, Sinai summed up all the three reasons that drew me to Iran: cinema, music and poetry. Having studied architecture in Vienna, Sinai became one of the first people to have learnt and brought the accordion to Iran. A talented music composer, poet and one of the most remarkable documentary filmmakers of Iran, Sinai made innumerable short films and documentaries centring around history, ethnicity, women rights, and environmental issues. Yet he is best known for his fiction feature film, *Arus-e Atash, The Bride of Fire*, (2000) which won him local and global attention and made him the recipient of various prestigious awards. In 2020, Sinai succumbed to Covid and passed away after spending months in the hospital. Through his stories on the yesteryears of Iran, he had allowed me to peek into a foregone time in Iran's history. He shared memories of being smitten by the grandeur of music and cinema despite having studied architecture for years at one of the finest universities of Vienna. I watched many of his films seated with him in a cosy room designed especially for watching his films from a DVD player. He had copies of all his films with him, neatly stacked on shelves. He would take out a copy, show me specific scenes from the films and ask me what I felt about

them. His health was weak even then. I remember he had just spent a month at a hospital nursing weak lungs. It was snowing in Tehran then, and no one dared step outside, yet he would take intermittent cigarette breaks. He would politely say, “It’s freezing, don’t step out, you’ll catch a cold. I’ll be back in a minute.” I would accompany him each time, as the best conversations happened in the snow. By the time we’d be back, he’d be coughing, but his silver hair would bear tiny snowflakes in them. He would say pointing at the unlit cigarette between his fingers, “You see, I am addicted to this”.

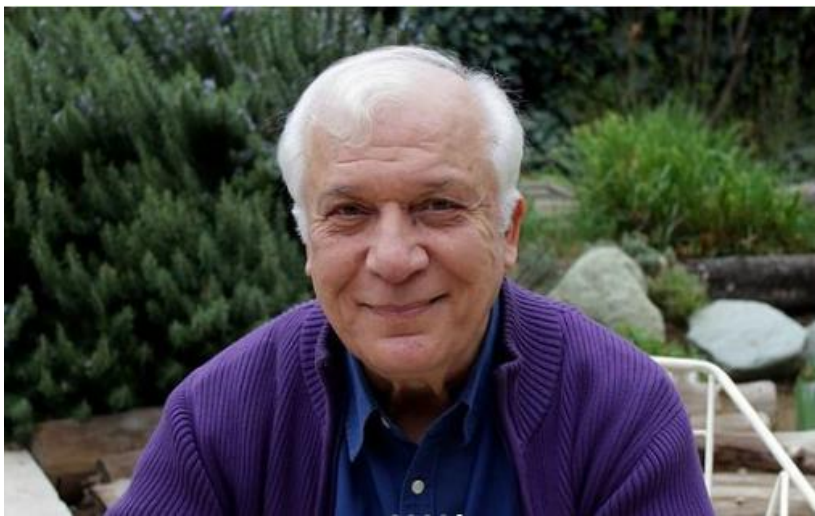


Figure 9: Khosro Sinai in Tehran, January 2016

He was composing music for an album of his poetry that was due to be released in a year. He would make me listen to his recordings playing the accordion, and often read out some of his poetry that he had published in Farsi earlier. I had filmed a recording of one of the poems he recited before my camera, named *The Pink Room*. Last year, I translated it with the help of my friend Majdeddin.

It snows in the alley.

From behind the frozen window I see phantoms

who sink their head inside their coats

upto foreheads as they pass by.

Just to do something,

I count their footsteps on the snow.

My whole existence lies in this moment of life.

What deep tranquility

Like kind death

And I say to myself again

How good can not having be, how good could not having be.

How good could liberating existence from chains have been.

I look out from the window

A kid puts a fur hat over his head

And rolls a red ball over the snow.

And I say to myself again

Perhaps life is this red ball playfully rolled over

the snow of our dreams.

As snow melts it takes our dreams with itself to the ground.

The ball stops.

Another child appears.

He kicks the ball.

The ball rolls and rolls again

over the snow of a different dream.

-Khosro Sinai, an excerpt from *The Pink Room*.

Finally, during the early months of 2020, I reached out to Mohsen Makhmalbaf. My work that centres around exile would have been incomplete without interaction with him. Makhmalbaf has been living in exile since 2005, after deliberate attacks planned by the

agents of the Islamic Regime on his and his family's lives. After the film set of his daughter, Samira's *Two-Legged Horse* (2008), was bombed in Afghanistan, Makhmalbaf and his family left Iran for good. Thereafter, they have lived in many different countries and made films in diverse languages such as *Sex and Philosophy* (Tajikistan, 2005), *Scream of Ants* (India, 2006), *The Gardener* (Israel, 2012), *President*, (Georgia, 2014), *Marghe and her Mother* (Italy, 2019). I was invited to present a paper at a conference at the University of Exeter in March 2020. At the same time, I had heard that Makhmalbaf was conducting a workshop on acting and filmmaking in London. The chances were minuscule, but nevertheless, I drafted a heartfelt message in Persian about my research on Iranian Cinema and my zeal for the Persian language that took me to Iran. Perhaps he did not entirely believe me in the beginning, and so he called to check. After we spoke to each other in Persian, he was thrilled to know about my research and agreed to meet me in London in March. By the time I had arrived for my conference, the Covid outbreak had hit the UK rapidly. Just a day before the conference was to be held, all universities were shut down, and before we knew we found ourselves planning our return journeys to India. Yet, despite the panic and outbreak and on extremely short notice Makhmalbaf kept his word and met me the day before I took the flight back home from London. The meeting may have been brief, but an association founded in trust, and mutual love for cinema had been built, which only got stronger with time. I wrote my fourth chapter on the cinema of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, tracing his life through the poetry he had written at various junctures of his life. In London, he had promised to share his poems with me. These poems were unpublished, some unfinished, unmarked, and uncatalogued. I spent all of 2020 arranging these poems and translating them with the constant support of my friend Majdeddin.

With all the interviews collected in the course of my fieldwork in Iran, and those conducted online and in other places, along with the valuable experience gathered from

conversations with the aforementioned artists, film critics and academicians, I began writing my thesis. I spent many months translating and transcribing all the interviews and material I had in Persian. Along with close viewing of film texts and analysis, I began writing my chapters.

Literature Survey

Books in English

When I was first initiated into the fascinating world of Iranian cinema in the year 2010, I began acquainting myself with the available literature on Iranian Cinema written in English by acclaimed authors, theoreticians and historians. I began by reading the works of eminent authors such as Hamid Naficy and Hamid Dabashi whose writings provided a fair idea on the history of a nation whose cinema had gripped prestigious film festivals around the world in a whirlwind in the 1990s. While *Close Up, Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, Future* by Hamid Dabashi, 2001, and *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 2006 were the first books on Iranian cinema I had read, over the years for my thesis I followed them with the readings of his other important writings on *Iran: A People Interrupted*, 2007, *Theology of Discontent*, 1992, *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, 2007, *The Green Movement in Iran*, 2011, *Makhmalbaf at Large*, 2002, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, 2010.

Hamid Naficy's magnum opus comprising four detailed and informative volumes on Iranian Cinema titled, *A Social History on Iranian Cinema* was published in 2011 and 2012 by Duke University Press. Its value as an encyclopedia on Iranian Cinema tracing the journey of cinema from its inception, (from the Qajar Era - to Post Revolution Iran) remains unparalleled. The volumes included everything a researcher would require for the study of

Iranian cinema. The volumes divided the history of cinema into four volumes: *The Artisinal Era 1897-1941*, *The Industrializing Years 1941-1978*, *The Islamicate Period, 1978-1984*, and *The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*. These volumes included analysis of genres, film texts, and detailed interviews of filmmakers, actors, musicians, technicians, academicians and industry personnel working actively in the cinema industry till about 2010, substantiated with figures, statistical data, and graphs. My research attempts to pick up where Naficy's work ended. Naficy's detailed study of the cinema of Shahid Saless and Amir Naderi was extremely beneficial to me. While I could get personal interviews of all the filmmakers I have dedicated chapters to, (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Bahman Ghobadi, Jafar Panahi, Mohammad Rasoulof) Naficy's research along with interviews of other important filmmakers made me feel like I was not missing out on much.

Another seminal book by Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, published earlier in 2001, gave thorough accounts of filmmakers living and working in exile not just in Iran, but in other West Asian countries. He traced the shift in the cinematic language of Iranian filmmakers, Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid-Saless who left Iran before the Revolution to continue making films as free individuals. This further filled me with zest to study the works of Mohsen Makhmalbaf (exiled in 2005) and Bahman Ghobadi (exiled in 2009) whose works needed examination as they did not fall under the purview of Naficy's work.

Even though extensive research has been done on the cinema of Mohsen Makhmalbaf by researchers, cinephiles, film critics and authors, two books authored by Hamid Dabashi (*Makhmalbaf at Large*, 2002, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, 2010), and two documentaries, *Stardust Stricken: Mohsen Makhmalbaf, a Portrait* (1996) directed by Houshang Golmakani while he was living in Iran and *Daddy's School* by Hassan Solhjoo (2014) after his dislocation, provided me with valuable secondary research

material. Above all, Makhmalbaf's unpublished and untranslated poems written in exile, (that he generously agreed to share with me) along with his interviews (conducted in Persian, at London, 2020) functioned as precious, first-hand literature and research material. These became crucial in studying the films of the director made in exile.

Apart from the poems, and the interviews, I have also referred to his short and long stories (available only in Persian) in analysing his early cinema. Among them, I have written in-depth about *Jarrahi Ruh*, (Soul Surgery, 1988) and *Hoz- e Soltun*, 1984 in the fifth chapter of my thesis. Tracing the tragic life of a single woman and her grit to survive, the story of *Hoz e Soltun* is replete with allusions, idioms and proverbs and uses cockney diction used by people belonging to lower classes in Tehran. Makhmalbaf was undoubtedly under the influence of writers like Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) and Sadegh Chubak, (1916-1998) whose engaging narratives and the grim portrayal of society are often seen in his early writings and cinema. Makhmalbaf published his film scripts and theatrical plays in numerous publications. Among his best-known writings are *Salaam bar Khorshid* (Hail to the Sun), *Madrese Rajaei* (Rajaei School), *Tavallod-e Yek Pir-e Zan* (Birth of an old woman), *Marge Digari* (Death of the other), *Baghe Bolour* (Crystal Garden), *Nang* (Dishonour).

Other important readings tracing the history of religion and politics in Iran would include the books by eminent historian, Hamid Algar. His meticulous scholarship on Islamic Theology gave rise to translations of books by well-known theologians and jurors like Ayatollah Khomeini's *Velayat e- Faqih*. He translated and annotated speeches of Khomeini in his book, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*. He has also translated books of Ali Shariati to English and edited and introduced seminal works like *Occidentosis, A Plague from the West*, by Jalal Al-i Ahmad. I have benefited greatly from his book titled, *Religion and State in Iran: 1785-1906* while tracing the history of Iran from the Qajar Kings, the Pahlavi Dynasty and the formation of the Islamic Republic in my second

chapter. I have also referred to Ervand Abrahamian's exhaustive book, *A History of Modern Iran* (2008) while referring to Reza Shah's social and political reforms in chapter two along with *The White Revolution* written by Mohammad Reza Shah.

While writing my first chapter which traced historiography of Iranian Cinema from The Qajar Kings to the formation of the Islamic Republic I found historian Abbas Amanat's research resourceful and comprehensive. His contribution to the early modern and modern history of Iran is exhaustive and fascinating. His book, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*, and his edition of the memoir of the daughter of Nasereddin Shah, princess Taj Al Saltaneh, *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernity 1884-1914*. The memoir includes an introduction and additional notes by him along with fascinating illustrations, and rare photographs from Naser Al-Din Shah's harem, women of the Qajar Era, their attire, rare images of Tehran, the architecture of the Palaces of Golestan, the inner chambers of the royal palaces, photographs of Naser al-Din Shah and Mozaffer al-Din Shah, and images of women musicians playing instruments. He also shares maps and charts the relations between members of the royal household which get cinematically realised in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema*, (1992)

Taj Al Sultanah's memoir, one of the first and perhaps an only account of an insider, a woman from the royal household, spans across thirty years of her life, documenting both inner changes, including descriptions of her childhood spent in the royal harem with eighty-odd wives of the Shah and their eight hundred eunuchs and attendants. She also documents the socio-political changes in Iran brought about by the Constitutional Revolution. In contrast *Glimpses of life and Manners in Persia*, the travelogue Lady Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil maintained during her stay in Iran between 1849-1852, later published in 1956, provides one of the earliest accounts of an outsider's gaze/memoirs on Iran. Lady

Mary's memoir makes intriguing references to Bab and includes an account of his martyrdom. From her privileged position at the British quarters, her accounts are based more on interviews conducted of other visiting women, sometimes more subjective and less factual. Most notable among her interviews are her conversations with the mother of Naser Al-Din Shah Qajar. Her presence in Tehran during the historic attempt to assassinate Naser al-Din Shah and the persecutions of the Bahai's at the hands of the monarchy makes her memoir an important record of the time.

I discovered the contribution of Farzaneh Milani, an eminent Iranian scholar only after the publication of her biography on Forough Farrokhzad through the unpublished letters (of Forough) she obtained from a lifetime of research, *Forough Farrokhzad: A Literary Biography With Unpublished Letters* (2016). She has been an editor for many books of poetry and has published her writings in prestigious journals. I have referred to her seminal book, *Words Not Swords, Iranian Women and the Freedom of Movement*, 2011, in the sixth chapter of my thesis. She has also done extensive research and published her translations of the poetry of Simin Behbahani, *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems of Simin Behbahani* (translation, with Kaveh Safa) in 1999.

For translations of Persian poems in English, I mostly refer to the translations of Ahmad Karimi Hakkak for Forough's poetry, even though Farzaneh Milani's translations are lucid, lyrical. Newer translations of Forough's poetry include those of Sholeh Wolpe that are available online on her website.¹ Wolpe's major contribution lies in translating and publishing Attar's *The Conference of Birds* in lucid English, making the text readable and interesting for younger readers, with interesting anecdotes, references and illustrations. Jasmin Darznik's fictional account of the life and times of Forough Farrokhzad, *Song of a*

¹ <https://www.sholehwolpe.com>

Captive Bird published by Penguin Random House in 2018 are among the more recent works on the poet.

Despite the contributions of the aforementioned scholars in the field of Iranian cinema, literature, politics and society in English, there remains a vast body of poems, texts, and writings on religion, Shiism, Sufism and the Quran that remain untranslated and hence forever inaccessible to non-Persian speakers. In my humble way, I have attempted to translate some of these Persian texts (that I have referred to in my thesis) hoping to make them accessible to the rest of English speaking community. These include a huge body of Sufi literature, Classical poetry, religious texts like the Quran, *hadiths*, as well as relevant journal articles published in magazines and newspapers like *Keyhan* and *Kelk*. With some help, I have at times translated full articles such as Dariush Ashouri's "Tarikh, Roya, Kaboos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actor Cinema", ["History, Dream, Nightmare: A look toward *Naserreddin al-Din Shah Actore Cinema*"] that was published in the *Kelk* Magazine, Tehran, in January 1993. Ashuri is a prominent Iranian translator, researcher, linguist and author. His Persian translations of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, and *Macbeth*, are among the best translations available in Persian. In his major book, *The Encyclopedia of Humanities Sciences* he suggested numerous Persian equivalents for modern words and phrases, such as *gofteman* (discourse), *rahyaft* (approach), *hameporsi* (referendum), *armanshahr* (utopia), and *hamrasani* ('to share' in social media). These words have now been included in most Persian dictionary.

Mentioned below are some of the most important Persian texts used in my thesis. To manage the vast body of Persian texts I have grouped them into clusters of three sets: Religious Texts and Shia Literature; Sufi Literature and Persian Classical Poetry; Important Newspapers, Magazines; Important websites.

Books in Persian/Arabic

Religious Texts, Shia Literature

Biographies: Religious Shia texts can be further categorised into biographies of Islamic saints such as Prophet Mohammad, his daughter Fatima and the twelve Imams. Written by the prestigious scholar Jafar Shahidi, *Zandegani Fatima (Life of Fatima)*, 1995, charts the biography of Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Mohammad. Shahidi's works cover an array of subjects such as Persian language and literature, Sharia law, and the History of Islam. He was the head of the Dehkhoda Lexicon Institute and International Centre for Persian Studies and his book *The Analytic History of Islam*, published first in 1984, is used as a university textbook. Among other writings on Fatima, Ali Shariati's, *Fatima is Fatima (Fatima, Fatima Ast)*, published in 1970, is an interpretation of the life of Fatima who Shariati considers a role model for contemporary Iranian women. In contrast to Shahidi's historical mode of narration, Shariati's work is written in the form of an elaborate, romanticised narrative, not entirely based on factual history.

Quran: A lot of references have been made to verses from the *Quran*, the holy book of Muslims that is believed to have fourteen different versions (*Qara'a*) with over 1100 differences. These differences primarily arise from differences in Arabic scripts, such as the absence of vowels, accents and pronunciations which makes their readings different. All these versions are based on the Quran of Usman, by the third Khalif (Mushaf Othman or Mushaf Imam). The most famous version of the *Quran (Imam Hafs from Aasim ibn Abi al-Najud)* is the version of Madina published by King Fahd.

Commentaries on the Quran: At the beginning of the 10th century, after the Samanid king, Ahmad Samani got permission to translate the Quran into Persian from jurors, others

began writing Persian commentaries as well. *Tafsir Atiq Neyshaburi* is the third commentary of the Quran, written in Persian by Atiq ib Mohammad Surabadi, (after Persian translation of *Tafsir al-Tabari* and *Tafsir Esfarayeni*). Over the years, this book surpassed its value as a commentary to become one of the finest books in Persian literature, replete with quranic stories narrated engagingly.

Hadiths: While the Quran is considered to be the word of God, *Hadiths* are words of wisdom by the Prophet Muhammad (for Shias, it could also be from any of their twelve Imams or Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet). *Hadiths* are believed to have lesser credibility than the Quran, yet there are many well-known *Hadiths* that are considered Holy in Islamic culture, literature and history. Verifying the credibility of a *hadith* is important for a juror who formulates laws based on them; this is crucial in defining what is permitted (*halal*) and what is prohibited (*haram*).

Sufi Literature and Persian Classical Poetry

Masnavi by Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Balkhi (known as Rumi): Jalal ad-Din Mohammad Balkhi (1207 - 1273), wrote the most magnificent book of Sufism, or The *Masnavi* in the Persian language. *Masnavi*, literally meaning dual in Arabic, referring to the style of poetry in which two successive lines have independent rhymes. The book spreads across six volumes (*Daftars*) of poetry each having a brief Arabic introduction. Rumi is believed to have written the book after the disappearance of his mentor and beloved, Shams-e Tabrizi, at the request of his apprentice, Husam al-Din Chelebi. Most of the verses of the *Masnavi* were dictated by Rumi to his apprentices and followers. The dictations were later revised by him. It took Rumi ten years to compose the *Masnavi*, and finally, it was completed two years before his death. Along with *The Meccan Revelations*, written by Ibn Arabi, the

Masnavi is the most significant contribution to Islamic Sufism. Rumi is also credited to have written one of the most important books of lyrical poems, named *Divan Shams-e Tabrizi*.

A Comprehensive Commentary on Mathnavi Ma'navi, by Karim Zamani: The book of *Masnavi* (also spelt as *Mathnavi*) is difficult to understand due to its numerous references and its lofty themes. Innumerable commentaries are available that attempt to make the ideas of the *Masnavi* approachable through their lucid citations, and references, explaining the parables and metaphors that have roots in Islamic theology and mysticism. The most significant among the English translation remains the commentary on *Masnavi* by Reynold A. Nicholson published between 1925-1940. There are online commentaries as well, which bring together translations by the most important scholars, in one forum. I benefitted greatly from one such website, Dar-al-Masnavi, or the Electronic School of Masnavi studies.¹ Among the versions in Persian, From the many commentaries available in Persian, Karim Zamani's comprehensive commentary on *Masnavi* written in clear and modern Persian makes the *Masnavi* an easier read. Zamani's commentary has seven volumes and has been republished over 45 times. The book is also used as a university textbook. Another edition of *Masnavi* by Badiozzaman Forouzanfar a scholar of Persian literature, Iranian linguistics, and an expert on Rumi, includes a few extra lines by Rumi (added by Rumi's son, Sultan Valad) that explain why *Masnavi* seems incomplete.

Apart from the *Masnavi*, Rumi's *Ghazaliyat Shams-e Tabriz*, (edited by Mohammad Reza Shafie Kadkani) holds a unique space in Persian literature. *Ghazaliyat Shams-e Tabriz* or *Divan Shams-e Tabriz* consists of his lyrical poems (mostly in form of *Ghazals*) demonstrating his most intricate, romantic, and elaborate thoughts. Full of linguistic and poetic innovations, Rumi forever struggled with language which he felt was inept and incapable of expressing his lofty ideas. He invoked the need for a new language. In this

¹ <https://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/index.html>

edition, published in 2013, Mohammad Reza Shafie Kadkani, published a neat version of the book in two volumes, with footnotes and a comprehensive introduction. Shafie Kadkani, a prominent Iranian literary scholar, and an eminent poet is revered for his books of poetry, such as *In the Alleys of Neshabur*, published in 1972.

Bahaeddin Khorramshahi, the prestigious scholar and an expert in the poetry of Hafez famously titled one of his major books, “Hafez is our memory” ¹(*Hafez Hafeze-ye Mast*). Hafez is considered to be the most elaborate poet of Persian literature. His multilayered, deep verses scattered with puns, irony and sarcasm, remain unparalleled in the Persian language. Most of his works are *Ghazals*, comprising five to twelve couplets. Each couplet has an independent meaning and one can even easily change their order and begin reading them from any point. Hafez was the greatest critique of asceticism and hypocrisy. His poems can be studied from myriad points of view. Despite his pungent critique of Sufism, some Sufi concepts cannot be expressed more elegantly than his verses. The most political lyricist of the Persian language, his verses reflect the politics of his time, his affinity toward travel and his hatred of dogmatism. In him is a queer mix of politics and spirituality; eroticism and faith; apostasy with love; humour with disdain. Despite being the most political of all poets, the magical attribute of his poetry lies in its survival from all the censors in the history of Iran. His poems are popular among both agnostics and believers.

Among the most important and prestigious of all commentaries on Hafez is *Hafiz Nameh*, by Bahaeddin Khorramshahi. Spread across two volumes, the books explain the technicalities and intricacies of the poems. The volumes comprising half of the *Ghazals* of Hafez have detailed references and explanations of every verse. The book was first published innumerable times since its first publication in 1994.

¹ Bahaeddin Khorramshahi, *Hafez Hafeze-ye Mast*, (Tehran: Ghatre Publications, 2018)

Khorramshahi a renowned author, journalist, translator, and an expert on the poetry of Hafez and the Quran also compiled and edited the *Complete Works of Saadi* or *Divan-e Saadi*. Among all Classical poets, Saadi's contribution in shaping contemporary Persian is unmatched. His eloquent verses of wisdom, ethics, romance and love are divided into *Boostan*, and *Golestan*. His love poems or *Ghazals* and his long descriptive poems or *Ghaside*, are the finest writings in Persian literature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Iranian politician, and author Mohammad Ali Foroughi, published an edition of Saadi's poetry, without his obscene and profane verses (*Hajviyat and Hazliyat*) In 1999, Bahaeddin Khorramshahi, edited the publication of Foroughi, with additional comments, citations and translations of Arabic verses.

After the *Masnavi*, the most influential book of poetry in Sufism remains *The Conference of the Birds* or *Mantiq Ut-tair* written by Attar Neyshaburi in 1177 AD. Rumi expressed his enormous debt to this book, which inspired him to write the first eighteen lines of the *Masnavi*. Replete with parables, allegories and allusions that are interspersed with the main narrative, *Mantiq Ut-tair* narrates the struggles of a group of birds, who embark on a journey to ask the grandest of all living creatures, *Simorgh*, to be their king. After passing the seven valleys of Quest, Love, Knowledge, Detachment, Unity, Wonderment and Annihilation, only thirty bird arrive at their final destination or *Simorgh*. Of the most comprehensive editions in Persian is the one by Mohammad Reza Shafie Kadkani. Among English editions, I have referred to C.S Nott's translations and the more recent translation of Sholeh Wolpe published in 2017, which has illustrations and is written in modern English.

For a deeper understanding of the structure of Classical and Modern Persian poetry, I found the writings of Sirus Shamisa very helpful. His book, *An Introduction to Prosody*, is a compilation of all the rules of *Aruz* systematised in Arabic and later Persian Poetry since the eighth century by Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi, credited to be the inventor of

Aruz or the rules of prosody in Arabic and Persian literature. Shamisa kept the traditional explanations of prosody intact, shedding only the complex terminology. His book also explains the prosody of new rhythms in Persian literature. The fourth edition of the book was published in 2014. Among other notable works on prosody are *Prosody (Aruz) in Persian*, Abbas Mahyar, *Music of Poem*, Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani and *Rhythm in Persian Poetry*, Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani. Majdeddin M. Arsanjani's unpublished book attempts to explain the rules of *aruz* in Persian poetry to a non-Persian speaker. It has a special chapter about the musical aspects of poetry, and the connection of traditional prosody with traditional Iranian music (*Radif*). This book was an extremely important point of initiation for me into the prosody of Persian Poetry.

Important Newspapers, Magazines

I validated my observations on Iranian cinema, poetry and politics by often referring to important newspapers and magazines actively working before and after the Revolution, such as Keyhan, the second oldest newspaper, in Iran after *Ettela'at*, founded in 1943. After the Revolution, the founders of the newspaper, Abdorrahman Faramarzi and Mustafa Mesbah Zadeh, began publishing the newspaper in London after the Islamic Republic confiscated its office inside Iran. The Supreme Leader of Iran appointed Hossein Shariatmadari as his representative in the newspaper in 1993. Since then Keyhan has been controlled by agents of the Islamic Regime publishing the most radical, extremist and controversial views of the political leaders of Iran.

In this regard, it is important to mention the contribution of Muhammad Ghaed, a well-known columnist and translator based in Iran, who was associated with *Ayandegan*, an illustrious independent newspaper functioning from 1967- 1979. After the newspaper was confiscated after the Revolution, Ghaed embarked on a project of tracing the political

turbulence and the story of the Revolution using the different issues of *Ayandegan*. The book, *Dastan-e Ayandegan* (The Story of *Ayandegan*), was denied publication in Iran. Ghaed later published it on his website <http://www.mghaed.com> which was soon filtered by the Islamic Regime.

Kelk, the literary, art Magazine of Iran was a prestigious platform where distinguished writers like Bahram Bayzai, Mohammad Ebrahim Bastani Parizxi, Dariush Ashuri, Ahmad Kamyabi Mesk published essays, columns, and their critical writings. *Kelk* has a repository of significant academic and literary writings on Iran literature, cinema and art in Iran.

Important Persian websites

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary>

The Dehkhoda Lexicon Institute & International Center for Persian Studies, has recently launched a web page for the *Dehkhoda* dictionary which makes searching for words easier for a non- Persian speaker. The web page is designed according to the layout of the 1998 edition of the dictionary. The Dehkhoda Dictionary is by far the most prestigious and comprehensive dictionary available in the Persian language, formulated by a group of writers led by Iranian scholar and leading intellectual in 1940s Iran, Ali Akbar Dehkhoda. The first volume was published in 1940. Before the publication of *Dehkhoda* two major Persian dictionaries were published in India. Borhan Khalaf Tabrizi published the famous dictionary of *Borhan Qate* in Hyderabad in 1621 under the command of Abdullah Qutb Shah. In the eighteenth century, Mohammad Padeshah Shad named his dictionary in honour of Maharaja Anand Gajapati Raj. The Anandraj Dictionary was first published in Lucknow.

<http://tarikhirani.ir/>

A website dedicated to the oral, written and pictorial history of Iran. Despite its connection with the Islamic Regime (that makes it accessible inside Iran), it has unbiased articles and audiovisual material. The website was founded by Sadegh Kharazi, a former Iranian diplomat and advisor to Iran's former President Khatami.

<http://sherenno.com/>

A website dedicated to Modern Persian Poetry.

<https://www.bbc.com/persian>

The website of the Persian radio and television of BBC. The BBC Persian radio began functioning in 1940. In 2008 the BBC Persian television was launched. Even though the website is filtered in Iran it is considered a credible source of news. It broadcasts news from all Persian speaking countries, including Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

<http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/>

A website dedicated to writings and speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini. It has a collection of essays and dissertation projects written about him. It functions under the Institution for Editing and Publishing the Works of Imam Khomeini. And is supervised by the grandson of Khomeini, Hasan Khomeini.

<https://www.khamenei.ir/>

A website dedicated to publications about the current leader of Iran Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It has a compilation of his speeches, *fatwas* and other contents related to him. The website works directly under the supervision of his office.

<https://www.radiofarda.com/>

A website of a prestigious Persian radio station (of the same name) funded by the U.S government. The website publishes articles that have no chance of publication in the heavily censored media of Iran. The website has been at work since 2002. The website is filtered inside Iran.

www.radiozamaneh.com

The website of the Persian radio is based in Amsterdam. In addition to news, it publishes articles from prestigious writers that cannot be published inside Iran due to censorship. The website also provides a space for publications and discussions centring on LGBTQ issues and women rights among other things. At work since 2005, the website is filtered in Iran.

Chapter 2:

Introduction: *Shahrefarang* and the Iranian Encounter with Modernity

Revisiting History: *Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema*

Cinema was born from the will, science, and art of modern men . . .to gather, through time and space, the meaning of life, which is perpetually renewing itself. It was born to be the Total Representation of the body and soul, a visual story made of images painted with a brush of light.¹

The earliest encounters with modernity in Iran can be traced back to the Qajar Era (1789-1925) when members of the royal family began travelling to the West for the first time and sending their kin to European universities for higher education. This tradition began with Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, the most formidable monarch of the Qajar dynasty who ruled Iran for a stretch of almost fifty years (1831-1896). Naser al-Din Shah was the first Persian monarch to visit Europe in 1873 where he was amazed by the advanced technology and science that gripped Western cities. He took a keen interest in photography and is said to be the first Iranian individual to ever be photographed. He soon began taking portraits of not just himself, but also took the camera into the innermost, inaccessible/ *andarun* chambers of the harem where he photographed his wives in their natural surroundings.

This chapter seeks to chart a historiography of Iran's first frivolous encounters with modernity from the Qajar kings who brought with them the cinematograph as a souvenir- a toy of entertainment for the Shah from the streets of Paris² to the regimented modernisation campaign enforced under the Pahlavi Dynasty that ruled Iran with an iron hand for the next 54years; the nature of the political reforms undertaken and the effect it had on the

¹ Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) ,76.

² Dariush Ashuri, "Tarikh, Roya, Kaboos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actor Cinema", (History, Dream, Nightmare: A look toward Naserreddin al-Din Shah Actore Cinema). *Kelk* (Magazine), published by Mir Kasra Haj Seyed Javadi, January 1993, Issue number-34, 128

development of cultural sphere, mostly cinema. With close analysis of the film *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* or *Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema*, (1992) directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, I wish to trace how the dream of the *Shahrefarang*¹/West ends into a nightmare, metaphorically in the film and literally in the political sphere of Iran only to be reclaimed in the cultural revolution of the 1960s which culminated in the eventual formation of the New Wave in Iranian Cinema.

My methodology to chart this expansive history of Iran and its cinema is based on readings of Persian texts written in the Qajar and Pahlavi periods- memoirs and journals published by kings and ministers from the royal court. Dariush Ashouri's article, *Tarikh, Roya, Kavoos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema* published in *Kelk Magazine* is my primary point of reference. It satirises the failure of the project of Modernity in Iran and brings to context the formation of *Rowshanfekri* or Intellectualism in Iran with the arrival of the *Shahre Farang* (here the camera). Among other important Persian texts is *The White Revolution* by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi that brings to light his massive reform program in the field of education, women rights and agriculture. The primary reference for this chapter is the text of the film *Nasserredin Shah, Actore Cinema* itself along with explanations and the intentions of the filmmaker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf recorded in a telephonic interview.

The film begins with Mozafer al-Din Shah's (1896-1907, the son of Naser al-Din Shah who is historically credited for bringing the movie camera to Iran for the first time) return from Paris where he was accompanied by his personal photographer, Mirza Ebrahim

¹ *Shahre Farang* literally means French city in Persian, referring largely to any European City or the West in general. *Farang* in Persian is associated with luxury and modernism. The cinematograph with its peep hole window was literally named *Shahre Farang*, or the window to the West. The device had a peep hole with a magnifying glass looking into which one could view an exhibition of pictures, objects or people captured on film.

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/237607/فرنگ>

Khan Akkasbashi¹ given to learn the art and technique of moving images. He had loaned heavily from the Russian banks to fund his travels to the west and especially to bring back the cinematograph to amuse members of his court.



Figure 10: A postcard of Mozafer al-Din Shah on one of his European trips with George V of England
Postcards on the Qajar Era printed by Nazar Research and Cultural Institute.
Images: Archive of Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies.
Scanned from the collection of the.

In an excerpt from his travelogue found in Issari's book, *Cinema in Iran*, he writes about his first experience of watching a projected image from the cinematograph,

At 9:00 P.M we went to the Exposition and the Festival Hall where they were showing cinematographe, which consists of still and motion pictures. Then we went to Illusion building They erected a very large screen in the centre of the Hall, turned off all electric lights and projected the picture of cinematography on that large screen. It was very interesting to watch. Among the pictures were Africans and Arabians travelling with camels in the African desert which was very interesting. Other pictures were of the Exposition, the moving street, the Seine River and ships crossing the river, people swimming and playing in the water and many others which

¹ The title *Akkasbashi* means court photographer. *Akkas* meaning the one who takes photos and *bashi* is a Turkish word meaning chief. In the Dehkhoda dictionary *Akkasbashi* means the chief of the photographers. As a suffix it refers to a profession related to the court.

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/55022/باشی>

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/218582/عکاس-باشی>

were all very interesting. We instructed Akkasbashi to purchase all kinds of it [cinematographic equipment] and bring it to Tehran so God willing he can make some there and show them to our servants.”¹

On returning to his court in Tehran, Mozafer al-Din Shah is informed by his minister who also doubles up as the sorcerer that he is neck-deep in debt as ‘the treasury is emptier than the Sultan’s heart’. “*Khazaneye mellat az ghalbe sultan paktar ast.*”² Afraid that he may not be able to compensate Akkasbashi for his services to establish cinematography, he whines on the grave of his father (filmed in real location at the palace of Golestan, Tehran) and commands the sorcerer to teleport the cinematographer to his son’s court in the future (Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar- 1907-1909). The film drawing its references from history satirises the incompetence of the ministers in the Qajar court; the sorcerer does exactly the opposite of what he is told. The cinematographer is instead transported to Naser al-Din Shah’s court and henceforth he becomes the real protagonist of the film, and history.

Just like the sudden arrival of modernity in Iran, which followed no linearity in time or a demarcated period of enlightenment that prepared its citizens for its encounter, the film itself is anachronistic. Makhmalbaf takes the liberty to change the order of time in history, and shifts the historical reality of the arrival of the cinema and technology from the time of Mozafer al- Din Shah, to the time of his father, Naser al-Din Shah, who ruled for a stable period compared to his son who died after a five-year term immediately after signing the Persian Constitution in 1906.

“This era also was the beginning of our serious encounter with European civilizations.”³

¹ Mohammad A. Issari, *Cinema in Iran: 1900-1979*, (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 58-59

² Mohsen Makhmalbaff, *Nasserredin Shah, Actore Cinema*, 1992

³ Dariush Ashuri, “Tarikh, Roya, Kaboos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema”, 129

“The Qajars governed less through religion or a central bureaucracy than the systematic manipulation of social divisions, especially clan, tribal, ethnic, regional and sectarian differences.”¹

Lacking a central bureaucracy or a standing army, they relied on local leaders- the tribal chiefs, the clerics, big merchants and large landlords who took advantage of their power and connections to the central court. Almost all ministers of the court were appointed not based on merit, but because they were related to the Shah through marriage or blood. Fath Ali Shah, the second Qajar ruler, had consistently created bonds between himself and the provincial families by marrying more than one thousand wives and leaving behind some hundred children.²In the absence of any responsible administration or designated ministry, most legal matters were left to religious judges, tribal chiefs or village headmen who retained ultimate authority in matters of life and death.

They presided over the center through ministers (vezirs), courtiers (darbaris), princes (mirzas), hereditary mostowfis (accountants),and nobles (ashrafs) with such titles as al-saltaneh (of the realm), al-dowleh(of the government), and al-mamaleks (of the kingdom). But they reigned over the rest of the country through local a’yans (notables) – khans (tribal chiefs), arbabs (landlords), tojjars (wealthy merchants), and mojtaheds (religious leaders). These notables retained their own sources of local power. Even after a half-century of half-hearted attempts to build state institutions, Nasser al-Din Shah ended his long reign in 1896 leaving behind merely the skeleton of a central government.”³

¹ Abrahamian Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2008), 33

² Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 19-20.

³ Abrahamian Ervand , *A History of Modern Iran*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9

Instead of building a competent economy, the Qajar kings spent most of the budget on public displays of gallows and spectacular ceremonies. The Education Ministry had spent most of its limited resources on building the *Dar al-Fanon* (Abode of Learning), a grand high school, the first of its kind in Persia, established in 1852 to train cadres for the army and civil service. Its mission was to train the sons of the rich and the landed aristocrats for public service. The teaching faculty was brought in from France and Belgium, and it also provided scholarships to top students to pursue higher education in those countries. By 1900 it was a fully established polytechnic with more than 350 students.

Much later Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in his book, *The White Revolution* demonstrated how education despite being a long-standing tradition in Iran was not publicly open for the masses despite the efforts of the Qajar kings at building a modern Persia. “It has to be mentioned that in accordance to social order and the relation between different [social] classes, education for children was not public and only included the nobility class”.¹ He further states that while modern Iran was being conceptualised, its masses were drowning under ignorance and illiteracy. Even ten years after the formation of *Dar al-Fanon*, primary and secondary schools in Iran had only 40,000 students.

“This *Dar al-Fanon* was founded by Amir Kabir in 1268 (1851), but the founder in the way we all know, was assassinated only thirteen days after the official inauguration of that institution”.² The government soon opened other secondary schools in the major cities of Tehran, Isfahan and Tabriz with new military colleges, schools of agriculture, political science and foreign languages affiliated to the *Dar al-Fanon*. The official Government Printing Office published innumerable medical, military and language textbooks and travelogues, including Naser al-Din Shah’s tour of Europe, western Classics such as Defoe’s

¹ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The White Revolution* (Tehran: Imperial Pahlavi Library, 1967), 122

²Ibid, 126

Robinson Crusoe, Dumas' *Three Musketeers*, Verne's *Around the World in Ninety Days* and Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. This apart, accounts of Pre-Islamic histories of Iran written by Europeans were published too. Thus, Iranians began seeing their history through Western eyes. This gradually resulted in the formation of a distinct intelligentsia (albeit a small group of people mostly hailing from the aristocrats) who began realising the need for government reforms.

On the other hand, the contact with the West, especially through modern education, introduced new ideas, new occupations, and eventually a new middle class. Their members described themselves as "enlightened thinkers," adopting first the Arabic term *monawar al-fekran* and later coining the Persian equivalent *rowshanfekran* (enlightened thinkers)¹

Ashuri also brings attention to the emergence of the class of the *rowshanfekrans*/enlightened thinkers in his essay, "History, Dream, Nightmare: A look toward Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema". He further critiques the term and states that the *rowshanfekr* is the one whose enlightenment comes with his encounter/direct association with the West either through his travels or education. The intellectual associates himself with the foundation and philosophical idea on which Western civilisations are structured on. "The Qajars also shrouded themselves in religious aura declaring themselves as the Protectors of Shi'ism, the Keepers of the Koran, Commanders of the Faithful and Girders of Imam Ali's Sword."² Their rule was often interspersed with ostentatious displays and publicised pilgrimages to the Mosque of Imam Reza in Mashed. They are credited for building the town of Mashed which

¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 35

² Ibid, 15

means the place of martyrs (*shahid*). As a family tradition, members of the royal household were buried in the shrine of Shah-Abdul-Azim in Shahre Ray located on the outskirts of Tehran. Soon the country's first rail line connecting the capital to this shrine was built for their easy access.

The cinematograph is ushered into the court after the superstitious eastern/oriental custom of ridding bad *nazar* following the tradition of *nazar kardan*¹ where ill omens are ward off when dealing with a person or thing of great value or beauty. It is believed that bad gaze *shurchashm* (literally meaning salty eye or jealousy) could cause great tragedy and hence needed purification. In this regard, the arrival of the movie camera signified more than just the arrival of an apparatus. It signified the arrival of Europe or the West to the oriental court of the Shah and quite appropriately the apparatus was given a new name: *Shahrefarang*.

The roots of their superstitions ran deep into their religious beliefs. Naser al-Din Shah was notorious for razing and re-building his palaces every two years because he was obsessed with the evil gaze. On the night before his assassination, Naser al-Din Shah said to his wives that a fortune teller, Mohammad Vali Mirza (who had earlier correctly predicted all the events of his life (including travel to Europe) had predicted that on the 29th of April 1896 there would be an event that would put his life in grave danger. He was informed that if he survived by a streak of good luck he would rule the country for many more years.

¹ *Nazar kardan* or *chashm zadan* is said to have roots in witchcraft, but is also validated in the Koran. Koran, Chapter 68, verses 51 and 52: (68:51) When the unbelievers hear this Exhortation, they look at you as though they would knock you off your feet with their (hostile) glances.³⁵ They say: "Surely he is afflicted with madness";

The holy verses are inserted in armlets as good omen. These are worn by Iranians in contemporary times.

Esfand Dud kardan: Another traditional practice to rid off the evil gaze is by putting a specific herb on a hot plate to create smoke. Inhaling the smoke is believed to rid one of evil gaze.

The other and most common method still practised in modern Iranian Society is by a raw egg. All possible names of people who could be bearers of the evil gaze are marked. The egg is circled around the head of the victim by mentioning each name. Two coins are placed on both sides of the egg. The egg cracks with the utterance of the name of the one with the evil gaze.

“Tonight, is the 29th. I will go tomorrow to the shrine to celebrate and thank god.”¹ Jubilant after his survival he soon went to the shrine of Shah-Abdul-Azim to pay his respects on 1st May 1896. He was assassinated while praying in the shrine.

The time travel in *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema* is filmed in a way that resembles the surreal language of a dream that suddenly halts over the frozen photograph of the ghosts of women in the inner quarters of the harem- the teleported cinematographer has landed into the harem – into history, in the time of Naser al-Din Shah. The still image magically achieves movement with the cinematographer’s descent into it. The ladies shriek and run away at the sight of the sudden intruder. This is metaphoric of the forceful movement back in time, or the anachronism Makhmalbaf uses, and symbolic of an entry into the court of Naser al-Din Shah credited for introducing photography to Persia for the first time.



Figure 11: The still photograph of the harem, before it comes to life in *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992

¹ www.ensafnews.com/256721/اړوايتي-خصوصي-از-تړور-ناصرالدين-شاه accessed on 12.11.2019

Cinema holds thousands of images in one scene and, made up of a bright source and a white sheet, makes the dead get up and walk. This simple exposed celluloid ribbon constitutes not only a historical document, but a piece of history, the history that has not disappeared, that does not need a genius to be resuscitated.¹

Makhmalbaf weaves the surreal universe of a dream by combining historical events with *khiyal* (fiction); a dream that will eventually turn into a *kaboos* (nightmare) to be characterised by *parishan* (disorder), *bibonyadi* (baselessness) and chaos.² The absurd, childish dream of Qajar kings visiting European cities by loaning large sums of money from Russian and British banks by mortgaging the country to bring back the cinematograph and its operator for mere entertainment proves to be dangerous for the monarch. Cinema arrives with a dream. It literally opens a window to look at the West- It possesses the ability to present a dream- dream of an ‘other’ better and free world. With the physical act of placing the eye into the keyhole of the camera kings and their loyal servants, could be transported to fantastical lands of the west.



Figure 12: The *Shahrefarang* in *Nassereddin Shah*, *Actor-e Cinema*, 1992

¹ Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century Film, Experience, Modernity*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) ,70.

² Dariush Ashuri, “Tarikh, Roya, Kavoos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema”, 128

Dream of the west with its all its wealth and affluence, wonders of technique, with its broad streets, beautiful parks, well-groomed men and pretty women without hijab, with its all justice and security and liberty and civilization and humanity (as intellectuals would say) was the exact thing that caused anxiousness in this traditional old school human, turning him to a third-world human.¹

The desire to ‘fly toward’ and chase this dream could topsy-turvy the concrete universe of the despot, invert hierarchies of power between the supreme power/ *qeble-i alam*² and his loyal servants. The image of this dream percolating through the traditional world order could in itself bring about a revolution and topple existing governments.

The filmic gaze is a levelling gaze that can reframe everything and everyone within a principle of equality. Benjamin notices: “now the mirror image has become detachable from the person mirrored and is transportable.” Film celebrates the sameness and the nearness of things.³

The West is suddenly brought geographically closer with one peep into the keyhole. But who watches?



Figure 13: Naser al-Din Shah looks through the peephole of the *Shahrefarang* in *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992

¹ Dariush Ashuri, “Tarikh, Roya, Kaboos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema”, 131

² “Pivot of the Universe”, as Naser al-Din Shah preferred to be called.

³ Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 10

Naser al-Din Shah watches himself, often inviting his ministers and innumerable children to look into the camera. Soon private and public projections are organised where women of the harem, loyal servants of the king are invited to watch. The Queens, their servants, eunuchs, the guards of the harem take part in viewing the fantasy of cinema unfold before their eyes and are at once transported to the lands of the films while rocking their babies in cradles, knitting, or running away at the sound of thunder coming from the screen. The king in the meantime is enticed by what he watches and has in turn fallen in love with the image of Golnar from *The Lor Girl*, (1932) the first sound film to be ever produced in the Persian language by Ardeshir Irani. In a surreal fantasy, Golnar escapes from the clutches of the men in the film to reach her lover Jafar but in turn, falls into the court and the clutches of the king. Entranced by her beauty, he chases her in a long sequence as she runs from the halls of the castle, to be trapped into the harem before slipping out again. Makhmalbaf designs the chase sequences tediously, with a sound design that runs uniformly through each of these dream sequences and this brings to mind Ashuri's essay where he talks about 'chasing this dream of the west' symbolised by cinematographic images that the eye literally sees; a dream that dominates the modern history of the Iranian and resultant tragedy that befalls due to the unreachable gap between his unbearable reality and this unattainable dream.

The desire for a dream devastates the order in the world of the king, reducing him from the pivot of the universe to the cow of Mashthasan (Dariush Mehrjui, *Gaav*, 1969) in turn alienating himself to his own harem. Ashuri writes that the thirst towards realising this dream rendered the reality of the Iranian self futile and resulted in the formation of a diseased/*pourashub* society which was soon to be termed 'occidental' /*gharbzade* by Jalal

Al-i Ahmad who coined the word *gharbzadagi* for his book translated into English as *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*.

I speak of “Occidentosis” as of tuberculosis. But perhaps it more closely resembles an infestation of weevils. Have you seen how they attack wheat? From the inside. The bran remains intact but it is just a shell, like a cocoon left behind on a tree...I am speaking of a disease: an accident from without, spreading in an environment susceptible to it.”¹

While Al-i Ahmad speaks of rapid industrialisation and the cancerous growth of the tumour of aping the west contagiously spreading across Iran resulting in the loss of any formation of the Iranian *self*, Ashouri subtly criticises not just him, but the emergent class of *rowshanfekrs* whose *self* was formed in relation to the West.

...but the person who coined the term was *gharbzadeh* himself in his desires to imitate western authors and get recognition in Europe. Isn't it the dream of every artist who is a citizen of the third world to be taken seriously in the west? Don't we all believe that the West does not understand us?²

It is for this reason that the head of the artist- or the operator of the apparatus that symbolises the West is forever under the guillotine. He not only brings the western apparatus to Iran, but he is also the only one who can operate it. Hence in this context, he is the *roshanfekr*- or the intellectual who suddenly finds himself teleported into the court of Naser

¹ Al-i Ahmad, Jalal. *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), 27

² Ashouri, “Tarikh, Roya, Kaboos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema”,131

al-Din Shah pleading to be spared of the blades of the guillotine as a minister reads out his crimes.



Figure 14: Akkasbashi under the guillotine in *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992

Amir Kabir (1807-1852) chief adviser to Naser al-Din Shah, and the first of Iran's reformers appears in the scene before the guillotine is about to slit off the head of the cinematographer, mouthing the iconic lines,

“Grow rice should you intend to harvest in one year,
plant trees to gain fruit in ten,
cultivate a person to develop in a hundred years.
Cinematography cultivates people.”¹

Among the first actions taken by Naser al-Din Shah on becoming the ruler of Iran was to appoint Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Nezam (Amir Kabir) Chief Minister. A capable administrator, Amir Kabir was, in effect, the man behind the throne. He assumed all executive powers and embarked on a policy of military, financial, administrative, and educational reforms. To strengthen the power of the Qajar state and train officers for a modern military force and a modern government, he conceptualised and constructed the *Dar*

¹ Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema/ Once upon a Time Cinema*, 1992

al-Fanon, the first college to train the sons of the ruling elite in modern European sciences. His charismatic personality rooted in secular ideologies soon found trouble for him and severed his relations with the *ulama* or the clergy and the Shah himself. A few days before the arrival of European instructors and the commencement of the College in 1852, he was sacked and exiled in the garden of Fin, and thereupon ordered to be executed by the Shah.

'Haj Ali Khan, ... the court's chief servant ... is assigned to go to Fin of Kashan and relieve Mirza Taqi Khan Farahani [Amir Kabir]. In performing this mission, he should be assured of imperial favours and he shall be honoured among his peers.'¹

“Once in Kashan he went into the bathhouse at the Fin royal garden where the former prime minister was taking a bath. There, the executioner who had accompanied Haj Ali Khan opened the veins of Amir Kabir and, after watching the condemned man bleed for a time, suffocated him with a bath towel pushed into his throat.”²

Makhmalbaf's obsession with the blade and the guillotine in the first half of the film anticipates Amir Kabir's impending death – slitting of the veins with a shower blade in a scene later in the film which is further juxtaposed with the iconic shower sequence of *Qeysar*, Masoud Kimiai's path-breaking film in 1969. *Qeysar* here is summoned by the Shah to return as Haj Ali Khan, as the mightiest of the *lutis* with *gheyra*t to protect the *namoos* which in this context is the nation itself, Iran. “Come back *Qeysar*, *Qeysar* stays.”

As the search for the mightiest man begins to cut short the tale of Amir Kabir, clips from the tough-guy genre films of the 1960-1970s like *Toofan dar Shahre ma/ Storm in our City*, Samuel Khachikian, (1958) also starring Behrouz Vossoughi, *Qeysar* fill the screen.

¹ Mehrdad Kia, “Inside the Court of Naser od-Din Shah Qajar, 1881-96: The Life and Diary of Mohammad Hasan Khan E'temad os-Saltaneh”. *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2001):105
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284141>

² *ibid*, 105

The tough guy genre often classified as *Luti* or *Jaheli* films in Farsi based their ideology (variously called *lutigari*, *javanmardi*, *fotovvat*) of chivalry. In the Iranian context, chivalry is based on bravery, generosity, loyalty and benevolence toward the poor and downtrodden. These virtues come with responsibilities of the male members of a family or the society at large (*gheyrat*) to protect the honour and chastity of the women in their families (*namus*).¹ The tough guys could be further classified in the binaries of good and evil, or the heroic and the villainous *louts*.

Many of the terms, such as lout (*lat*), ignorant thug (*jahel*), loafer (*velgard*), knife-wielder (*chaqu kesh*), bully (*qoldor*), and lumpen (*lompan*) are pejorative and critical of the toughs. Others, such as velvet hat wearer (*kolah makhmali*), slick brother (*dash mashti*), brave and generous (*javanmard*), cunning trickster (*ayyar*), champion (*pahlevan*), dervish (*darvish*), and tough guy (*luti*) are either neutral or laudatory.²

It is no surprise that Qeysar, the mightiest of the toughs (played by Behrouz Vossoughi) is chosen by the Shah to perform his *gheyrat* by murdering Amir Kabir in the *hamaam* in a way similar to his murder of one of the Ab Mangol brothers in the film to avenge the dishonour perpetrated on his family after the rape of his sister Fati and the murder of his brother Farmaan, a well-respected tough himself. In NSAC, Qeysar must perform his *gheyrat* again, but this time toward his country, ridding it off an ‘occidental’ reformist and

¹ According to the Amid Farsi Dictionary *namus* is defined as one of the following :

-honour

-chastity

-(figuratively) sister, mother or wife of a man, whose honour and chastity needs to be protected by the male member of the family. *Binamus* similarly signifies the loss of virtue and honour. It is a harsh insult in present day Iran.

² Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Industrializing Years 1941-1978*, vol 2, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 266-267

his attempts to westernise the honour of the *namus* in question here- *Irane Khanom*, or the motherland, Iran itself.¹

Qeysar is chosen for the task, but instead of carrying out the task, he like a vigilante hero watches Amir Kabir's wrists ooze out blood on the floor referring to a popular second version of events, where it is believed that while Haj Ali and his guard had stormed into the Fin Bath, they dared not slit the wrist of the minister themselves. They respectfully asked him to make the task easier for them, by slitting his veins himself. Amir Kabir commands his servant to carry forth the task who after following the last orders of his master writes the final words that a true Muslim must offer to Allah before breathing his last breath, *La Illahe illa Allah* on the hamaam walls with his blood. Two exemplary shower sequences- one through memory of the most commendable vigilante films of Iran and another a tragedy from the pages of the history of Iran's are put together and fictionalised to now retell the history of the journey of cinema itself. In a telephonic conversation with director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, he explained how he crystallised all the elements of the film,

In *Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema* the history of the journey of cinema through all its genres is told through two important *nakhs*/strings; one of love between the cinematographer and Atiyeh, which is *jesmane*/carnal desire of physical unity with the beloved. The other string is the love of Nasser al-Din Shah towards *Doktare Lor*, depicted through the magic of moments floating between solid (reality) and vaporous

¹ Iran has been referred to as a beautiful lady, a lover or a mother in the works of many poets and musicians. A well known example is from Reza Barahani's poem *Irane Khanom*, also made into a song by the exiled musician Mohsen Namjoo. Instead of Iran, the name Irane is used, according to the logic of Arabic grammar where a masculine word is feminized by placing an *e* in the end.

*"I die of sorrow and you don't even know it beautiful lady,
All of me is yours, I have no home either here or there
I have no head for you to sever.
Without you I am only a beggar in the streets of the world
I am talking to you Irane, oh beautiful lady."*

(imagination) states; moments which have its legs rooted to the ground, but hands stretched out and touching the skies.¹

The film shows the arrival of cinema at the new wave from the silent era (*Haji Aga Actor-e Cinema*, 1933, directed Iranian Armenian filmmaker Ovannes Oganian) to the first Iranian Talkie (*Dokhtare Lor*, 1932, produced by Ardeshir Irani and Abolhossein Sepanta under the Imperial Film Company in Bombay) to clips from path-breaking Film Farsis released during the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah (Siyamak Yasami, *Ganje Gharoon*, 1956, Samuel Khachikian, *Toofan dar Shahre ma/ Storm in our City*, 1958, Masoud Kimiai, *Qeysar*, 1969 and Naser Mohammadi, *Valede Agha Mostafa*, 1977 among others) the earliest New Wave films (Dariush Mehrjui, *Gaav/ The Cow*, 1969, Bahram Beyzai, *Raghbar /Downpour* by 1972, Parviz Kimiavi, *Mogholha*, 1973, Sohrab Shahid-Saless, *Tabiyate Bijaan/ Still Life*, 1974) and finally with the consolidation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, and the resultant films of the New Wave (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Cyclist*, 1987, Abbas Kiarostami, *Where is the Friend's Home*, 1987, *Close Up*, 1990, Bahram Beyzai, *Bashu the Little Stranger*, 1986) among others

The agent of censorship in *Nassereddin Shah Actore Cinema* is a chubby grown-up boy who seems to be the right hand of Naser al-Din Shah. This character is based on a character from the pages of history of Malijak, a Kurdish shepherd boy, nephew to one of the Shah's favourites wives. In the four volumes of his memoir, *Diary of Aziz-os-Sultan*, (published in 1997, by Mohsen Mirzaei)² Malijak writes that he became the most pampered and spoilt kid in history after he made the Shah shift his position in sleep one night in his playfulness. Soon after the Shah had turned over, the chandelier above him crashed. The

¹A telephonic conversation of Mohsen Makhmalbaf with the author on 22.02.2020, 7.30pm IST.

² Mohsen Mirzaei, *Diary of Aziz-os-Sultan*, (Tehran: Zeryab Publications, 1997)

little child had saved his life. The king was obsessed with the boy henceforth and Malijak accompanied him wherever he went.



Figure 15: A real-life photograph of Naser al-Din Shah with Malijak
Source: <http://newsoholic.com/>

The boy's real name was Gholam Ali. Gholam Ali's father, Mirza Mohammad Khan (also known as the first Malijak), was a brother of Amin Aqdas, one of the Shah's most powerful wives. Naser al-Din Shah, who mistrusted and disliked his biological sons, adopted Malijak as the child he would have loved to father. The boy came from humble origins. He spoke the language of a peasant boy, calling the monarch, *shah jun* (darling Shah). In return, the Shah called him *mali jun* (darling Mali). To show his unlimited power and to humiliate those who ridiculed his relationship with the child, the monarch honoured Malijak with the royal title *Aziz-os-Soltan* (The King's Darling). He also appointed Malijak as an officer in the army...¹and a brigadier general at the age of eight.²

One day the little boy had spotted a sparrow (Kurdish: *melic*: bird, sparrow) and exclaimed with delight, “maluychak!” in his Kurdish Garrousi accent. Henceforth out of

¹ Mehrdad Kia, “Inside the Court of Naser od-Din Shah Qajar, 1881-96: The Life and Diary of Mohammad Hasan Khan E'temad os-Saltaneh”. *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2001): 121.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284141>

² Ehsan Yarshater, “The Qajar Era in the Mirror of Time” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1/4, (2001): 191
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4311430191>

affection, the king began calling him Mallijak. The boy took to the king's fancy and soon replaced his favourite cat Babri Khanom that had been put to death by his jealous wives in the harem as a result of their hostility toward Amina Aqdas, the keeper of the cat, the aunt to Malijak and the *sogholi* of the Shah.¹ "I had eighty-four wives, none loved me. I didn't love either except Babri Khanom... she was my cat...she also played with Malijak. The women were jealous and did away with her."²

In the film, Malijak is a part of a council that decides on the censor codes of cinema while eating *dizi* or *aab gusht*,³ a traditional Persian dish with meat stew thickened with potatoes and chickpeas. While the members of the committee sit on the carpet eating the traditional meat soup, Malijak is in charge of steering the rolls of film while gorging on meat himself. This symbolic scene directly refers to the commercial cinema or Film Farsis that were then popularly called *cinemaye aab gushti*, "stewpot films" or "meat and potato films."⁴ It symbolised a cinema that propagated the values and traditions of the common Iranian man, often criticising the elite. The committee watches a celebrated sequence from the Film Farsi, *Ganj-e Qarun*, or *Garun's Treasures*, directed by Siamak Yasami (1965) where the protagonist Carefree Ali (enacted by Fardin) is seen devouring *aab gusht* with his friend Hasan the Rattler while singing a cheerful song, with the lyrics, *aabgusht bezan, rowshan mishi*, or 'eat *aabgusht* and be merry'. This scene from the film became so popular among audiences that the genre of tough-guy films in Film Farsis came to be known and named after this sequence.

Film Farsis broadly categorised as the cinema at the time of Mohammad Reza Shah (Pahlavi Dynasty, ruled Iran from 1941-1979) was a combination of family melodramas,

¹ <http://newsoholic.com/malijak-darbar/3/> accessed on 1.11.2019.

² Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema/ Once upon a Time Cinema*, 1992

³ Traditional Persian cuisine, also called *aab gusht* literally means meat juice. Lamb stew thickened with potatoes and chickpeas. *Dizi* refers to the stoneware crockery it is served in.

⁴ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Industrializing Years 1941-1978*, vol 2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 199

tough guy films, vigilante noir dramas, comedies. Commercially categorised as *cinema-ye aab gushti* (stew-pot films) this genre was interspersed with generous doses of songs and dance sequences, imitating melodramas of the west and Hindi films made around the same time. Functioning under the regulations of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's forced modernisation campaign, these films equated modernity with Westernization and were filled with dichotomous self-other relationships that Iranians were experiencing in their real lives. Messages of reconciliation between pre-modern Iranian traditions and Western modern innovations surfaced. They reflected a nation struggling to find an acceptable identity in the face of rampant industrialisation and rapid modernization that disparaged their Islamic traditions and community. Even though the Western other was posited as technologically superior, it was associated as an agent of corruption and a return to traditional values and the Iranian self was the only way to restore peace in the community.

As the agent of censorship and the shah's right hand, in an iconic sequence from the film, the Shah brings cinema to the courtyard of his palace to exhibit it to his people. People gather to watch the old lady from Sohrab Shahid-Saless's *Still Life*, (1974), trying to thread her needle. As the audience gets impatient, the cinematographer and the cyclist (from *Cyclist*, 1987, Mohsen Makhmalbaf) peddle forward the scene. Meanwhile, the Shah and his *Soghli* have dozed off in their thrones borne by servants who begin drifting off too. With the throne slipping from their shoulders Naser al-Din Shah is awakened. He gives orders to Malijak to help the old lady thread her needle.

Malijak literally enters the scene, through the projector trying to hasten the process of threading the needle- a symbolic gesture of cutting and censorship, which seeks to bring up pace in the slow cinema of Sales. Thus, the words of Shah 'go help her' could be interpreted as "go censor this scene." Malijak here reiterates the lines from *Doktare Lor*, by replacing it with the image of the needle- "*Tehrūn shahre kashangiye, faqat mardomesh*

badand” (Tehran is a beautiful city, only its people are not) gets replaced by “*Tehrūn shahre kashangiye faqat surakhesh tangan*”¹ (Tehran is a beautiful city only its eye is tight as a needle)

This line refers to a huge number of cultural references in Iran. One such can be directly traced to the Quran, and the New Testament, where it is said that the wealthy would not reach heaven until they passed through the eye of a needle. It refers subtly to the act of censorship itself. By indirection in language and cinematic image Makhmalbaf² hints at the impossibility of intervening through the eye of art, which is as closed and difficult to percolate as the needle of time in *Still Life*. Makhmalbaf’s self-referential language reflects in this scene where both the operator of the projector and the cinematographer himself have fallen asleep (referring to his film, *Cycle*, where the rolling of the wheels of the actor, Moharram Zaynalzadeh’s cycle is substituted by the wheel or rolls of film but the sound of the chain of the cycle is retained) while only the artist or the filmmaker himself remains awake to tell the tale – of the journey of cinema itself through the journey of time.

Malijak’s lines and the image of the needle obliquely hints at deep sexual connotations. Majeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani, a teacher of Cinema at Soore University in Tehran remembers how Makhmalbaf got away with such oblique but such obvious sexual connotations despite the stringent censorship codes of the time. He remembers how the cinema hall² had burst into roars of laughter with the delivery of these lines – “You know everyone was laughing, just like one would laugh at a dirty joke”.³ That it was intended is visible in the displeased expression of *Sogholi* as the Shah cracks up with the delivery of these lines.

¹ Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992

² Cinema Central then, renamed *Cinemay Markazi* after the Islamic revolution

³ Telephonic conversation of Majdeddin M. Arsanjani by the author on 15.10.2019

Mirror/Future: *Ayeneh/Atiyeh*



Figure 16: Akkasbashi with Atiyeh (future) seen through the mirror in *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992

Now if we go back to the first string in the narrative Makhmalbaf referred to earlier, or the string of physical unity with the beloved, we must talk of the love between Akkasbashi and Atiyeh. Here Atiyeh, or the beloved, is brought into the narrative of *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema* from Bahram Beyzai's *Raghbar, Downpour*, (1972). Deeply inspired by Beyzai's debut feature film, Makhmalbaf takes the liberty to change two letters in the name of the female protagonist named *Atefeh* (meaning affection) in *Raghbar*. *Atefeh* (affection) becomes *Atiyeh* (Future) in *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*. Now, *Atiyeh* closely resembles the word *Ayeneh* (mirror) when the *nokhtes* (dots separating alphabets) from the Persian alphabets are dropped. Makhmalbaf uses a rhetorical device taken popularly from literature -*janas-e khat* which is an imperfectly spelling pun in writing but transforms it into a cinematic pun, or punning in shot. *Ayeneh* and *Atiyeh* become one but the same idea, the future signified by the impossible reunion with the beloved. One that can never be touched (or arrived at) physically, but must always be looked at, or longed for, through the mirror.

By this manipulation in the name, Makhmalbaf brings a deeper dimension to Beyzai's film which dealt with how Atefeh, entrapped by the baggage of her duties toward

her ailing mother and little brother fails to respond to the love of her suitor (Hekmat). By changing the name, Makhmalbaf makes a woman represent the future. Atiyeh becomes the object of tragic, cinematic love; a woman passively represented by her eternal wait and eventually destroyed by it.

The audience is conditioned to look at the future through a mirror in the film. The mirror and the cart of the cinematographer become other important motifs borrowed from the expository sequence of *Raghubar*. The film begins with a close shot of the rolling of the wheels of a cart, as a cart puller hurriedly makes his way past the alleys of Tehran loaded with luggage, noticeably a large mirror. Hekmat, the male protagonist, a school teacher has moved to a new neighbourhood, and it is his luggage the cart puller bears. Large photo frames of Hekmat's family ancestors are unloaded from the cart. In his film Makhmalbaf replaces these frames with large posters of the American silent film *The Kid* (directed by Charlie Chaplin in 1921) that is unloaded from the cinematographer's cart signifying an era when American and British films dominated domestic markets. As the self-portraits of the famous court painter Kamal ul-Mulk, (1848-1940) are taken out, the film posters are ushered in. Kamal ul-Mulk's painting of *Talar-e Ayene* (Hall of Mirrors) of one of the rooms of the Golestan Palace, is among his most famous paintings. This scene also signifies the ushering in of Cinema as the most modern of all art forms, quickly replacing the realism offered by Kamal ul-Mulk's paintings.¹

The *ayeneh* has a special place in the religious and cultural aspects of Iranian culture. The presence of the mirror with candle stands (*ayeneh sham daan*) is mandatory in auspicious ceremonies such as weddings in Iran. The painting of the Hall of Mirrors signifies

¹ Mohammad Ghaffari better known as Kamal ul-Mulk was known to have mastered the art of perspective very early in his paintings. He was an exceptional painter educated in the Dar al Fanon, under the guidance of teachers who were educated in the West. He was discovered by Naser al-Din Shah in the Dar al Fanon who hired him to work as his court painter. He soon bestowed upon him the title, *Kamal ol-Mulk*, which means Perfection on Land.

happiness associated with the future. The oldest and most traditional shrines in Iran (such as the sacred Shah Cheragh and Ali Ibn Hamzeh in Shiraz) have *ayenehkari* work in their walls. Here the walls are covered with mirrors, reflecting maximum light even in the presence of little or no available light. This artwork is present both in Islam and has roots in pre-Islamic traditions, as God is believed to be the “*Light of the heavens and the earth.*”¹ Makhmalbaf shatters this notion of brightness and joy associated with the future by making it inaccessible and dark.

Just as the mirror in *Raghubar* shatters by accident, and the glass candle stands or the only things handed down to Hekmat by his mother (represented by the past) are destroyed, Atiyeh becomes an unreachable future for the cinematographer who is forever trapped in time. When she asks him in the scene above (Figure 16) when he would return, he clutches onto the snow in his palm and says, “Before the snow melts.” This ironically signifies an impossible return as it is known that the cinematographer has been teleported into the past by the command of the king, and thus will be forever trapped in time travel. The cinematographer will never reach his future, and from the beginning, it is hinted that youth will be wasted away, and finally when the future is arrived at, old age will have consumed over love.

¹ The 35th verse of the 24th chapter of Quran, known as Verse of Light: “Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is that of a niche, in which there is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass - the glass looks like a brilliant star - it is lit by (the oil of) a blessed tree, the olive, which is neither eastern, nor western. Its oil is about to emit light even though the fire has not touched it - (it is) light upon light. Allah guides to His light whomsoever He wills; Allah describes examples for the people, and Allah knows everything well.”

<https://quran.com/24/35?translations=83,84,17,26,101,20,85,18,95,19,22,28>

Slide/ Sursure



Figure 17: Naser al-Din Shah's slide in *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992

The slide that is seen above in the film *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema* where Naser al-Din Shah's wives slide down as he sits by the side watching photographs of Golnar has precedence in history. While it is known that many such slides were built by the grandfather of Naser al-Din Shah, Fath Ali Shah (1772-1834) for voyeuristic sexual pleasure, these slides are historically dated much earlier from the time of the last Safavid king, Shah Sultan Hossein (1668-1726). The book of *Rostam-ot-Tavarikh* written by Rostam-ol-Hokama, which traces the early history of Iran has an extended chapter on the sexual extravaganza, adventures and eccentricities of the last king of the Safavid Dynasty.¹

The *sursure/sursurak* was considered the first site of sexual voyeurism where Shah Soltan Hossein would spend long hours looking at the many women of the harem who were required to slide into his arms. Compared to his predecessors, Naser Al-Din Shah had a

¹ Muhamaad Hashem Rostam-ol-Hokama, Asaf, *Rostam-ot-Tavarikh* رستم التواريخ. Edited by: Muhammad Moshiri, (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications, 1974), 75-76

modest number of eighty-four wives. He commanded each of his wives to go down the slide situated in the Negaristan Palace wearing their traditional *shalites* (short dresses to be worn over pants/ *salwars*) but without the *salwars*. He would sit on a bench by the slide for hours watching all of his wives slide into the pool. The slide of Fath Ali Shah was described by Edward Granville Brown in his account of Negaristan Palace in Tehran,

A beautiful marble bath [is] furnished with a long smooth *glissoire*, called by the Persians *sursurak* ("the slide"), which descends from above to the very edge of the bath. Down this slope the numerous ladies of Fath-'Ali Shah's harem used to slide into the arms of their lord, who was waiting below to receive them.¹

Ervand Abrahamian mentions that the Shah lay on his back awaiting each of his many concubines."Fath'ali did so every day naked so that his wives would slide down naked over him."²

The film has many references to the harem of the Shah, the first of which is where Akkasbashi is transported after the first time-travel. As explained earlier, a still photograph of ladies working in the harem comes to life, symbolising the arrival of cinema itself. It is interesting to note that Naser al-Din Shah, believed to be the first person to get the photographic camera to Iran was immersed in voyeuristic, sensual pleasures in his harem. As discussed earlier, harems were designed as sites of live erotic pleasures. Thus, the practice of partaking in pleasures associated with sexual voyeurism had precedence in the royal courts which was soon to be replaced by cinema in the court of Naser al-Din Shah.

¹ Edward Granville Brown, *A Year Among the Persians: Impressions as to the Life, Character, & Thought of the People of Persia, Received During Twelve Months' Residence in that Country in the Years 1887-1888*, (London : Century ; New York : Hippocrene Books, 1984), 105.

² Ervand Abrahamian, "A History of Modern Iran" *South Asia Bulletin*, Volume 28, Issue 2, South Asia Association, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008.

Historically it is known that Naser al-Din Shah was the first person to take a real photograph after bringing the photographic camera to Iran. Even if some express doubts with this, it is universally agreed upon he was the first person to take a self-portrait in Iran. He is also known for photographing many of his wives inside the harem, without their hijabs, in the most relaxed positions. The real-life Naser al-Din Shah was just as obsessed with peeping into the camera as the onscreen Shah is. He derived immense pleasure by looking into it, to capture images of his women. He is also credited to have established the first photography studio in the palace of Golestan.¹ The Palace of Golestan is full of hundreds of such photographs..

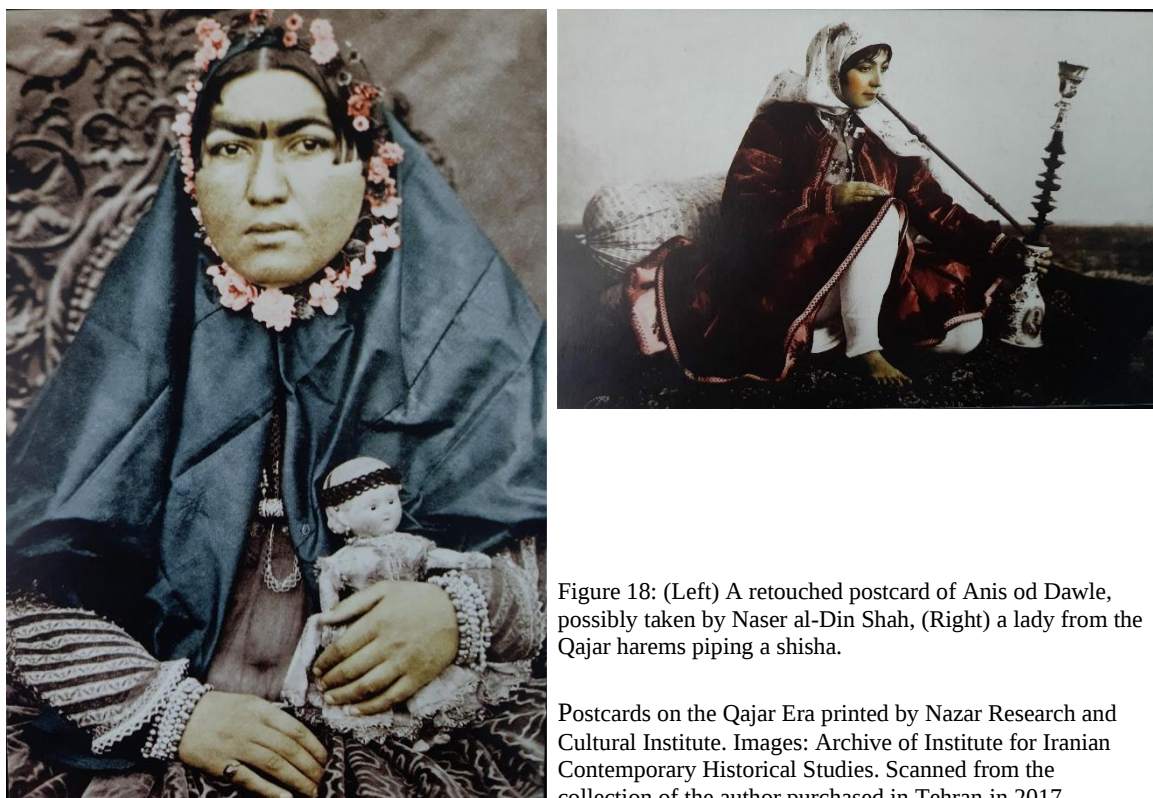


Figure 18: (Left) A retouched postcard of Anis od Dawle, possibly taken by Naser al-Din Shah, (Right) a lady from the Qajar harems piping a shisha.

Postcards on the Qajar Era printed by Nazar Research and Cultural Institute. Images: Archive of Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies. Scanned from the collection of the author purchased in Tehran in 2017.

Cinema was no wonder first hired as a medium of engaging in voyeuristic activities replacing the erotic entertainment provided by the slides. The act of peeping into the peephole of the *sharefarang* and the fantasy of images provided by cinema sucked the Shah

¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1422.pdf> accessed on 10.12.2019

into it, making him fall in love with a subject eternally captured on film, Golnaar from *Doktare Lor*. Just as the Akkasbashis is consumed with desire to be reunited with Atiyeh, the Shah is torn by the angst to reach Golnar.

This brings us to the second string of the narrative Makhmalbaf mentions, of the love of Naser al-Din Shah for Golnar, depicted through “the magic of moments floating between solid (reality) and vaporous (imagination) states; moments which have its legs rooted to the ground, but hands stretched out and touching the skies.”¹ Naser Al-din Shah is so captivated by the magic dream offered by the apparatus of *Shahrefarang* that he is seen relentlessly following its image. The feisty Golnar from *Doktare Lor* is magically transported to his castle. He is smitten by her charisma and forcefully tries to include her in his harem. Golnar is forcefully ushered into the inner chambers of the harem where women, both old and young, are seen getting massages, having their eyebrows lined, upper lips powdered, knitting, and getting their makeup done. The *sogholi* (favourite wife) of the Shah, Anis od Dowleh is enraged at discovering the Shah’s love for Golnar and his decision to have her slide down the *sursure* along with the other ladies. Golnar slides down the *sursure* of Naser al-Din Shah and escapes the castle as a fleeting image through the *Sharefarang*. The Shah drowns himself into the dream of acquiring her which causes him to lose the border between dream and reality. To be reunited with Golnar he now wishes to be transported into the reels of the *Shahrefarang*, and become Jafar (the on-screen lover of Golnar in *Doktare Lor*). Depressed in love, he commands the cinematographer to transform him to Jafar, but by a twist of fate, he is ironically transformed into the cow of Masht Hassan from the film *Gaav* by Dariush Mehrjui.

¹ Mohsen Makhmalbaf in a telephonic conversation with the author on 22.02.2020, 7.30pm IST



Figure 19: Naser al-Din Shah, enacted by Ezatolah Entezami, is immersed in the film reel of *Doktare Lor* in the film *Nassereddin Shah, Actor-e Cinema*, 1992.

Transformation of the Shah

As the Shah transforms into the cow of Masht Hassan, the grand dream of modernity signified by the fantastical lands of the West turns into a nightmare. From the agent of ultimate power, the *qeble-alam*, or the pivot of the universe, (and the one who fulfils the desires of his subjects) the Shah falls to the pits of utter insanity, believing himself to be the cow of Hasan in *Gaav*. The consequences of voyeurism land him into a stable strewn with dead film negatives. The Shah asks the cinematographer to teach him acting so he can enter the movies and meet Golnar. The cinematographer coaches him to play the part of Masht Hassan in *Gaav*, who out of grief after the death of his beloved cow tragically begins emulating the mannerisms of his cow.

The court sorcerer intervenes to restore order, his trick instead turns the Shah into Masht Hassan's cow. The next sequence sees the *qeble-alam* chewing on film reels that have replaced hay in a stable. Lessons on method acting begin. The Akkasbashi directs a real cow and the Shah who has just turned into one. In the following scene the Center-of-the-World

sits on his throne surrounded by loyal servants and ministers and declares, with his ears flapping like that of a cow, “I’m not Center-of-the-World, I’m the cow of Masht Hasan”.



Figure 20: The Shah transforms into the cow in *Gaav* consuming films reels instead of hay

This is a depiction of a historical metamorphosis which shows a dictator in the East in his desire to chase the dream of *Shahrefarang* turns to a cow, which could be a symbol of idiocy because he suddenly loses the rationality and logic of his world and attaches to another logic, another rationality of another world (West) which is fundamentally alien to him.¹

In a final culmination of events, the deluded Shah who has cast aside his throne is chased by Mongol soldiers who till now have only been seen marginally throughout the film. Here Makhmalbaf makes a direct reference to Parviz Kimiavi’s film *Mogholha*, (1973) by using sequences from it. A disordered, wild storm of images in the final scene reveals the ultimate meaninglessness of the Iranian tryst with modernity. After all the chaos brought by

¹ Dariush Ashuri, “Tarikh, Roya, Kaboos: Negahi be Nassereddin Shah Actor Cinema”, 132

a western image-making apparatus, we see Mongol troops approach an absurd gate in the middle of an endless desert. One of them stands behind the gate and rings an electric bell.



Figure 21: Scene from Parviz Kimiavi's film *Mogholha*, 1973 used in *Nassereddin Actore Cinema*, 1992

He asks, "What is cinema?"

The absurdity of this penultimate sequence bears the whole meaning of the film in itself. The presence of the Mongols in the Qajar context of the film is anachronistic as Mongols conquered Iran five centuries before the Qajar period.¹ What follows is a concluding sequence of what cinema has journeyed into from being a meagre tool of voyeurism for the pleasures of royal Qajar despots to evolving into a serious form of art. From the earliest available film footage of Mozafer al-Din Shah posing on a donkey's back, followed by *Doktare Lor*, Film Farsis of the 1950s, 1960s, and finally, the early new wave in Sohrab Shahid-Saless's cinema, shots are strung together to celebrate and usher in the new wave, signified by a harmonious mix of films of masters of pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary cinema. A collage of shots from the films of Bahram Beyzai (*Bashu, the Little Stranger*, 1989), Amir Naderi, (*Runner*, 1985), Ali Hatami (*Mother*, 1990), Naser Taqvai (*Captain Khorshid*, 1987) and Abbas Kiarostami (*Where is the Friend's Home*, 1987) and

¹The first invasion of Chengiz Khan to Iranian territories happened in the 13th century. Abbas Eghbal, *Tarikh-e Mongol تاریخ مغول* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publication, 2009), 25

Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Boycott*, 1985, *Peddler*, 1987, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989) culminate into an end montage with credits rolling over the shot of the curving road and the poplar tree in Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's home*. The journey of Cinema toward a serious form of art is welcomed, with film footage of people hugging and kissing each other, acknowledging the camera and saying *salam* on screen.

The arrival of Cinema in Iran (1900) roughly coincided with the signing of the Constitution (in 1906), both of which were done by Mozafer al-Din Shah before his death in 1907. Along with his father, Naser al-Din Shah who got the still camera to Iran for the first time from the West, unintentionally exposed images of their private lives to their subjects thus shattering the sanctity of their royalty and superiority. The innumerable portraits commissioned by them directly looking into the camera brought them closer to their subjects, who up until now revered them as distant Gods who made their choices for them.

The Constitutional Revolution and the Fall of the Qajar Dynasty

The roots of the Constitutional Revolution can be traced back to the earliest connections established with the West by the Qajar rulers who encouraged modern education and ideas through the creation of the elite Polytechnique, Dar al Fanon. This, in turn, sowed the seeds of the intellectual formation of a 'new middle class' who started to distinguish themselves as *rowshanfekran*. "Their outlook was shaped not so much by the Koran, the shari'a, and the Shi'i Messiah, but by the Age of Reason and its radical notions of Natural Rights..."¹

E. Abrahamian writes in his book, *A History of Modern Iran*, that the leading reformer Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, who compiled the first comprehensive Persian dictionary included new terms such as "demokrasi, aristokrasi, oligarki, fudalism, kapitalism,

¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019.), 35

sosyalism, imperialism, and bourzhuazi (bourgeoisie). They introduced novel concepts such as chap (left) and rast (right)...The most contentious of the new terms was probably mashruteh (constitu-tional). For some, the term came from “charter” – as in Magna Carta. For others, it came from shari’a (holy law) and mashru’eh (conditional) –implying that temporal laws should be conditioned by the divine shari’a.”¹

Western penetration of the Russians and Britain into Iran, and the inadequacy of the Qajar Despots to hold onto their administration, led to the bankruptcy of the state treasury and threw the nation into abject poverty. After the death of Naser al-Din Shah, the old order protected by him began collapsing and the demand for a constitution that would delimit the power of the monarch began brewing among the intellectuals. They believed that modernity would be ushered in only by assigning nominal powers, and limiting the despotism of the monarchy.

Mozafer al-Din Shah conceded to signing the Persian Constitution in 1906, three days before his death. His son Mohammad Ali Shah abolished the constitution and bombarded the parliament with help from Russian military support. From all over Iran, mainly Tabriz *Mashrute Khahan* (guardians of the constitution) led by Sattarkhan and Bagherkhan, invaded Tehran in favour of the constitution. Shah escaped to Russia and his very young son Ahmad Shah was put on the throne, as a nominal head of the monarchy. The constitution was re-established again. After the death of Mozafer al-Din Shah, a weak line of Qajar kings ruled till 1921, before the Pahlavi Dynasty was established by Reza Shah in 1925.

With the ascension of Reza Shah to the Pahlavi throne in 1926, a new era in the history of Iranian modernity began. Inspired by the social imperatives and political impulses of the day, he embarked on a ‘nationalist state-building project that aimed at piercing the

¹ ibid, 36

primordial beliefs of ethnicity, faith and kinship.’¹ Reza Shah as a part of his modernisation campaign built universities and sent the best students to the West to get educated. Despite being illiterate himself his investment in modern education, and science for both men and women equally made them genuinely connected with modern phenomena and the global affairs of the world. While the Qajars got a camera from Europe only as a souvenir, Reza Shah paved the way for a more serious involvement with the West, which in turn, resulted in the gradual development of cinema as a significant form of art in the coming generations.

Educational Reforms in Pahlavi Era

In his book *The White Revolution*, Mohammad Reza Shah mentioned the efforts of his father to develop modern education in Iran via mass educational reforms after hundreds of years of the monarchy. One of his famous programs was to send top students to the West so they could learn new sciences and return to their homeland to teach those to others. This was followed by the publication of books exclusively for imparting education in schools. Unlike the Qajar kings who reserved education for the aristocrats, everyone could have the opportunity to go to school in the time of Reza Shah Pahlavi, especially women. In a section in his book *The White Revolution*, Mohammad Reza Shah writes,²

After 1935 co-educational primary schools were founded in which boys and girls could study in the same place till the age of ten. In the same year, girls could enter the Danesh Saray-e Alli.³

¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes* (London: Michael Joseph, 1993), 454

² Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The White Revolution* (Tehran: Imperial Pahlavi Library, 1967), 126

³An institution of higher education, dedicated to train teachers for High School.

He further mentions, “If we want to work against illiteracy effectively, we have to implement revolutionary and unconventional methods of imparting education”.¹ His revolutionary idea was to recruit young men who were required to do mandatory military service under his father’s famous policy, as teachers and send them to rural places to educate less achieved classes there. “According to the law, young men with a high school diploma, are to be recruited in military service. It is mandated that they must spend a part of their term to teach illiterate people in the rural areas who do not have access to primary schools.”² He named this wing and the performance of soldiers as teachers as “The Magnificence of Literacy Corps” (حماسه سپاه دانش)

The Shah’s robust and energetic process of education and cultural modernization turned against him. His genuine support for the improvement in the position of women was not approved by the clergy. His care and enthusiasm about the importance of education increased mass literacy and produced a large number of revolutionary students and intellectuals. The native Iranian subject was torn between the stringency of the brutal campaign of modernity imposed by the Shah (and his blind faith and reliance on the West and the finances they brought by trading Iran’s deep reserves of oil) and the Islamic theological doctrines and traditions that governed their beings. The outbreak of World War II and the Allied occupation of Iran in 1941 however, resulted in the abdication of Reza Shah Pahlavi bringing to power his son Mohammad Reza Shah who reigned from 1941 until his downfall due to the uprising that led to the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

The project of modernity that was doomed to fail in the political sphere under the rule of the Qajar kings and later the Pahlavi monarchy, continued disintegrating with the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, finding a representation only in the sphere of arts, especially fiction, poetry, and later cinema. The earliest instances of modern fiction

¹Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The White Revolution* (Tehran: Imperial Pahlavi Library, 1967), 128

²Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The White Revolution* (Tehran: Imperial Pahlavi Library, 1967), 129

developed at the hands of Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997) and Sadeq Hedayat, (1903-1951) who are credited for introducing modernist techniques to Persian fiction. Belonging to a family of aristocrats Hedayat had the privilege of affording education at the prestigious *Dar-al Fanon* formed during the Qajar period. Later he studied at the French missionary school, St. Louis, in Tehran, where he learned French and acquainted himself with French literature.¹ He was among the few students sent to Europe with scholarships to pursue higher education. Hedayat studied engineering in Belgium and architecture in France and then gave up both to pursue dentistry. He abandoned everything and returned to Tehran in 1930 without any university degree whatsoever. Thereafter he devoted his entire life to acquainting himself simultaneously with Western literature and studying Iranian folklore. He soon began publishing his collection of short stories, (*Zendeḥ be Gur*, Buried Alive 1930), dramas (*Parvin Dokhtar-e Sasan*, Parvin, Daughter of Sasan), travelogues and prose works (*Sayeh-ye Moghol*, Mongol Shadow 1931 and *Se Qatreh-Khun*, Three Drops of Blood, 1932). He was deeply inspired by the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Anton Chekov and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He made the writings of Kafka, Chekov and Jean-Paul Sartre available to Iranians by publishing his translations in Persian. His novel *The Blind Owl*, *Buḡ-e-Kur* which he started in France was completed during his stay in Bombay in 1937. It is credited to be one of the first novels from Iran to have achieved an audience beyond the Persian speaking world. Despite his long sojourn in the West, Hedayat remained forever sceptical and critical of the monarchy in Iran (in the way it blindly imitated the West and forcibly imposed modernization and rapid industrialisation) and the clergy (for its religious dogmatism), both of which he considered to be primary causes for Iran's decimation and decay.

¹ <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/hedayat-sadeq-i> accessed on 5.11.2019

Poetry and fiction provided an aesthetic space where the individual could define a location for the *self*, freed from the clutches of the colonial self. Thus, art began to define a place for itself beyond the colonially conditioned modernity. Nima Yushij's *Afsaneh* published in 1922 marked the modernist movement in Persian poetry. With the founding of Tehran University in 1934 that contributed greatly to successfully institutionalising secular learning, it saw the formation of a significant rise in the number of urban intellectuals. New theatres sprung up in different pockets of Tehran, especially lining *Lalezar* Street. Despite few local films, the 1930s-1940s¹ saw an increasing number of film viewers with many slots lined up for films imported from Europe and India. Cinema as a serious art form developed only in the 1960s, but it must be remembered that the development of cinema into a commercial industry (Film Farsi) was primarily brought about by people who were not remotely associated with intellectual drive and the formation of the *roshanfekran* in the early 1920s that E. Abrahamian or Dariush Ashouri wrote about. The makers of the Film Farsis were concerned mostly with imitating the melodramas that reached Iran during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi from parts of the West and India, designed solely for the entertainment of the masses. Only with the enthusiasm and return of the second generation of western-educated intellectuals to Iran such as Dariush Mehrjui, Farrokh Gaffary, Ebrahim Golestan, along with Masoud Kimiai, cinema began to be taken seriously, as a modern form of art with enormous potential to affect audiences. The first seeds of the New Wave were sown by these filmmakers in Iran.

Ebrahim Golestan belonged to a politically influential, aristocrat family where his father, Sayyed Moḥammad-Taqi Golestan, not only was a member of the Assembly of Founders of Reza Shah Pahlavi, (he represented Fars in the Constituent Assembly of 1925

¹ <https://kayhan.london/fa/1399/09/27/ایران-یکی-از-میراث-های-لاله%E2%80%8C%E2%80%8Cسینما-ایران-یکی-از-میراث> accessed on 15.12.2019

that did away with the Qajar dynasty and nominated Reza Shah as the new king.)¹ but he also owned a thriving newspaper company, named *Golestan*. *Golestan*, which started as a biweekly journal was turned into a daily newspaper in 1928. Ebrahim Golestan actively worked there as a translator and had direct access to the western media and was in touch with journalists from all over Europe. He may not have been educated in Europe in his youth, but his work as a journalist and translator had put him in direct contact with writers, artists and journalists from Europe. Golestan started his film studio, Golestan Films in 1957 and began his career by making documentaries for the Iranian Oil company. Later, he embarked on a career as an editor, producer and director, producing Forough Farrokhzad's *Khaneh Siah Ast*, *The House is Black*, (1963). The film, a lyrical, poetic documentation of life in a leper colony in Tabriz, along with Golestan's *Khesht va Ayeneh*, *Brick and the Mirror*, (1965) marked the beginnings of the New Wave in Iranian Cinema.

Farrokh Gaffary, educated in Belgium and France having worked as an assistant to Henri Langlois at the Cinematheque Francaise² returned to Iran and established the National Iranian Film Center (*Kānun-e Melli-e Film*) in 1949. Here, with the support of Ebrahim Golestan and Fereyduh Rahnema, he organized the first Film Festival in Iran. The Festival screened British films in 1950 and French films in 1951. The Center also became a place that united intellectuals interested in foreign cinema and encouraged early writings on cinema. Soon Ghaffary immersed himself in writing serious film criticism under the pen name M. Mobarak and also published articles on the history of Iranian cinema in *Positif* and *Archives du Cinéma*- two French magazines devoted to surrealist films and avant-garde cinema.³ His third feature film, *Shab-e Quzi*, *The Night of the Hunchback* (1963) is considered to be an early example of a dark comedy is adapted from a story in the *Arabian*

¹ <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/golestan>

² <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/gaffari-farrok> accessed on 2.11.2019

³ *ibid*

Nights (Hezar o Yek Shab) After a hunchback from a team of entertainers dies, his body is passed from person to person. This surreal atmosphere created after the death of the hunchback who dies in a farcical accident was designed to reflect the socio political climate of the 1960s in Iran. The film became one of the earliest examples of serious, intellectual cinema in Iran.

Masoud Kimiai, who was an assistant to Samuel Khachikian, (known for making western-style thrillers, such as *Goodbye Tehran*, 1966) was influenced by Khachikian's noirish thrillers, hard-hitting plots, and murder mysteries. His most memorable film, *Qeysar* (1969) that broke all box office records in Iran, was an unconventional, avant-garde film, that used all the elements of the Film Farsi and its tough guy sub-genre to situate a grim, atypical crime drama in the alleys of Tehran. In doing so, he brought an authorial style to the largely authorless body of Film Farsi films and shattered the ideas of mindless entertainment provided by Film Farsi makers and the idolatry of the hero it propagated. Dariush Mehrjui returned to Iran in 1965 after studying cinema at the University of California, Los Angeles, with Jean Renoir as one of his teachers. His path-breaking second feature film, *Gaav*, 1969, along with *Qeysar* and Nasser Taghvai's *Tranquillity in the Presence of Others*, (1972) is officially known to initiate the New Wave Movement in Iran.

The period of the 1960-the 1970s marked a significant turning point in the history of Iranian Cinema. The filmmakers mentioned above, inspired by the Neorealist movement in Italy and the French Nouvelle vague took a collective radical stand against the commercial Film Farsi Industry, desiring to liberate cinema from the clutches of traditional melodrama and the performative sequences. Together, they desired to create a 'new', *motefavet* cinema. Even though Mehrjui's *Gaav*, (1969) is considered to officially be the first New Wave film, Ebrahim Golestan's *Brick and the Mirror*, (1965) Farrokh Farrokhzad's *Khaneh Siah Ast*, (1963) Ghaffary's *Shab-e Quzi*, *The Night of the Hunchback*, (1963), and Kimiai's *Qeysar*,

reflecting the hypocrisy, corruption and the dark gloom in the socio-political climate of Iran in the 1960s are said to have paved the way for the arrival of the New Wave in Iranian Cinema.

Popular discontent started brewing against the colonially functioning government of Mohammad Reza Shah and his economy that was dependent and functional only due to the solid support of the USA and the interests it had in the country's oil reserves. His implementation back to the throne by a CIA imposed coup that deposed the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 and increased the powers of the monarch. Realising that he had lost the popular support of the people, the Shah began ruling with an iron hand and imposed a ruthless campaign of censorship on all forms of art, especially poetry and cinema. The brutal campaign by his secret police (SAVAK) against all dissidents and the guerrilla groups was driven toward suppressing any form of political or cultural opposition to his rule. Even though he succeeded in suppressing these elements, the real opposition came from the organized and politically active clergy that had no real parallel in the Muslim world or within its Shiite sector. Their leader Ayatollah Khomeini had been in exile since the 1960s when he had led a major uprising against the "White Revolution" organized by the Shah, but had been brutally crushed and exiled to Turkey and Iraq instead. On the 11th of February, the Shah left Iran and the Iranian revolution was won.

Chapter 3:

Exile and the Cinema of Bahman Ghobadi (in Exile)

The Exile Without

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.”¹

What Is Exile? - General Definition

Conventionally the word exile means banishment from one's native land for committing an offence of deep political significance. Exile may be compulsory (enforced exile- forced by authoritative decree) or voluntary (self-imposed- not forced by authorities directly) to escape political imprisonment, censorship, and continue political or artistic expression elsewhere. Exile leads to prolonged separation from one's home country by force of circumstances which are generally spearheaded by political, social and cultural changes as a result of wars and revolutions. Exile is sometimes external or internal, thus depending largely on the location to which one is banished in.

Scope of this Chapter

In my thesis, I broadly divide the phenomenon of exile into two forms with regards to the contemporary political history of Iran. Firstly, the politically banished artists, or the external exile, uprooted from the homeland and placed in unknown territories, and secondly,

¹Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and other essays*. (London: Granta 2012), 180

the internal exile, people out of place within their own country, fighting for artistic expression. Referring to Hamid Naficy's fourth volume in his *Social History of Iranian Cinema*¹ I classify *external* exile in five forms, borrowing from Naficy and Said, but stress on working closely with only two forms in the scope of this chapter. Naficy's work on the cinematic history of Iran is informative and all-encompassing until 2004/2005 (the volume was published in 2012). He has charted a detailed journey in the works of filmmakers who left by the early turn of the millennium. While I have borrowed from his research, I add on to this by exploring the works of Bahman Ghobadi (exiled in 2009) in this chapter and the next, Mohsen Makhmalbaf (exiled in 2005) in chapter five through a series of personal meetings, WhatsApp chats and telephonic conversations.

I also intend to argue that Foucault's modern prison as the panopticon which creates 'docile bodies' of its people, is no longer geographically limited to a prison, where its inmates are watched from a tower, rather the city of Tehran itself transforms into the panopticon with disembodied eyes watching over the activities of its people.



Figure 22: A coffee advert on a highway in Tehran, 2018. Frame grab from the author's documentary (in-progress) *Toward Happy Alleys*, filmed in Iran in 2018

¹Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol 4, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 370

Here surveillance is not limited to a position (tower) anymore but is all-encompassing. The whole city transforms into a prison, where visible, enclosing walls are replaced only by barbed wires (borders) which cannot be traversed. If the panopticon dis-embodies itself and yet governs the inmates penalised under internal exile, then could the dungeon or the earliest 'prison' where individuals posing a threat to the power structures were expelled or banished to, be considered as the earliest instance of ostracism, or external exile? The dungeon after all was intended to segregate the offender - the mad man incapable of transformation in the arena of discipline- in order not to contaminate the rest of the society with his diseased thoughts. The point of isolation in the dungeon Foucault mentions in *Discipline and Punish*, was to 'to enclose, deprive of light, and to hide'¹. Here on the other hand in the dungeon, to a certain degree, the prisoner escapes observation, or the eye of the state surveilling his actions. Here surveillance is not important, as banishment and expelling from the community serves as the punitive act of governance. Transformation through correction is not necessarily desired as there can be no economic utility from his docility and discipline.²

Hence two forms of ostracism or exile were practiced in society from the beginning- the external form of banishment, geographically to distant lands, where one would be excluded from his country and a community speaking his native language, and the second, internal ostracism where exile removed and ripped him off all identities as a citizen, as an artist, a filmmaker, or a human being with basic rights within the nation itself. He may not be imprisoned or watched from a certain tower, but he is imprisoned within the borders of

¹ Michel Foucault, and Alan Sheridan. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200

²In Islam, exile and banishment to a barren, undeveloped far-off region is a form of punishment under the Sharia Law. *Nafy-e Balad*, or the legal term under Sharia Law is still under practice for dissident writers and authors.

his native country that wipes off his name from its registers. He ceases to exist in his country, for his people. His feats, global recognition does not matter within this country- as that is what internal exile seeks - he must be forgotten by his very own people. It reduces him to become a living, moving being, struggling, breathing, still creating and working, still expressing, but for a world outside, which if he is fortunate, recognises his identity and position when his home forsakes it.

While external exile resulting in exclusion from a domestic public arena vis-a-vis inclusion into a transnational zone gives a sense of freedom to filmmakers thereby displacing them geographically with a movement Westward, contradictorily, a similar Westward movement takes place for internal exiles confined within the boundaries of their homes countries. Confinement also results in a shift toward the West – represented by a global network through transnational channels of distribution. The exiled artist is mostly applauded in the world outside/without, while often being heavily criticised at home/within for depicting the social ills of his country thereby painting a dark face of Iran.

Context

The Iranians came to the United States in three large waves. The first wave (from 1950 to 1978) was motivated by Westernization spearheaded by the Pahlavi regime; the second wave, (from 1979 to 1986) after the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979; and the third (1987 to 2012) by the impact of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s that yielded economic misery, and imposed socio-cultural restrictions.¹ These three waves demarcated distinct periods in the political history of Iran before and after the Revolution. They produced three different kinds of population namely permanent and temporary workers, and students;

¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol 4, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 380

political refugees and exiles; highly qualified working professionals, and working-class economic refugees who emigrated after the ceasefire of the Iran-Iraq war in search of better opportunities.

Purification/*Paksazi*

After the overthrow of the Monarchy (Pahlavi Dynasty 1925-1979), and the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, several reforms were violently enforced to purge the nation of the 'Western' influences endorsed by Mohammad Reza Shah, replacing them with 'pure' Islamic doctrines. Cinema was considered the vilest of all influences brought in by the puppet government of the Shah. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had directly charged the monarch saying,

It is the Shah who corrupts our young stratum with the usual colonialist movies, which turn our girls and boys into immoral people unaware of the sad state of the country. The Shah's cinema is a training ground for prostitution and for ignorant dolls and robots, and the Muslim nation considers these centres to be opposed to the national interests.¹

After the revolution had been a success in 1979, the burning of cinema halls, banks, liquor stores, discos was seen everywhere, a symbolic form of protest against the Shah's reign. Thereafter a system of cleansing or *Paksazi*/purification had begun where Cinema was to be restructured, reformed and given a unique language of its own. Film Farsi (the popular cinema of the 1950-1970s) or the cinema at the time of the Shah, was purged, censored, and

¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol 4, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 100

edited. Most of the Film Farsi directors, actors, and musicians were banned from working in the newly formed industry.

The restructuring of institutions like Farabi Cinema Foundation and the Institute of Intellectual Development for Young Adults (IIDYA) encouraged new filmmakers and the development of an art-house cinema that would propagate Islamic values. State grants were given to emerging art films and documentaries. There was a steady growth in the number of films produced under the mentorship of then-emerging filmmakers Amir Naderi, (*The Runner*, 1985), Bahram Beyzai's (*Bashu, the Little Stranger*, 1985) Abbas Kiarostami (*Where is the Friend's Home?* 1987) and Majid Majidi (*Children of Heaven*, 1997).

As the conflict between the state and these artists grew, innumerable cuts and restrictions were imposed on their works, resulting in a series of departures and exiles from Iran in the late 90s. Several directors were exiled from their homes, many were arrested and imprisoned with their licenses seized; while a few chose to leave voluntarily to be able to make films. Those who remained behind were in no better position: fears of being uprooted made them stay on but only as internal exiles.

Erasure of the Industry of Film Farsis and Mass Exodus of Stars

Film Farsis, or the widely popular cinema of the Pahlavi Era, much repulsed by the Islamic Regime for its 'sexually overcharged' female representation, nudity, 'debauchery' and violence were soon purged, censored and edited. Some of them were even renamed to conform to Islamic values. Most were banned from exhibition in theatres. Womanhood in the Pahlavi movies was strictly classified into binaries. While women related by birth to the male protagonists (mothers, daughters, sisters) were regarded as ethereal, virtuous and pure; wives considered the next of kin also shared similar traits of virtue. The least respectable were women entertainers comprising singers and dancers who were considered frivolous,

corrupting and promiscuous. Men were masculine and aggressive tough guys whose sole responsibility was to restore the honour of the family, neighbourhood or his community. Pure women, often fell into prostitution because of their gullibility or after being deceived by men. Often the major themes of the films traced the transformation of the fallen women who rose to respectable positions after entering into holy bonds of matrimony with the male protagonist.

Film Farsi actresses and entertainers were used to spice up not only the movies but also the television and movie commercials in the last decade of the Pahlavi regime. In these commercials, their bodies were fragmented, fetishised and exhibited as sexualised objects through the use of close up photography, lighting and editing techniques. Contradictorily this fetishized image projected women as powerful agents of modernity, consumerism, and capitalism, pushing not only liberal domestic products but also Western consumer capitalism and its ideology propagated by the Shah.¹



Figure 23: (left) *A Woman Named Sharaab* (1967) by Amir Sherwani (right) *Seven Towns of Love* (1967) by Hamid Mojtahedi

Source: <https://caravanistan.com>

After the iconoclastic destruction and purification, the Islamic Republic created its limited representations of women, chiefly based on principles of subservience, segregation, and veiling. By July 1980, the wearing of the Islamic *hijab* (veil) was made compulsory

¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol 4, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 99

nationwide. Cinema was to be purged in absolute opposition to the cinema of the Shah and meant only to serve the purpose of propagating the values of the newly founded Islamic Republic of Iran. The leading stars and filmmakers of the Pahlavi era were sacked and their work permits were seized. The search for robust, new, young filmmakers was advertised by the government institutes which were to bring about a national cinema – a cinema exemplifying the values of the glorious revolution and the new Islamic Republic.



Figure 24: A group of women protesting against wearing the Islamic veil by waving their veils in the air outside the office of the prime minister in Tehran, Iran, in March 1979. Kaveh Kazemi/Getty Images



Figure 25: On 8th March 1979, more than 100,000 women gathered on the streets of Tehran to protest against the new Islamic government's compulsory hijab ruling. Photographs: Kaveh Golestan.
Source: <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com>

Modesty codes imposed by the Islamic Republic

The Islamic Republic soon imposed a series of modesty codes on the representation and projection of women on cinema and television after it came to power. Images of unveiled women were promptly edited out from the domestic and foreign import films. When such editing out could cause narrative confusion, some films were cut for over half an hour. The

specific parts displaying a show of hair, nudity or uncovered body parts were blackened with magic markers. It was obvious that the use of markers to draw a veil or a headscarf on images of women did not represent a clean image, giving away the attempted process of artificial veiling. The process of purification/ *paksazi* on the sets affected the process of filming and most directors of this time chose to do away with women characters altogether to avoid tussles with the censoring authority. Minders were often sent from the Ministry of Culture and Guidance to ensure no unethical conduct occurred on set – this meant preventing inappropriate physical conduct between cast and crew; there could be no joking, laughing, and no smoking by women. It was mandatory for female stylists only to do an actresses' hair, and if at all hair needed to be revealed, the actors had to wear wigs. The use of wigs, Naficy mentions, was permissible only so long “as it made the actress uglier”.¹

To evade the strict modesty codes imposed on the cast and crew, actors in a film had to often resort to temporary marriage, *siqeh* (a renewable contract of marriage for a defined duration, which does not involve transference of property rights) for the span of the film to stay within the codes of Islamic modesty. In one instance the actors playing husband and wife in a film resorted to *siqeh* and in another instance, the makeup artist temporarily married the six-year-old daughter of an actress, so they became one of kin allowing him to do her makeup.² Female characters were required to wear dark headscarves, chadors or veils and long, loosely fitted tunics covering the form of their bodies entirely. They were to be seated at most times, to avoid provocative movement, so spectators could strictly concentrate on the ideology that the film was propagating. They were to be poised and dignified in their actions – a film could have no shots of running, no laughing, no cycling, no touching men or no shaking hands. Physical contact was to be strictly avoided even if they were related by

¹Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol 4, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 113

² Ibid, 113

marriage or blood. Private spaces like bedrooms had to be treated as public. This made it impossible to represent women as they had to veil themselves even from the next of kin in the privacy of their homes –something they would not do in their real lives. This rule was imposed keeping in mind the scores of unrelated, unknown spectators watching them in public halls or unveiled (women) watching actors within the comfort of their private TVs.

While some new wave filmmakers devised ingenious ways to work around these mandates, many were frustrated by the obnoxious, unrealistic aspects of modesty and chose to leave the country to be able to make films freely. “The myriad accounts of censorship and harassment during both the Pahlavi regime and the post-revolution era in this book testify to the variety and extent of internal exile conditions for the filmmakers working inside Iran. Some found this internal exile productive, testing their creativity against limits; others found it unbearable, and they left.”¹

Classification of Exile

In the fourth volume of his book *The Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Naficy classifies Iranian accented cinema into five overlapping categories: exilic, diasporic, emigre, ethnic and cosmopolitan. This brings to mind an earlier rudimentary distinction made by Edward Said between exiles, refugees, expatriates, emigres:

Although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made among exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés.

Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider.

¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol 4, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 4

Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word “refugee” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality.¹

While expatriates and émigrés relocate to different lands voluntarily for personal and social reasons, they are not barred from entering their home countries again. Expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions.²

Naficy adds two other groups classified as diaspora and ethnic to Said’s distinction. Diaspora, like exile, is situated in trauma dealing with people who have moved out of their homelands, but their mass exodus is primarily spearheaded by a desire for trade and better work opportunities. Unlike exile which could be individual or collective, diaspora is necessarily collective. Emigres, like diasporic subjects, migrate to settle in other countries but after a period of resistance, they acquire permanent citizenship. Like members of the diaspora populations, they maintain minor relations with their home country, which are not painfully severed like that of exiled subjects.

They can choose to visit their home country when they wish to, but do not burn with the desire of returning home or harbour nostalgia for a lost motherland. Ethnic filmmakers on the other hand are second-generation filmmakers born to exilic, diasporic or emigre populations. They are citizens of the adopted country, born and bred in new lands, speaking the language of the adopted homeland. Their relationship with their ancestral homeland is often indirect, abstract, the memory of which is transferred solely through nostalgic accounts by their previous generation. Tales of their homeland survive in stories, recollections,

¹Edward W Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. (London: Granta. 2012), 186

²Ibid, 187

memories, like taste survives in cuisine. Culture survives in new lands, often intermingled with other cultures, language intermingles with other languages and an accent emerges in language and cinema. However, in the scope of this chapter, I will restrict myself to studying in detail only the first and last of the categories - the exilic subject and the cosmopolitan subject.

The Exilic Filmmaker

An exilic filmmaker is one whose identity, expression and art stem from his estranged relationship to his home. The long forceful separation and inability to return to his homeland form the crux of most of his films. Here exile means external exile where an individual voluntarily or involuntarily leaves his country of origin and is forced to settle elsewhere, an alien land, where he often feels like a fish out of water, having little or no access to the culture or the language of the host country. Loss of language, culture and audience robs him of his only tool of expression. Since exiles cannot return home their stories predominantly revolve around the politics of homeland and exile. The artist, fully aware of his exilic position, accepts it and is deeply consumed by his longing for home. Hence his films reflect this potent desire for return and *return to origin* narratives often emerge as an important form in their stories. A nostalgic journey to reach home and an idealised depiction of home characterised by its cultures of origin, sights and smells, tastes and feel narrated through memory and loss are predominating themes of their films. They tend to define all things in their lives in strictly political terms in relation to their homeland, “If at home they were regarded as stricken by the West (*gharbzadeh*), in exile they became deeply stricken by home (*ghorbatzadeh*).”¹

¹ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol 4, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 394

Most exilic films are films of denial and panic dealing with characters who may be physically exiled, but mentally they are at home, disavowing exile. Although physically displaced, the characters seem not to have left Iran. The memories of the past haunt them, often involving disturbing interactions with government agents, like interrogators and the secret police. These often form the basis of their films- giving rise to panic-driven, political thrillers or exilic captive narratives directly opposed to the Islamic Republic and the regime's politics. Identity, loss, return, home and acceptance of their exilic positions form the main themes of their films.

The Cosmopolitan Filmmaker

Unlike the exilic filmmaker who is consumed by his exile and a homebound return, the cosmopolitan filmmaker resists all claims to leading exilic lives and stresses the values of universality in his films. Strict denial and rejection of the status of being in exile characterises his existence while living in their adopted homelands. "They resisted any attachment to a place, nation, roots- instead, they emphasised routes, individualised identities and auteurist authority."¹

Evoking Universalism

Stressing more on the universal human predicament of displacement, they restrained themselves from making films about their ethnic roots, their nation Iran or the Iranian community in exile. If they did, they did not tell their personal accounts directly. While exilic films focused on stories of their estrangement from the homeland, or their larger community, cosmopolitan films denied particularity, nationality and language associated with the idea of an idealised home and universalised the predicament of homelessness itself. This was done

¹ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, 397

by situating characters in foreign lands amid diverse communities, with other characters speaking different languages (opposed to mother tongue Farsi/ Kurdish). Yet hidden in the vehement denial of their exilic conditions lay undercurrents of anxiety, claustrophobia and discontent stemming from their own experiences in their adopted home countries.

While the exilic films of denial and panic were mostly made in Persian, often at the cost of incorporating global, European audiences, the cosmopolitan films, also replete with themes of panic, phobia, and anxiety characterising the life of an exile, were made without Iranian characters, or with Persian dialogues. Particularity, national identity, nostalgia for an ideal homeland and a celebrated return home were avoided. Instead of stressing heterogeneity, difference and particularity, these films cherished the dreams of the exiled characters of living in a free society, often making efforts of assimilating, with their amiable behaviour, and their desire to learn the host country's language to communicate with members of the new society. However, in most cases, the dream of the most optimistic characters shatter as the dream given by the West turns out to be only an illusion.

The Cosmopolitan Filmmaker: Sohrab Shahid Saless

One of the forefathers and the harbingers of the New Wave movement in Iran, Sohrab Shahid Saless began making films in Iran in the late 1960s. While employed by the Ministry of Culture and Arts he made twenty-two documentaries and short films in Iran. His first feature *A Simple Event* (*Yek Ettefaghe Sadeh*, 1973) made within Iran, brought him national attention while his second feature *Still Life* (*Tabiate Bijan*, 1974) won him the Silver Bear in Berlin, thereby turning the global attention toward Iranian cinema. He left Iran after the Islamic Regime halted the production of his film *Quarantine*, (*Qarentin-eh*) following which he migrated to Germany in 1974 hoping to continue making the kind of films he desired to. During his lengthy stay in Germany, he made fifteen uncompromising, dark, bitter,

dystopian films for German cinema and TV that were termed *dark as tar*¹ by audiences and critics. In the sixth chapter, 'Chronotopes of Life in Exile: Claustrophobia, Contemporaneity', from his book *An Accented Cinema, Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* Hamid Naficy wrote how Saleh was consumed by his denial of his exile which he preferred to rather term as a 'long vacation'. "I must admit with extreme sadness that I have no nostalgic longing for Iran...I am essentially not a patriot but...I think one's homeland is not one's place of birth, but the country that gives one a place to stay, to work, and to make a living..."²

Far from Home

His vehement denial of exile and longing for a home comes across in his first feature made in Germany *Far from Home*, (*Dar Qorbat*, 1975) centring around the lives of Turkish migrant workers who believe that migration to Europe will bring with it security, freedom and a better life. Hossein, the ideal worker, uncomplaining, energetic, and an extreme optimist makes all effort to assimilate into German society. He tries to learn German, works diligently also managing to save money from his salary, has no vices, greets a senile neighbour every day who never returns his courtesies, and seems satisfied even in the monstrous, noisy, mechanical environment at work that regiments his life into structured routines. While work gives his life security, meaning and structure, the strict regimentation resembles the monotony and drudgery of life in prison. The factory representing a space of ultimate alienation leaves no room for individual exchange, save the receiving of the payslip, and stray comments from fellow workers during lunch break. Here Hossein puts on an absurd smile in his efforts to fit in while gulping down food picked with a fork and spoon, hardly

¹Hamid Naficy *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, volume 4. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 205

² Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema, Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. (US: Princeton University Press, 2001), 200

resembling a human being. The journey from the factory to the dormitory via the same metro, walking down the same roads, at the same time resembles the cyclicity of mechanical life. His dormitory also resembles a prison despite having roommates from his own country who speak his native language, dine at the same table, but hardly entertain him. Despite the efforts of the good-hearted Hussain, he feels alienated in a loveless society where he fails to communicate with anyone. The few words he learns from his only friend, a young man who borrows money from him and gambles it away, leads to misunderstanding and confusion. In a sequence where he desperately wishes to establish a dialogue with a young woman in a park, he comes across as a pervert trying to seduce her. He walks up to her bench and awkwardly takes a seat along its edge. Reading out the only German sentences he knows from a paper, his desperate attempts at a failed communication symbolise utter frustration, entrapment and loneliness ironically juxtaposed with a flight of birds by a lake beside them. His roommate, Kasim is perpetually depressed and dissatisfied in this overbearing, expensive city and is hardly able to save any money. He is consumed by angst and waits for letters from home. Hossein weaves dreams of accumulating money, buying a house and getting married. He writes letters secretly to his family back home. He never posts them. An unexpected letter announcing the death of Kasim's father forces him to return. As opposed to films made by exilic filmmakers where return is celebrated and desired, here return is unexpected, unwilling and dreaded as it signifies the forced closure of a promised dream of freedom and security given by the West. *Lies! Lies!* says Kasim throughout the film. There is no nostalgia associated with the home or any desire for a homebound journey. Despite alienation, confinement and no individual freedom, intimacy, human connection, or a safe roof over their heads, the men prefer to live in this alien land. This emotion prevails in Saless's other films, especially *Utopia*, 1983, which centres around the lives of five prostitutes dominated by a ruthless, exploitative male pimp Heinz, inside a brothel called

Club Arena. Despite being brutally assaulted, the prostitutes prefer life inside the brothel to the oppressive, alienating world of the host city outside. The toughest among them, the rebellious, outspoken Susi, demands her money back from Heinz after he abuses her physically. She leaves in a huff but returns only after a few days. The financial rewards and security that even this degrading, oppressing, sadistic brothel (a microcosm of the alienating host country) provides outweigh the freedom and choice offered in the world outside. The oppressed, abused and beaten-up women realise there is no escape to a utopian world outside. In the only liberating moment of the film (otherwise stifling with spatial claustrophobia within the brothel that resembles a prison with long corridors, tiny, barren rooms where time stalls, recurring cyclically in an eternally vicious circle) they unite against him. They stab him and collectively finish him off. Business continues, but without the oppressive slave master. Exile becomes bearable, far from the promised Eden, but goes on nonetheless.

Still Life

This depiction of the universal predicament and the angst of homelessness, and an eternal strife to find a home was not an outcome of geographical dislocation and exile for Saleh. *Still Life*, (1974), made in Iran brings to life the minute but extremely dispassionate details of the everyday life of an elderly couple, a railway signalman and his wife. Living in the fringes of town, only connected to the city by most infrequently arriving train, the couple remains consumed in a world of their own, where time passes leisurely, much in denial of the activities of the larger world, politics, bureaucracy, or even their only son whose letters never reach them. The couple hardly exchange words except about tea. Their alienation from society and their confinement within their little world brings a cosmopolitan language in Saleh's films. Lack of particularities about the characters' histories, backgrounds, their pasts

make the characters more disconnected from the local and the national, and thus make them universal. Their life could be situated anywhere. Saleh concerned more about the home than the country; homelessness than an acceptance of exile. He omitted details about nationality and specificity of his Iranian identity whatsoever from his films. Time seems to have stalled in the still lives of this couple. The signalman opens and closes the rail tracks, smokes and dozes off in his tiny room by the tracks. His wife painstakingly threads her needle without a care about how long it takes and immerses herself into making rugs. Tea in the evenings brings them together, yet not many dialogues are exchanged save her reminders for him to bring sugar for the tea. Immersed in his world, he forgets about regular chores. Their son, a conscript soldier, comes to visit and stays overnight, in transit from one base to another. Their room is small for three, but it has been a haven for thirty-three years. Their son brings out three oranges from his bag and they have them after dinner. Soon after he leaves, the old man gets an official letter that congratulates him for reaching the age of retirement and relieves him of further service. A new signal man arrives, and he must vacate his room for him to stay in. Saleh allows us to enter the world of this couple only to show us in the end how it shatters, and they are rendered homeless. The film ends with them packed up to leave, but nowhere to go.

The film ends where exile begins.

From the time I went after film and became a filmmaker until today I have not felt for a moment that I am Iranian. But that which gave me everything, and was my home, my wife, my father, my mother, my children, my life was filmmaking. If one day they tack a ribbon on my lapel, that says "Filmmaking Forbidden" I won't

commit suicide because I hate people who do so, but I think I will die within two years' time.¹

Despite his vehement denial of his own exile, all of his films ruminate about a common dilemma, of pervasive homelessness and un-belonging. Often through metaphors, he universalised human suffering, isolation, poverty, resistance and pain, but never situated them to his Iranian roots. Saleh in his home founding journey away from his birthplace, to the adopted home in Germany, and later in the US, like most of his characters, fails. While the west brought him opportunities to build a prolific career in the 1990s in Germany, he remained an outsider due to his uncompromising and demanding work habits, his dark pessimism and his sombre minimalism. His unwillingness to work for the commercial film industry and make films with happy endings made him a true stranger in Germany. His films made in Germany often have comments like 'dirty foreigner!' which depicts the xenophobia and racism in Europe toward immigrants who despite their efforts at assimilation never could become insiders. After making *Roses for Africa* in 1992 he could not make a single film. His screenplays were rejected by producers and this brought him severe depression. "Without any films to make I was totally undermined and vanquished; while when I was making films nothing in the world mattered to me."²

With no hope of making films in Germany, Saleh embarked on his second exile in the US settling in 1995, hoping to make his first American feature. With a series of rejections and failed fundings, Saleh confined himself in a closed apartment, much like his characters in *Utopia*, took ill and soon succumbed to tuberculosis, pneumonia and died a sad, lonely death in Chicago in 1998.

¹ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema, Exilic and Diaspora Filmmaking*. (US: Princeton University Press, 2001), 206

²Ibid, 205

The Exilic filmmaker: Cinema of Bahman Ghobadi (in Exile)

Rhino Season

The first film made by Bahman Ghobadi three and a half years after his exile begins with a dedication to Sane Jaleh and Farzad Kamangar¹ and Sadegh Kamangar, who was held captive for 27 years while his family was told that he was dead. A fake grave was staged by the government for the family to cry on. *Rhino Season*, (2012) is the first film made by Ghobadi after his exile from Iran after being repeatedly threatened by Iranian intelligence to leave the country. His last film in Iran, *No One Knows About the Persian Cats*, (2009), was severely criticised by the government who began pressuring him to leave thereafter. He left for exile in May 2009 leaving behind not only his homeland, but his mother, his production company (Beyond Borders, which still works with him from Iran), his team and his close friends and first moved to the neighbouring regions of Iraq and then Turkey. In an interview with BBC at the Toronto International Film Festival, he confessed, "I had a mental crisis when I left Iran, this crisis became so severe that I felt I would die if I didn't make a film."²

Three years later he finished filming *Rhino Season* produced by Martin Scorsese with a star cast comprising exiled Iranian actor Behrouz Vossoughi making a comeback into Iranian Cinema after 35 years and Monica Bellucci among others. The film is a classic example of an exile-captive narrative or panic-driven political thrillers opposed to the Islamic regime where exiles despite having left their homelands still feel captives of memories of the past while being chased, stalked and hunted down by the agents of the

¹Sane Jaleh was an Iranian student at the University of Arts. He was one of two students shot dead during the February 14, 2011 demonstrations in support of Egyptians and Tunisians for ousting Presidents Hosni Mubarak and Ben Ali, in Tehran, Iran.

Farzad Kamangar was a 32-year-old Iranian Kurdishteacher, poet, journalist, human rights activist and social worker from the city of Kamyaran, Iran who was executed on May 9, 2010 after being accused of having affiliations with PJAK, Kuridsh Free Life Party

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19587075>

regime. These films involve activities of terrorism, assassination and captivity. *Rhino Season* begins with the imprisonment of a famous Kurdish poet who wrote under the pseudonym Sadegh Kamangar after the collapse of the Shah's Regime. Sadegh was falsely framed and imprisoned for 27 years. Only when he was released did he learn that he was proclaimed dead to his family. *Rhino Season* is based on the story of Sadegh (renamed Sahel in the film, played by Vossoughi) and his wife who were arrested and tortured in prison along with many other artists and intellectuals after the formation of the Islamic Republic.

The film charts Sahel's journey after his release from a prolonged period of imprisonment (similar to internal exile) from the prisons of Iran to the unfamiliar terrain of Turkey to be reunited with the only family that he has- his wife, Mina, played by Monica Bellucci. Herein begins Sahel's journey into an alien land with an alien culture where he loses the only gift he had - of expression, of words, of language itself. Henceforth he becomes a stoic man motivated by a quest - but is rendered mute. He does not speak the language of the people in this new country. Transformed into a mute observer, he follows the movements of his wife, often stalking her, discovering her involvement with another man (later finding out it is the revolutionary guard who was instrumental in putting them behind bars, and raping his wife in prison) and accidentally meets his own son without either of them knowing it. Tragedy befalls when unknowingly he finds himself in bed with one of the prostitutes, he rescues several times, only later being numbed into a realisation that it is his daughter he was with.

The film is deeply exilic in its desire for an escape- from the present conditions of each of the characters to a land of better possibilities. While Sahel's desire to escape from the prison to meet his wife changes to escape from life itself; his wife and her children resort to unwilling acts like prostitution and intercourse with the obsessed, sick, perverted revolutionary guard to attain their transit visas to leave the country to start a new life afresh.

Spatial Architecture and Claustrophobia

The film begins with a shot of Vossoughi being given a bath, preparing him for his release. As he lies on the floor, looking up he sees the dome¹ (an architectural motif in Iran, for natural light to enter from ceilings) interspersed with holes that let sunlight in. The light blinds and scorches, signifying anything but a happy journey into the outer world after his release. Outside, the city space will only resemble the enclosed space within the prison, fragmented into a hundred pieces by rods, bars, roots of tube lights, creating semi-circular shadows on the walls.



Figure 26: Sahel, in prison, in *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

Sahel is released, but his anxiety and restlessness seem to move with him in the seemingly free space of the world outside. He is mostly seen taking refuge inside a car, where

¹ ‘Jaam-Khane (or a room shaped like a wine cup)

At the peak of domes or dome shaped-roofs of baths, or hammams, the servant rooms of old motels and rest places between towns, and in bazaars still, there are small holes or openings which are shaped like a hemisphere with some clay rings. In this part they put clay rings and in winters they put round shape cups and jars in them and in summer they take one or all of them out. Even today it is the best way to provide light for places which should be cold or warm seasonally....

As a tradition, long after Archimedes, *Jaam-Khane* was used and it is part of Sassanid architecture due to the prevalence of domes. We can see that they have put some openings in the domes which probably were covered with glass.

Sharzad Etemadi and Zahra Ebrahimi, “The Comparative Research of Methods of lighting in Traditional Architecture and Modern Architecture with an Emphasis on Iranian Traditional Architecture”, *The Sixth International Conference of Stable Development and Civil Engineering*, Esfahan, Daneshpazhoohan Higher Education Institute, 2015,

he possibly feels safer than the room offered to him which seems to be an extension of the prison where he was entrapped for 27 years of his life.



Figure 27: Sahel after his release, in a car. Prison are replaced by horizontal and vertical city cables that cut the frame into multiple parts. *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

The room lined with brick walls has shadows from the window bars creating oblique lines on the walls, cutting space in a nauseous manner. Just when one expects to get a breather with a window, Sahel looks up, but in place of a ceiling, he finds a cramped corner with tall towers formed by buildings on both sides, cramped with adjoining balconies, window panes and clotheslines both vertically and horizontally cluttering and cutting space. The camera pans up as if to finally find a patch of sky, but it is further entrapped within the buildings on all four sides with scorching light from above. The sound of a train passing by is heard, and the building shakes. This association of light and the sound image which brings in the outer movement and life into the enclosed life of the convict brings to mind Plato's allegory of the cave where prisoners were imagined to be facing a blank wall with their hands and necks chained. The fire lit behind the prisoners projected shadows of moving objects outside the cave on the blank wall. These shadows or representations of the outer world, together with the sound of people talking echoing in the walls created an illusion of reality for the inmates. The prisoners would watch these moving shadows, guess what they were, name them.

Exile, for me it's like being in an invisible prison. I am like a dormant, still, live creature, not a moving, living thing (being). Being in an invisible prison and all around you only see walls. Your soul sees this. We live with our souls. The worst thing one can experience in his life is unwanted exile...I don't care about myself much, the problem is with my mother and my family. I believe that the prisoners are not the ones suffering really, their family and the people who care about them are the ones in a real prison. The real suffering comes with the knowledge that your mother and your family are suffering because of your absence.”¹



Figure 28: Istanbul, vertically and horizontally fragmented. Screenshot from the film, *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012.

Cityscape

The first ten minutes of the film after his release charts a journey where he meets different people to get information about his wife. He learns that after the death of his mother his wife moved to Istanbul from Kurdistan with her children and wishes to immigrate to Europe. An air of restlessness and claustrophobia hangs in the air and the lens through which space is filmed. The space of the city with its architecture is mostly cut up into fragments by vertical lines and objects like buildings, long vertical staircases, railing, wires, grills, satellite

¹Interview of Bahman Ghobadi with the author via email, dated, 27.04.2020

dishes. Buildings are further broken down into smaller frames crowded with windows and doors. The lanes of Istanbul seem to be guarded on both sides by tall, crunched up buildings, one on another, further watched over by cars placed in front of them. The sepia tint along with the fatal sound of gloom over the shots create a stifling environment. Mostly filmed at dusk, or during twilight, it barely allows for vision, adding a sombre tone to the already tense atmosphere. Even the shot of Sahel arriving in Istanbul, signified through the blue sea gives a fleeting moment of relief before it is cut by the moving bridge in the foreground, giving the feeling that the sea can only be seen through prison walls, through the point of view of a captive. The sea, as we will see, is the only element in the landscape that possesses the power to liberate the exiles from their entrapped states.



Figure 30: The space inside the visa office represents claustrophobia and suffocation. Lines of shelves with hundreds of books of records converge to a point, filmed in wide. *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012



Figure 29: Verticality in framing instilling acrophobia Cafe sequence with Sahel and his son. *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

Indoor

Indoor spaces too are fragmented like the topography of the city. Characters are mostly never seen directly, but often through reflections. Sahel meets his daughter for the first time in his car. She hops into the backseat of his car awkwardly as he looks ahead and continues driving. There is no exchange of looks. A front mirror allows a glimpse of his eyes. Only the windshield moves. He follows his son inside a cafe. They awkwardly begin playing *Takhte Nard*/ backgammons strangers. The cramped-up cafe space is broken further in the centre by a mirror that reflects them. The room is overcrowded with customers and vertically placed furniture, and walls have vertical lines. The father and son are never seen directly looking at each other or sharing a frame, but short exchanges of glances are filmed through a mirror. The dice is rolled, and a close up of the circular dots in the dice seems rather pointless unless it evokes a sense of fear which increases manifold in a sequence in the bedroom of Sahel. Sahel is seen through the reflection on the television set in his bed,



Figure 31: Fear of holes or tryphobia. Sahel in the bedroom, *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

which has a bed sheet with a leopard print on it. The rounded spots on the bedsheet and the sofa further accentuated with the brick-lined walls aggravate the gnawing fear of holes or tryphobia.

This and the recurrence of vertical lines further culminate into the fear of heights or acrophobia. There is no release from the claustrophobia that these spaces invoke.

Even when Sahel reaches the shore to have a moment of relief, the frame with the blue sea is split into five vertical segments by six curved, naked tree trunks which further branch out into multiple leafless branches dividing the top of the frame into a thousand parts. There is no release.



Figure 32: An example of verticality breaking down space instilling acrophobia. Sahel, by the shore, *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012.

A poem is recited, a moment of release before hundreds of birds cross the skies, not liberating the air in their flight but cutting the blue skies further as Sahel's verses invoke an agony of restlessness

A spider arrives

It misses the moment with its sticky saliva

It weaves a web from time

It hunts you and leaves you

A spider, the size of a spider

The sky darkens, clears and darkens

The tree gasps for air to clear its sap.¹

¹ Poem from the film *Rhino Season* directed by Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

His release from internal exile does not bring him Sahel freedom but only external exile, where a reunion with lost family, or a community - a prevalent theme in all of Ghobadi's cinema is a desire that will never be realised here. There is no reunion for the exile in *Rhino Season* as he has been robbed of any sense of belonging or the desire for inclusivity in an unknown land. Robbed of speech, consumed by guilt, and numbed by tragedy, his only escape is to avenge himself by killing the man that has ruined all their lives, and finally drowning himself.

Fear of Death

Fear of death haunts all of Ghobadi's works.

Every day the shadow of death looms darker and heavier. All the pressure, desperation and hopelessness in this area...in everything... from the logistics of filmmaking...to the many pressures that I am under...the banning of my film, the fact that I am not working right now...death's shadow looms heavier and heavier and it bothers me...and this problem of death is going to be the subject of my future films¹

Fear of death foreshadows the narrative culminating in the final sequence in *Rhino Season* where Sahel takes his revenge but must drown himself too to save grace, and prevent his family from knowing the secret that has devastated him. As his wife and her children board the boat to leave, his car with his corpse is hooked up from the sea. The sea finally sets free the exiles.

¹ Ghobadi Bahman in conversation with Peter Scarlet, Tribeca Film Festival, 2007
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mTQrvPNvXc> accessed on 3.3.2020

Animal Imagery

Before his death, Sahel sees a strange image of a horse peeking in through the window of his car. The horse looks into his eyes directly. A close up of the eye of the horse is matched with a close shot of Sahel's profile with the next shot having the horse and the poet in the same frame. The wide, anamorphic filming of the face of the horse, with its alarmed eye bulging toward him, with the sound of hoofs and a tense background score feel like a warning, an omen of death. His eyes close, he nods off, as the car begins moving perilously toward the shore. The waves foam and break at the shore madly.

When a poem dies in you

Its corpse will stall to smell

The corpse that they have left of you

Is but the falling eyelid of a horse

Half- asleep, half-awake

Look through the eyelid of that horse

A salt-field vanishes in the wind.¹

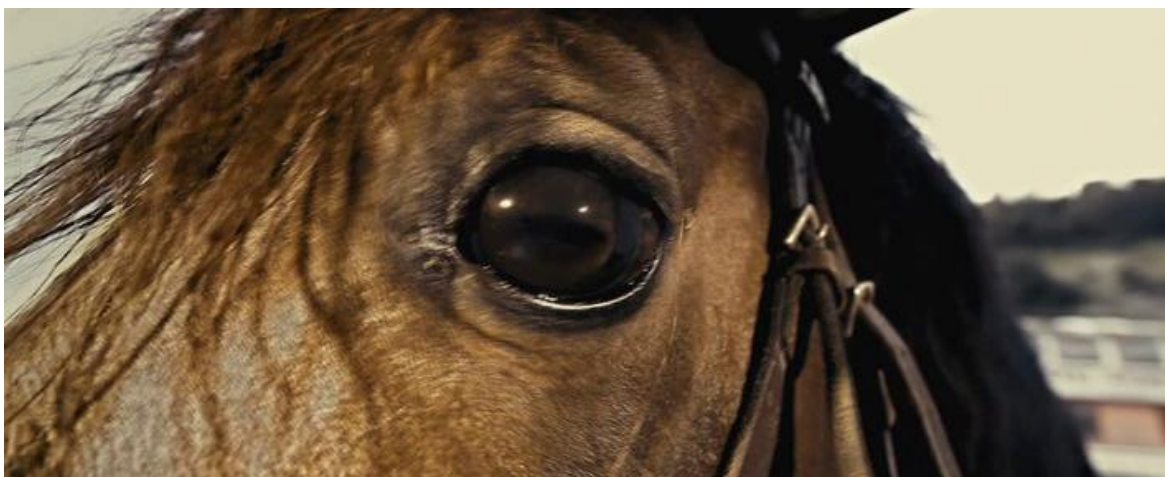


Figure 33: Screenshot from *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

¹ Bahman Ghobadi, *Rhino Season*, 2012

Ominously horses visit the protagonists of Ghobadi before their impending deaths. In *Half Moon*, (2006) the famous musician Mamo who embarks on a journey to Iraqi Kurdistan to perform with a woman singer in a grand performance that he has planned at the penultimate moment of his life, is visited by a horse before his death. The image of horses keeps recurring in most of his films as animals that symbolise the plight of human beings limited by borders. Horses represent the dreadful lives human beings lead. Horses, at once robust, energetic, beautiful animals, symbolising liberation, are reduced to whiskey induced load bearers in the unforgiving cold snowy terrain of Iran. They embody life itself. Life in Kurdistan is impossible to imagine without these animals. They bring livelihood from the other side of the borders, albeit illegally. Humans cross borders and bring back smuggled goods into the country via horses. Their domestication and death refer to the death of humankind at the hands of the dreaded regimes. In a personal interview taken with Ghobadi where I questioned him about the recurrence of horses in his films he mentioned,

Horses come from real life - I remember from childhood they were bringing brides from Iraq-Iran on horses. They were bringing sick people- I specifically remember they brought a sick, pregnant woman to the hospital on a horse, or a mule for 6 hours. All the traffickers/ *koolbers* always carried horses. Horses are necessary as there are difficult roads in the mountains of Kurdistan. We Kurds mostly pass these roads by foot and if we are lucky we find a horse or a mule to carry us back. This image of the horse always comes with me- it has remained with me since childhood. I have seen horses at different points of my life. People use it for sending oil (for making heat), transporting dead bodies or pregnant women. I remember once there were 8 mules bringing alcohol to Iran. The Islamic Republic took the mules, poured the alcohol on

them and set them on fire. I always have the image of 8 horses burning while trying to escape in my mind.¹

This further brings to mind a poem from exiled Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, in whose deeply exilic verses horses often appear as witnesses of dispossession, bearers of violence, as images of the robustness of life, lost.

Why did you leave the horse alone?

— *To keep the house company, my son*

*Houses die when their inhabitants are gone ...*²

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) poet, political activist and author and journalist, regarded as the national poet of Palestine was uprooted from his home village in Al-Birwa, West Gallilee when Israeli forces invaded it in 1948. His family had to flee to Lebanon but on returning found out that their village was now officially a part of Israel. The sudden loss of home, community and identity made Darwish an exile, for whom exile was not an outcome of migration but happened with the occupation of his homeland. “*And I am a stranger at home in my home country[...] Strange home!*”³ He continued living in Israel but was banned from re-entering after he joined the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1973. Another poem, titled, *The Horse Fell off the Poem* incorporates images of horses and doves/pigeons.

The horse fell off the poem

¹Interview of Bahman Ghobadi with the author via email, dated, 27.04.2020

² Mahmoud Darwish, Shahin Muhammad, *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone* (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2014), 12

³<https://www.aldiwan.net/poem8994.html>

*and the Galilean women were wet
with butterflies and dew,
dancing above chrysanthemum
The two absent ones: you and I
you and I are the two absent ones
A pair of white doves
chatting on the branches of a holm oak
No love, but I love ancient
love poems that guard
the sick moon from smoke*

*I attack and retreat, like the violin in quatrains
I get far from my time when I am near
the topography of place ...
There is no margin in modern language left
to celebrate what we love,
because all that will be ... was*

*The horse fell bloodied
with my poem
and I fell bloodied
with the horse's blood ...¹*

¹ Mahmoud Darwish, trans. Fady Joudah, *Butterfly's Burden*, 'The Horse fell off the Poem', (Tartet: Bloodaxe Books, 2007)

Darwish's poems are replete with images of Christ, with whom he shared his birthplace, Gallilee. For him Palestine becomes a metaphor for the loss of Eden, signifying dispossession and exile. Along with horses, pigeons and doves recur in his verses. In Arabic Literature pigeons represent love. The famous book on love by Ibn Hazm (994-1064), the Andalusian Muslim polymath has the name *The Ring of the Dove* (طوق الحمامة). In Persian literature, pigeons are birds that build their nests every season and are known to be forever flying to different places in the search for new homes. The restlessness of a lover is best represented through the homeless, anxious bird, forever migrating, and always in search of a home.

In *Rhino Season* all the animal images from Ghobadi's earlier films come together in fantastical dream sequences matched with the poetry of Saleh- horses from *A Time For Drunken Horses* (2000); turtles from *Turtles Can Fly* (2004) and rhinos from *Rhino Season* (2012). A rhino emerges directly from Sahel's verses in the penultimate scene and drowns in the water as Sahel drowns himself. Sahel sees its body floating in the sea moments before his death. The verses continue,

The earth is a solid salt paste
A rhino drops its head and licks
with an empty mouth it chews...and chews
Then it spits out the dregs of the season
Over there, a bit further.
*Your skin clothes in rhino season.*¹

¹ Poem from the film *Rhino Season* directed by Bahman Ghobadi, 2012



Figure 34: A screenshot from the trailer of *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

In another surreal sequence in the prison yard where Sahel has been tied up in the harsh snow with his mouth closed, he sees the white snowfall change to turtles pelting down from the skies. As the verses of his poetry begin, a turtle falls on his outstretched palm. Bewildered, he watches their descent from the night skies.



Figure 35: Turtles rain down from the night sky in *Rhino Season*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

What is happening in your inverted shell?

What roof is it that you call home?

Two turtles have fallen on their backs

They scratch their shells

against this cold ground

Astray and forlorn.

They have announced you dead

You hold your breath underwater

A vulture wanders in the air¹

Sahel overturns a turtle on its shell, and holds his breath.

After a painful pause, the turtle pushes itself back on its feet, and Sahel breathes in again.

The turtle travels with its roof on its back, much like Ghobadi himself who has been constantly on the move since his exile in 2009

Ninety per cent of my life has been spent in hotels or in makeshift apartments for one or two weeks. In 2009, I first left for France and since then I have been moving here and there...in the US, Germany, Erbil (capital of Iraqi Kurdistan), Istanbul, Dubai and other different places.”²

In the last scene of the film, after his death in the sea, Sahel is seen in his mobile home again driving against the parched landscape. He pauses, smokes a cigarette, and walks toward a light on the horizon. The parched brown land peels off in circles, deprived of water. Sahel keeps walking, his form moves further away from the camera, toward the light. He becomes the light.

¹ Poem from the film *Rhino Season* directed by Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

² Interview of Ghobadi Bahman with the author via email exchange dated, 20.04.2020

The Exile of Behrouz Vossoughi

Behrouz Vossoughi, one of the biggest stars of the pre-revolutionary cinema in Iran acted in more than 90 films and plays. He acted in many Film Farsis and other pathbreaking films like *Gavaznha*, (1974) *Toghi*, (1970) *Soote Delan*, (1978) *Tangsir*, (1973) *Beehive*, (1975), *Reza Motori* (1970). He is best remembered for the iconic character of Qaysar that stormed movie theatres in Iran. *Qaysar* (1969) went on to become the greatest films of Iran, and set in vogue a new genre of vigilante films of the 1960s and the 1970s based on the chivalry of the tough guys who protected the nation and their families (their *namus*) in the absence or the incompetence of the police force.



Figure 36: Film posters of *Tangsir*, *Gavaznha*, *Reza Motori*, *Toghi*, *Qaysar*, *Kandu* all starring Behrouz Vosoughi

Source: <https://www.imvbox.com/>

Soon after the erasure of the Film Farsi industry and the wide sacking of actors, filmmakers and technicians associated with those films after the formation of the Islamic Republic, the biggest stars and technicians lost their jobs. Agents of the Islamic government accused Vosoughi of having ties with the ousted royal family¹; but in his account, Vossoughi confesses how he was warned by the SAVAK² after *Gavaznha* (Masoud Kimiai, 1974) was censored and he was interrogated harshly.

Attached below is an excerpt from his conversation with a reporter ,

“For this film, one day a gentleman called me and gave me an address and said, "Come to a house on Golestan Street tomorrow at 8 am”. I went there, there was someone there. He took me to a room that had only one chair." He told me to wait. The person I was supposed to meet finally arrived at 6pm. His first question to me was why I acted in *Gavaznha*. I told him there was no particular reason but because I wished to work in films with different themes. In a harsher tone, he asked, ‘In a movie, if they give you a gun and tell you to kill the king will you kill him?’

To this Vossoughi replied saying that he would consider it if it had a worthy script. Hearing this agent threatened him violently. He said, "We respect you, but don't make us do this. For instance, one of the one million things we can do is to crush you in a speeding truck at midnight. All we need to do is put a bottle of alcohol in your car. The newspapers would publish the story of your death in bold headlines, that would read, 'The good movie actor drove drunk and died.' ” Vossoughi confessed that even though he eventually overcame the fear, for about eight months, every time he saw a truck pass by he panicked. "I panicked. I bit my gums and went alley to alley to hide. That danger has passed now.”³

¹ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/03/08/1737950/ناگفته-هایی-از-ارتباط-بهرز-و-ثوقی-با-خاندان-پهلوی>
accessed on 9.4.2020

² <http://behroozvosoughi.blogfa.com/post/72>
www.kayhan.ir/fa/news/89260

³ <http://behroozvosoughi.blogfa.com/post/73> accessed on 17.05.2020, translated and paraphrased from Persian to English by the author with Majdeddin M. Arsanjani

Constant pressure, violence, abuse of rights and vigilance and strict censorship existed from the time of the Shah and only increased manifold under the Islamic Regime. Frustrated living a life consumed by fear and pressure he left the country. With a change of power from the hands of the royal family to the religious clerics, the cinema industry was to be erased. The Islamic regime opposed to the very idea of stars or idols seized licenses of most performers, and almost any artist or technician attached with the commercial industry. There could be only one idol, the supreme leader of the newly formed Republic. Everyone else had to leave.

He left soon after and hasn't returned to Iran since. Vossoughi, like Sahel is an exile, who was forced to give up his career after his dislocation to California. While exile brought him temporary relief from political pressures by the government, it never got him peace. The West robbed him of his home audience, and he would never again be able to perform in Farsi. In a span of 35 years, he worked on a few insignificant and unfinished projects. It was difficult to survive in Hollywood, as an American actor. *Rhino Season* was greater than just returning to cinema for Vossoughi. It was a chance to be a part of a Persian film, with a team from his home country, albeit a team in exile just like him. *Rhino Season* was for Vossoughi a return in itself. "I don't think they would throw me in prison if I go back now," said Vossoughi, who lives in California and remains a legend among many Iranians. "But I'm sure they wouldn't let me do the kind of work I want to do."¹ The film also helped Ghobadi survive, he said. "I used to believe that people are only born once, but now I feel I have been reborn like I was given a new life. I see myself as a child, full of energy and hope."²

No one Knows About the Persian Cats (2009) was banned from movie theatres at home, because of its problematic theme that explored a group of underground rock musicians in Tehran, desiring an escape to Europe to continue pursuing their dreams centring around

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19587075>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19587075> accessed on 17.05.2020

music. The film journeys with two musicians Ashkan and Negar recently released from prison, desiring to travel to Europe having a festival invitation from Berlin, and a broker Nader who tries till the end to help them escape the country by procuring visas illegally. Filmed at a stage in his career with his earlier film *Half Moon* being banned from home screens, and the permits to make *Persian Cats* seized by the government, Ghobadi sought solace in music. The film begins with him recording a Kurdish song in a studio, as the sound recordist informs his assistant of the directors own suffering. The film in many ways foreshadows Ghobadi's exile and departure.

After making *Half Moon* they stigmatised me for being a separatist while I never had this view, and I still don't have it. The intelligence service called me many times and after that I realised, they wanted me to leave and they put me under a lot of pressure. I was living on the sixth floor, and I had to lock and chain my windows. The entrance of my apartment had 3 doors with three locks each¹

This film reflects on the marginalisation and criminalisation of musicians in Iran, where music and singing publicly is a privilege only men may have. Women are forbidden to sing in public spaces or make public recordings. In bigger cities like Tehran, they could be permitted to sing only in chorus with a man, and their voice must not at any point be heard louder than his. Besides this, the Islamic Republic forbids any kind of music that allows for the pleasure of escape.

¹Interview of Bahman Ghobadi with the author via email, dated, 27.04.2020

Music as *Haram*

Music in Islam is a controversial issue with regard to Sharia Law. While some schools of Sharia law consider certain kinds of music permissible (*halal*) some are considered unacceptable (*haram*). The general approach toward music and the debates centring around it are extensively explained in the works of the Persian philosopher Abu Hamid Mohammad Tusi Ghazzali, (known in the west as Algazel or Al-Ghazali)¹ one of the most prominent theologians, jurists and mystics of Sunni Islam. In his grand work, *The Revival of Religious Sciences* (إحياء علوم الدين) later published in Persian under the title, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (کیمیای سعادت) he dedicates a chapter to *Sama* or music where he explains that music brings out in humans what fire brings out in iron.²

He says that jurors who consider *Sama* as *haram* think it impossible for the human heart to hold pure love of God. They believe that humans harbour only mundane impure emotions that are incited by music. They are wrong he says “*music only moves what is already inside* (the heart).” He argues, if the heart has truth inside, music brings it out, if it has something unprescribed by religion, it is *haram*, and if the heart is empty, music is innocent entertainment. “It is not acceptable that *Sama* is *haram*, just because it brings pleasure, pleasures are not forbidden.” He then argues “A beautiful voice to the ear is what grass, flowing water and blossoms are to the eye, or what perfume [musk] brings to the nose ...”. By narrating a hadith where two women play *Daf* (a form of percussion) in the presence of the prophet’s wife on a festive day and the prophet allows them to continue he concludes that women could enjoy music too. But what he went on to say henceforth has been widely misinterpreted by clerics of the Islamic Regime. “Sometimes music is not just innocent entertainment, it provokes the lust of a woman or child and because young people mostly

²Abu Hamid Imam Muhammad Ghazzali Tusi. *Kimiyay-e Sa’adat* ed. Baeiddin Khorramshahi. (Tehran: Negah Publication, 2010)
<https://fidibo.com/book/1298-کتاب-کیمیای-سعادت>

have these forms of mundane, evil desires in their heart, it is Haram for them unless she is their legal wife.” He mentions types of music that are recommended and good, like music while travelling for Haj which excites the pilgrims inducing them religious fervour or music that encourages men to fight for God or mourning music that helps one grieve and contemplate about his life and sins. The music of halal festive events like a wedding is permissible.¹

Among schools of Sharia law especially Twelfth Imam Shias (clerics of the Islamic Regime) are among the intolerant ones. Some of the major figures of Shia Sharia law considered music generally haram because none of the twelve imams ever practiced or recommended it. A lot of them considered it completely haram, permissible only with a lot of restrictions. The more tolerant jurors of Shia Sharia law (minority) take a position similar to Al-Ghazali.

Ayatollah Khomeini did not have a positive view of music. In his interview with Oriana Fallaci (published in The New York Times) mentions,

Music dulls the mind because it involves pleasure and ecstasy, similar to drugs. Your music, I mean. Usually, your music does not exalt the spirit, it puts it to sleep... it destroys our youth, who become poisoned by it, and then they no longer care about their country.²

Later he took a milder stance saying, “if their music does not dull the mind, it will not be prohibited. Some of your music is permitted. For example, marches and hymns for marching.

¹ <https://rasekhoon.net/article/show/212715/> غنا و موسیقی از دیدگاه فقهای اسلام- ۱

This is an article about the debates surrounding music in Islam

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/10/07/archives/an-interview-with-khomeini.html>

We want music that lifts the spirit, as in marches, music that makes our youth move instead of paralyzing them, music that helps them to care about their country.”¹

Later in the July of 1979 when he was among the employees of *Radio Darya* (a radio station aired on Caspian Seaside) he had said music “stupefies persons listening to it and makes their brain inactive and frivolous.” He added that music thus joined alcoholic drinks like in most Western movies, and the practice of men and women swimming or sunbathing together as artefacts of the previous “satanic” regime that will not be tolerated under the Islamic Republic.²

On his website, the second and current religious leader of Iran, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, has a page with all his *Fatwas* about music. In an inquiry on whether it is permissible for women to sing for men, he answers: “listening to women singing which most of the time includes sinful [thoughts, feeling and acts], is not allowed”.³ Even though music exists in Iran, in underground, unofficial, accepted or semi-accepted forms, religious rulers remain steadfast in their antagonistic positions and restrict it by making it hard to afford, learn and practice.

In a powerful sequence of rehabilitating Afghan refugee children through music, the teacher sings for them and asks them to imagine themselves holding and playing the guitar. A class of children hold up their hands, shut their eyes, and feel the liberating power of music. Here music allows the displaced, exiled children to weave dreams. There is no escape for these bright, innocent children to a different, happier world save this moment that is provided by music. Music takes them to the ‘idealised elsewhere’ Saless sought for himself

¹ ibid

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/07/24/archives/khomeini-bans-broadcast-music-saying-it-corrupts-iranian-youth.html>

³ <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?id=99#4702>

and his characters, and that which Ghobadi seeks for the youth of the world. A place he knows can be only found in the realm of this forbidden form of expression.



Figure 37: "Play with the guitar children, imagine you are playing yourselves," the teacher tells the Afghan refugee children in the film *No One Knows about the Persian Cats*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2009

Who am I?

A vagabond.

One lost in the outskirts

The most neglected of all

In the soundless town of all

From where?

South of the town

Where the breath's in a one-way road

Where dreams and hopes

Get caught and trapped in cages

In the middle of a crossing

Tired and nowhere to go

In a crossroad that is one-way from all sides

Who am I?

A barefoot man

Full of questions with no answers

A hundred roads on the wall

*That I drew in my dreams.*¹

No One Knows About the Persian Cats is characterised by panic, phobia and deep anxiety that the couple Negar and Ashkan feels in a city where prison is not restricted to jail, where like everybody else they are watched, and yet the characters are always on the search for alienated pockets where they can be themselves, practice music even if that means working inside a stable that causes a musician to get hepatitis. The agents of the State are always watching and the film is replete with scenes of interrogation where each of the characters are harassed. Bureaucratic agents harass the broker, Nader who speaks broken English and claims he ‘can fix anything’ They raid his place and confiscate the film DVDs he sells in black. Traffic police guards stop the car of the Ashkan and Negar and violently snatch their pup by ‘lifting it’². The raiding of the underground visa office of David, and the final culmination of the party sequence where in a desperate attempt to escape the police each of the characters must pay with their lives. The suffering, drunk Nader, always on the run, is caught, Ashkan jumps from the window and Negar throws herself off her terrace. The desire to escape to the West is as unattainable and far-fetched as the desire for freedom and making free music in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The characters must pay with dear life to even dare dream of crossing borders, of creating music. The hopes and dreams of even the most optimistic are crushed.

¹Song from *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2009

² According to a report published in the national paper *Ettela'at* on August 9, 1964 1963 the Ministry of Health and Tehran Municipality started a project that came to be known as “dog-buying.” With a budget of one million rials, the project’s mission was to destroy 50,000 stray dogs in and around Tehran. Since then, countless dogs have been slaughtered in Iranian cities and villages, although no accurate statistics are available.
<https://iranwire.com/en/features/5623>

Where do you hurry in this haste?

به کجا چنین شتابان؟

The desert flower asks the breeze.

گون از نسیم پرسید.

'I am depressed here, the wind says

دل من گرفته زینجا،

'Don't you dream of travelling away from this desert and this dust?'

هوس سفر نداری ز غبار این بیابان؟

'I long to travel with all my heart, the flower says

-همه آرزویم، اما

'But what can I do? My roots are chained to this ground'.

چه کنم که بسته پایم ...

But where do you hurry in this haste?

به کجا چنین شتابان؟

'-Anywhere, but here...'

به هر آن کجا که باشد به جز این سرا سرایم .

'-Farewell friend, journey safe...

سفرت به خیر ! اما تو دوستی، خدا را

But when you meet the blossoms and the rain,

چو ازین کویر وحشت به سلامتی گزشتی،

Do convey my salaam/hello to them.¹

به شکوفه ها، به باران، برسان سلام ما را.

¹ <https://xakameh.com/سفر-به-خیر/>

Mohammed Reza Shafie Kadkani, *In the Alleys of Neshabur*, trans. Majdeddin M. Arsanjani, Sreemoyee Singh, (Tehran: Sokhan Publication House, 1972)

The desire to procure visas to get out of Iran creates trouble, and it drives the narrative of this film forward. The panic laden, fast-paced shots of the mute city watching and suffering collectively where the poor are ignored by the state that only concerns itself with its vote bank, creates a sense of gloom, increases anxiety and induces panic that comes from open spaces. This depiction of the city was similarly shown by Mohsen Makhmalbaf in *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989) where the city became an extension of the troubled mind of the character affected by the ravages of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and *Tangna, Impasse*, Amir Naderi, 1973. Due to strict censorship codes, Naderi was forced to add shots of modern-day Tehran in the distressed dystopia he depicted. This created a contrast between the rich northern neighbourhoods of Tehran with the shabby slums of the south thus making inequality stronger. The famous Iranian film critic Parviz Davaei, called *Tangna* “an identity card of Tehran of 1972, dark, impure and strange!”¹

Depiction of City

In *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, the space of the city is divided into its urban centres, visible to all, and its underbellies where its poorest populations live amid squalor and filth, hidden from the common eye. The fast-paced camera doesn't pause to look longer but captures the drudgery and monotony of the mundane in Tehran's bustling city life in quick, unsympathetic shots. Shots of people travelling by metros, lining in ticket queues, buses, elevators are juxtaposed with large construction sites signifying the expanse and growth of the private sector and the resultant growth of bridges that have come up over cramped alleys (shot in telephoto lens) where people passing each other resemble sewage pipes, synchronised with the fast beats of a rap song as a new age butcher cutting a frozen

¹Hushang Golmakani, *Ketab-e Tangna*. (Tehran: Rozane-kar Publications, 2007), 147-158

bird on a counter. Queues for jobs grow, daily wage workers toil all day long, traffic blares as the skyline boasts of progress while the dregs of the society remain in the margins.



Figure 38: Terrace in *No One Knows About Persian Cats* Bahman Ghobadi, 2012

Terrace

In the cacophony of the fast paced, alienating world outside buzzing with activity that does not pause for anyone, there is no room for the protagonists of Ghobadi. Like Sahel creates a safe, interim space for himself in his car in *Rhino Season*, the terrace becomes a makeshift interim space for the distressed couple in *No One knows About Persian Cats*. Here they can breathe in the air, look at the city line, contemplate, grieve, spend time as lovers and make music. It is also the only place where they can watch the city without being watched - the terrace like the car is also that which finally liberates through death.

In a sequence Nader climbs up a flight of stairs in a construction site to reach his rapper friend. The ascent up the stairs in the dead construction building, with its jagged cemented stairs, and vacuous confines of uninhabited rooms are cut with a telephonic conversation that informs him that all their visas and permits are rejected. He finally reaches his friend on the rooftop who hugs him and speaks of how liberating it is to work from above the ground (terrace) as opposed to the underground spaces he must have spent his life growing up, or working in.

Came up here to get a better overview

See the streets and roads from up here

So we can say that THIS is TEHRAN!!!

-A city you can die in with pride!¹

The city at once isolating and alluring revels in pride of its bridges and a hundred flags and a skyline of tall buildings. The streets halted with traffic suddenly intercut with a young worker carrying a load on his back, the poor line its underbelly as the rap begins, “This is Tehran, a city where everything entices your soul till you realise you are not human, just trash.” Shots of the tower of Milad, is juxtaposed with the poor children, pulling carts of trash, a city watched by the police but made functional by its poor workers, its Afghan refugees that are denied basic rights... “a hobo stands next to a Benz, he isn’t worth enough to rent it”, life goes on under bridges- that have transformed into shelter grounds for the poor and displaced. A jet plane cuts the sky in half, the camera pauses a second or two to look at the soot in the soiled palms of workers, caged birds, cigarette sellers and sewage workers. A man reads his *namaz* under the bridge, *chador* clad women pass by, young boys stare into nothingness amid work, trash pickers wake up in their makeshift beds surrounded by trash, construction site workers continue their day’s work as Nader rides in an underground garage to sell his only belonging - his bike, to raise money for the concert and get the visas of the young couple. This space resembles an underground parking lot which transforms into a makeshift bazaar for selling second-hand vehicles. Much like the *Passage e Parwaneh* in Jomhuri Street in Tehran famously called *Djomeh Bazaar* or the Friday Bazar, a similar parking space which transforms every Friday to sell all kinds of second-hand objects, some antiques, old paintings, tiles etc. While Nader sells his bike, the young kids speak of their

¹Song from *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2009

dreams of making music in the future under blue skies, meeting their idols like Sigur Ross, travelling to different cities; the camera comes back to follow Nader who passes by the illegal immigration office of David to find the police have stormed it, and have arrested David, metaphorically shattering the dreams of the youth.

With a detailed analysis of the cinema of Sohrab Shahid Saless and Bahman Ghobadi made in exile, this chapter has introduced two positions taken by two filmmakers in exile, one where they accept their exilic positions and tell their stories tinted by their experiences of panic and trauma centring around their dislocation, and the other where the artist denies and disregards his exile altogether, rather situating loss and homelessness as a universal predicament.

Chapter 4:

The Cinema of Bahman Ghobadi (Pre-Exile) and the Journey Narrative

Pre-Exile

While *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009) and *Rhino Season* (2012) dealt with exilic themes characterised by narratives of fear and panic with a desire for escape, reunification or return that tragically is never realised, often being consummated only by release or return in death, his earlier films made within Iran before his exile unexpectedly also projected the themes of exile and a desire for reunification. Only here these themes stemmed from his position and identity of being a Kurd, representing a community living in exile within their own country. Hence exile for Ghobadi never came with physical dislocation and geographical exile alone, but with his origin and identity as an Iranian Kurd, a community penalised, robbed of rights, marginalised, and violently erased from the national history of Iran since the inception of the modern nation-state in Iran, with political problems escalating to great heights due to the antagonism between Mohammad Reza Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussain during the Iran-Iraq war. While the previous chapter discussed Ghobadi's later films, the focus of this chapter would be films made before 2006- films that could be largely classified as journey narratives of identity, centring around border regions of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan, involving local people living on the borders and films shot by border subjects themselves. I will begin with a brief classification of journey narratives by referring to Hamid Naficy's work, where he classifies different kinds of journey films that are determined based on the direction of the journey, the motivation for the journey, and the kinds of journey narratives that are prevalent in the history of cinema. The aim is to trace how and where in this structure we can place Ghobadi's cinema.

In Chapter 7 ('Journeying, Border Crossing and Identity Crossing') of his book, *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy mentions the different routes journey films take, motivated by themes of exploration, pilgrimage, escape, emigration or return. As exploration could involve a quest, wandering, search and

homelessness, all physical journeys tap into mythical, epic or metaphoric travels thereby becoming deeply psychological. Naficy classifies three types of exilic journeys: “outward journeys of escape, home seeking and home founding; journeys of quest, homelessness, and lostness; and inward homecoming journeys.”¹

Yet all the three aforementioned exilic journeys have one thing in common: borders. Borders drive the narrative, the life of the characters, their struggles, aspirations and desires which primarily centre around crossing them. Borders are seen as hurdles, but not necessarily for a changed status, or nationality, but better living opportunities, finding homes, and reuniting with lost family.

While Naderi’s deeply exilic film, *The Runner, Davandeh*, (1984), is set around the border area of the Persian Gulf, centring around the desire of the local, orphaned Amiru, who despite his poverty, seeks knowledge, reads foreign books, chases after flying aeroplanes, and speaks broken English, all signifying his (and the filmmakers) desire to escape, by crossing the border; *Kandahar* (2001) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf begins with a shot of the protagonist, Nafas, a Canadian-Afghan returning to the hostile terrain of Afghanistan in a helicopter, to save her sister who has sent her a letter of distress. The film is situated on the border between Iran and Afghanistan, and through the journey of Nafas, we are shown an absurd, surreal portrayal of war-torn, broken Afghanistan where men run on crutches to get prosthetic legs that rain down from skies dropped by American helicopters, and women must be examined through a curtain by doctors. In this period Makhmalbaf directed a series of films around the borders of Afghanistan, *Kandahar*, (2001), *Test of Democracy*, (2001), *Afghan Alphabet*, (2002), with his daughters Samira, *At Five in the Afternoon*, (2003), *Two-Legged Horse*, (2008) and Hana, *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*, (2007), following which he and his entire family were politically banned from Iran.

¹ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. (US: Princeton University Press, 2001), 221

In his chapter titled, 'Journeying, Border Crossing and Identity Crossing', Naficy mentions the following features that categorise "border films"

- The plot involves significant journeying and border crossing and use of border settings
- The story deals with characters from the borderline regions regardless of the settings
- The story deals with border subjects who live on the border
- The film is shot on location in the borderlands, regardless of the plot
- The story makes significant reference to the borderlands or to the problems of ethnic or national identity
- Border subjects make the film themselves¹

The cinema of Ghobadi, in this regard set in the border regions of Kurdistan, tells the stories of local folk desiring to cross over to the Iraqi side (relatively freer where one has more rights and better living conditions) to be reunited with severed family members, lost lovers, and children separated or maimed by the bloody Iran-Iraq war and the occupation of the Ba'ath Party under the leadership of Saddam Hussain. His film *Marooned in Iraq*, (2002) begins with the local people of Kurdistan travelling to the border on a truck after Saddam's bombing of Iraqi Kurdistan as the sound of airplanes swoosh past the skies giving a grim atmosphere of war. Mirza, the musician, gets news of an urgent letter sent by his ex-wife who lives on the other (Iraqi) side of the border and undertakes the journey with two of his sons to find her. In *Turtles Can Fly*, (2004) the orphaned, and mentally distraught brother-sister duo wishes to cross the border like all other families ravaged in the Halabja Chemical crisis, but are held back by an unwanted child- a souvenir left by the war. Ayoub in *No Time for Drunken Horses*, (2000) must smuggle his handicapped brother in a mule to cross over to Iraqi Kurdistan so he can get treatment for his recovery. *Half Moon*, (2006) is motivated

¹ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. (US: Princeton University Press, 2001), 239

by the impossible desire of a musician at the penultimate juncture of his life to be able to sing freely with his female companion in a concert in Iraq. Borders determine life, stories and identity in the films of Ghobadi. Borders created by governments, rulers and dictators have divided the homogeneous people of Kurdistan into the four countries of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, thereby making them exiles, within their host countries. Kurdistan remains a divided borderland, and a people of the same ethnicity and race, speaking Kurdish languages¹ but severed and uprooted by man-made borders.

Ghobadi's earlier films made within Iran, *No Time for Drunken Horses*, *Marooned in Iran*, *Turtles can Fly*, and *Half Moon* can be broadly classified as journey films, yet deviating considerably from the conventional journey narrative patterns seen in Iranian Cinema and the world. To understand how different Ghobadi's journey films of identity tracing a community in exile are, we must first take a look at the notion of Journey in Iranian Cinema and examine its roots in the deeper philosophy of Sufism which is deeply connected with the primitive notion of exile itself.

Journey Films

Journey films could be loosely classified as a category of films predominated by themes of travel and journeying into far off lands. Journeys that could take the distressed character away from a seat of turbulence, often, the home. Journeys that could open up 'the way' or the road and result in the liberation of the self, by exposing it to the larger universe, landscape, or nature. One of the earliest instances of the journey narrative can be seen in Road movies, predominantly associated with the United States, reflecting the crisis of a male protagonist(s) who would take to the road in a car to discover a deeper truth. The car often

¹ Which comprises a group of independent languages such as Kurmanji, Sorani and Southern Kurdish.
<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kurdish-language-i>

became a safe space for masculine rebels protecting their individuality against orthodox societies, and also functioned as the vehicle leading to the road to liberation and discovery. *Thelma and Louise*, Ridley Scott, (1991) was an important exception. It traced the journey of two women enacted by Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon who escape abusive male figures representing the face of society and take to the roads of the Grand Canyon. The journey never ends, as the iconic freeze-frame ending shot of their car flying over the cliff signifies not only absolute annihilation before succumbing to the agents of the state but the forever onward process of journeying itself.

Journey in Iranian Cinema

Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry, Ta'm Gilas*, (1997) and Jafar Panahi's latest film, *Three Faces, Se Rokh*, (2018) are two appropriate but unconventional examples of the road movie in Iranian Cinema. Kiarostami's cinema centres around journey narratives deeply inspired and indebted to the Sufi concept of journey. Badii, a disillusioned, middle-aged and seemingly disturbed man travels in his car through the parched, brown and rugged landscape of Tehran looking for someone to do an odd job for him- to cover his already dug grave with soil after he steps into it. The journey through the city and the conversations that Badii has with so many workers he meets on the way throws light to not just the absurdity of his desire, but also how suicide is considered sacrilegious among Shia Muslims in Iran. In the second chapter of the Quran entitled *The Cow*, verse 195, it is mentioned, "Spend your wealth for the cause of Allah, and be not cast by your own hands to ruin; and do good. Lo! Allah loveth the beneficent."¹

Suicide is sinful and unacceptable in Islam and the Iranian society, and with a lot of difficulty Badii finally finds a man who agrees to put soil over his dead body and cover his

¹ <https://www.namazzamani.net/quran/surah-al-baqarah-ayat-195.htm>, accessed on 5.06.2020

grave. However, the journey that seemingly should end with his death does not; Badii lays down in his grave and looks up at the sky watching the moon get covered in a shroud of black clouds. The moon takes away the light and the screen turns black. The sound of thunder shatters the stillness of the night, his eyelids become heavy, as fatal sleep grips him. Lightning gives us a last glimpse of him before darkness consumes the screen again.



Figure 39: Homayoun Ershadi playing Badii in *Taste of Cherry*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1997

By the offscreen sound, we know it has begun raining... there is a pause. The rain stops making us believe the story ends here. The sound of soldiers marching is heard and seconds later a grainy, bleached out morning sequence along a serpentine road fills the screen. Soldiers march along the road in a trainlike formation, their whistles sound like a train moving along its tracks. The cameraman and his assistant enter the screen, Badii emerges out of his grave and lights a cigarette passing it on to Kiarostami as Panahi (his assistant), the sound recordist and the rest of the crew are exposed working. Kiarostami instructs the marching boys to stop and rest by an adjacent tree announcing that filming is over as only a sound take remains to be recorded. Sound of trumpet from *St. James' Infirmary*, an old American folk tune begins, as the boys rest in the grass, smiling, conversing

and smelling flowers. They wave at the camera with flowers in their hands and smile. The mood is light, as the breeze blows on the grass field overlooking the city.

As the train halts, a journey ends here...but who's journey was it? Badii's? Or the filmmakers? Or was it the journey of the film itself? And is it really over or has it only begun? The film ends with a car driving down the serpentine road and the credits begin rolling. The iconic tune of the trumpet brings back to the mind the lyrics from the song sung by Louis Armstrong,

“When I die bury me in straight lace shoes
I want a box-back coat and a Stetson hat
(John B., that is)
Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my watch chain
So, the boys will know that I died standin' pat.”¹

Just as Badii can make room for his odd request only in his car, for Panahi, the car becomes an interim space between his house and the city where he is not watched. The car is outside the purview of surveillance, a place he often escapes to, a place he can watch as a filmmaker, without being watched. The car transforms into a place where he can be himself in real life and his cinema. His latest films, *Taxi* (2015) and *Three Faces* (2018) have both been filmed inside his car. In *Three Faces* he sheds the self-reflexive form that dominated his works since his ban- (*This is not a Film*, 2011 and *Closed Curtain and Taxi*, 2013) where he struggles to tell the story of his prohibition. While in *Taxi* he steps out of his house for the first time filming Tehran as seen from inside his SUV, in *Three Faces* he embarks on a journey by road (car) to a remote village in Azerbaijan enquiring about the supposed suicide of a teenage girl (who had sent him a suicide video addressed to the TV actress Behnaz Jaffari). Panahi and Behnaz travel by road to the Turkish speaking village of Azerbaijan and

¹ <https://genius.com/Louis-armstrong-st-james-infirmary-blues-lyrics> accessed on 7.06.2020

confront different traditions and customs of the ancient village and its people. The film in more than one way is a tribute to his master Abbas Kiarostami who died an untimely death in 2016. The graveyard in *Three Faces* scene resembles the scene from *Taste of Cherry* (explained above) while the setting of the village brings to mind the ancient village depicted in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, (1999).



Figure 40: Scene from *Three Faces*, *Se Rokh*, Jafar Panahi, 2018

When Panahi and the actress Behnaz Jafari visit the local graveyard to look for the grave of the supposedly dead girl, they instead find an old woman lying in a grave she has dug out for herself. She waits for death to come to her by lying in the grave, which she refers to as her ‘final abode’. Unlike Badii who has no light, save that of the journeying moon, she has a lamp, to protect her from snakes, that she feels are sure to visit at night, punishing her for the crimes done in her life.¹ This further references the conversation on good and evil between the journalist Behzad and the child in Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us*, “What happens to the good and bad on Judgement day? It’s obvious the good go to hell and the evil to heaven.”²

¹ For a Shia Muslim *hadith* is a quote from their Imams or the daughter of the Prophet, Fatema. Shia Hadith: Prayer of night, is light of grave for the one who prays صلاة الليل سراج لصاحبها في القبر Hossein ibn Ali Kashefi, *Al-resalah Al-aliah fi al-ahadith al-nabaviah*, ed. Mohaddeth Jaladaddin, (Tehran:Sherkat Entesharat Elmi Farhangi, 1984), 176

² Kiarostami Abbas, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, 1999, Iran.

While the lamp itself brings to mind the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad imparting light in the darkness of the cellar in *The Wind Will Carry Us* and the lines below written on her grave,

If you come to my house, friend,

اگر به خانه من آمدی برای من ای مهربان چراغ بیاور

Bring me a lamp and a window I can look through

و یک دریچه که از آن

At the crowd in the happy alley¹

به ازدحام کوچۀ خوشبخت بنگرم



Figure 41: A woman puts a flower in Forough Farrokhzad's graveyard on her birth anniversary in Zahir-od-Dowleh, Tehran, 2017. Frame grab from the documentary, *Toward Happy Alleys*, Sreemoyee Singh, (in-progress)

In fact, all of Kiarostami's cinema is a classic example of the journey form, where the logic of the narrative is motivated by an experiential onward journey- devoid of highs and lows, climactic moments of revelation and denouement. The journey does not only make

¹ Forough Farrokhzad, *Another Birth*, 'Gift' trans. Ahmad Karimi Hakkak.
<https://foroughfarrokhzad.org/selectedworks/selectedworks1.php> as accessed on 16.06.2020 at 11.30am.

the story, or the content but emerges in his form of dealing with movement like in a journey, much like Sufi literature where more important and coherent than the narrative were the parables that testified to them.

To fully understand the notion of journey in Iranian Cinema we must take a look at Sufi literature, especially the poetic form which emerged from the teachings of the early Sufis like Attar, developed and brought to perfection by his follower Rumi in his *Masnavi*¹. The form of journey in Iranian cinema borrows from this unorganized, associative, parabolic form in Persian poetry and literature. Poetry forms the most significant part of Iranian culture and art. Nothing can be separated from poetry, expression and art, cinema, music. Persian language itself is structured around poetry, people express in poetry and this poetry of everyday life can only be understood in the pretext of the mystical tradition of Sufism. Abbas Kiarostami reiterates the importance of poetry in Iran that has become

In Iran, in conversation, the use of poetry is not limited to intellectuals, or poets, or even poetry lovers [...] Illiterate people, during the day, recite a couple of verses in order to relate to one another and express their viewpoints. Poetry in Iran pours down on us, like falling rain, and everyone takes part in it. Your grandmother, when she wanted to complain about the world – she complained in poetry. Or if she wanted to express her love for your grandfather, she expressed it with poetry [...] ²

¹ The *Masnavi*, or *Masnavi-ye-Ma'navi* (Persian: *مثنوی معنوی*), also *Mathnawi*, is an extensive poem written in Persian by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi, also known as Rumi. The *Masnavi* is one of the most influential works of Sufism, commonly called "the Quran in Persian". The *Masnavi* is a series of six books of poetry that together amount to around 25,000 verses or 50,000 lines.

² Lila Azam Zanganeh, *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes; Uncensored Iranian Voices* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 86.

Sufi Literature: *Masnavi* and the Early Interpretation of Exile and the Journey of Return

Interpretation and Quote

The iconic opening eighteen lines of the *Masnavi*- the only lines written by Rumi himself (the rest of the six volumes have been dictated by him to his disciple Chalebi) begins with the tale of the reed¹, the hollow sugar cane pipe, separated from its homeland/reed land or *Neyestan*² and thus singing a sorrowful tune. The reed that has been dislocated from its home and transformed into a flute now sings in the company of strangers, who interpret the secret of its sorrow according to their own physical and mental states of being.

Listen to the reed (flute), how it is complaining! It is telling

بشنو این نی چون شکایت می‌کند

about separations,

از جداییها حکایت می‌کند

Ever since I was severed from the reed field, men

کز نیستان تا مرا ببریده‌اند

and women have lamented in (the presence of) my shrill cries

در نفیرم مرد و زن نالیده‌اند

(But) I want a heart (which is) torn, torn from separation, so that

¹ the reed flute (nay): a flute made by cutting a length of a naturally hollow reed cane and adding finger holes. "The nay or reed-flute as the poet's favourite musical instrument and has always been associated with the religious services of the Mawlawí ("Whirling Dervish") Order, in which music and dancing are prominent features." (Nicholson, Commentary)

<http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/n-I-0001.html>

² Neyestan, geographically located in Kashan, Iran, known for its sugar cane produce. The reed field (nay-estân) literally means a "place of reeds." A symbol for the original homeland of the soul, when it existed harmoniously in the presence of God. "... referring to the descent of the soul from the sphere of Pure Being and Absolute Unity, to which it belongs and would fain return." (Nicholson, Commentary)

I may explain the pain of yearning..."¹

تا بگویم شرح درد اشتیاق

The Masnavi thus has a classic tale of estrangement, severance and homelessness at its heart, or exile as a state of constant being humans find themselves in. The reed becomes an analogy of mankind, and Rumi himself. Just as the reed, forever uprooted from *Neyestan*, and Adam and Eve banished from the original home, (Paradise) man forever lives in an uprooted state of exile, reminiscing the nostalgia of the home, and singing sorrowful tunes of the desire for a return back home. Hence all of life becomes a journey of return to paradise, to the beloved, to God, and to one's inner self that was all a part of man in the beginning. The earliest tale of Adam and Eve is but a tale of banishment from Paradise and a resultant descent down to earth. The teachings of Sufism invoke setting out on 'the way'² or the journey toward the annihilation of the ego, and self-discovery which finally lead to the sea where one must not reach as a pebble, or a leaf but a drop of water that will not drown, or float but dissolve entirely into it.³ A journey that begins from God, as it is God that created the first human, Adam by breathing his soul into him⁴ and it is he who banishes him for transgressing the laws of Paradise and lusting for the forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve descend from heaven to earth, from God/ beloved to earth, to be consumed by their egos and must

¹ Jalaluddin Rumi, Trans. Ibrahim Gamard, *The Mathnawi-ye Manawi* (Rhymed Couplets of Deep Spiritual Meaning) First published on "Sunlight" (yahoogroups.com), 2/24/00
<http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/n-I-0001.html> as accessed on 16.06.2020

² The Sufi way

³ Farid al-Din Attar and C. S. Nott. 1993. *The Conference of the Birds: Mantiq Ut-tair: A Philosophical Religious poem in prose*. (Boston, Mass: Shambhala:1993), 124.

"The drop becomes that part of this great ocean abides there forever and in peace."

⁴ "So when I have fashioned him and had a spirit of My Own 'creation' breathed into him, fall down in prostration to him."

Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran: A Thematic English Translation of the Message of the Final Revelation*, Chapter 38 (Sad) verse 72 (Lombard, IL : Book of Signs Foundation, 2016.)
<https://quran.com/38/72->

undertake a journey back to be reunited with God again after forsaking worldly ties. The story of exile and banishment thus is entwined from the beginning with the journey form.

The journey of mysticism in Islam is not linear. For Sufis mystics, all of the universe and existence has a circular shape which they call “the Circle of Existence”¹. This circle consists of two arcs, “descending arc”² and “ascending arc”³. In these two arcs, pure existence would descend to its lowest degree and then the ascending arc would start.⁴(unity-diversity-unity) It's circular because at the end one comes back to where he originally was. Sufis believed that humans descended to earth as guests, hence the earth or this world itself is nothing but a temporary accommodation centre where they were banished from their original homes.⁵ Much like the reed, humans are forever uprooted, and all of life is an epistemological journey back to the absolute, the sea, paradise, to reach the understanding of the unity with God. This preparation for return or the journey back is termed by Sufis as ‘*the way*’.

History of the Eighteen Lines

It is said that one day, one of Rumi’s closest disciples, Husamuddin Chalebi knelt before him and asked why he had not penned down his teachings in a book, while other great Sufi mystics of the time had revealed the secrets of the Divine in their enlightening accounts (*Book of the Divine* by the Sufi poet Hakim Sana’i, *Conference of the Birds* and *Musibat Nama* by Fariduddin Attar) He had asked,

¹ Dayere Vojudie/ دایره وجودیه

² Qows Nozuli/ قوس نزولی

³ Qows So'udi/ قوس صعودی

⁴ Sadreddin Muhammad Shirazi, *Hikmat al-Muta'aliya fi-l-Asfar al-'Aqliyya al-Arba'a* trans. From Arabic to Persian by Muhammad Khawjavi, (Tehran: Mowla Publications, 2013),358-9

⁵A hadith from Prophet Mohammad: “People are guests in this world and whatever they have is only temporarily owned by them. Indeed, the guest will eventually leave and all those things will go back to their original owner.”

<https://www.hadithlib.com/hadithtxts/view/900120>

“... (But) if there could be a book with the quality of the 'Book of the Divine' of Hakîm (Sanâ'î), yet in the (mathnawî) meter of the 'Speech of the Birds,' so that it might be memorized among the knowers and be the intimate companion of the souls of the lovers... so that they would occupy themselves with nothing else...'¹

It is said that at that moment, from the top of his turban Rumi put to Chalebi's hands the first portion of what was to become the *Masnavi* - the first eighteen lines, written by him, carrying within it the very essence of Sufism, and the truths of existence. The rest of the *Masnavi* had been dictated by the Maulana to Husamuddin Chalebi who wrote it down in the structure in which it survives to this date.

“...Anyone one who has remained far from his roots, seeks a

هر کسی کو دور ماند از اصل خویش

return (to the) time of his union.

باز جوید روزگار وصل خویش

I lamented in every gathering; I associated with those in bad or

من به هر جمعیتی نالان شدم

happy circumstances.

جفت بدحالان و خوش حالان شدم

(But) everyone became my friend from his (own) opinion; he did

هر کسی از ظن خود شد یار من

not seek my secrets from within me.

از درون من نجست اسرار من

My secret is not far from my lament, but eyes and ears do not

¹ <http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/n-I-0004.html> accessed on 16.06.2020

سر من از ناله من دور نیست

have the light (to sense it).

لیک چشم و گوش را آن نور نیست

The body is not hidden from the soul, nor the soul from the body;

تن ز جان و جان ز تن مستور نیست

but seeing the soul is not permitted."

لیک کس را دید جان دستور نیست

The reed's cry is fire -- it's not wind! Whoever doesn't have this

آتشست این بانگ نای و نیست باد

fire, may he be nothing!⁷

هر که این آتش ندارد نیست باد

It is the fire of Love that fell into the reed. (And) it is the

آتش عشقست کاندلر نی فتاد

ferment of Love that fell into the wine.

جوشش عشقست کاندلر می فتاد

The reed (is) the companion of anyone who was severed from a

نی حریف هر که از یاری برید

friend; its melodies tore our veils.

پرده هالاش پرده های ما درید

Who has seen a poison and a remedy like the reed? Who has seen a

همچو نی ز هری و تر یاقی کی دید

harmonious companion and a yearning friend like the reed?

همچو نی دمساز و مشتاقی کی دید

The reed is telling the story of the path full of blood; it is

نی حدیث راه پر خون می کند

telling stories of Majnoon's (crazed) love.

قصه‌های عشق مجنون می‌کند

There is no confidant (of) this understanding except the

محرم این هوش جز بیهوش نیست

senseless! There is no purchaser of that tongue except the ear [of the mystic.]

مر زبان را مشتری جز گوش نیست

In our longing, the days became (like) evenings; the days

در غم ما روزها بیگاه شد

became fellow-travelers with burning fevers.

روزها با سوزها همراه شد

If the days have passed, tell (them to) go, (and) don't worry.

روزها گر رفت گو رو پاک نیست

You remain! -- O You, whom no one resembles in Purity!

تو بمان ای آنک چون تو پاک نیست

Everyone becomes satiated by water, except the fish. (And)

هر که جز ماهی ز آبش سیر شد

everyone who is without daily food [finds that] his days become Long.

هر که بی روزیست روزش دیر شد

None (who is) "raw" can understand the state of the "ripe"

در نیابد حال پخته هیچ خام

Therefore, (this) speech must be shortened. So, farewell!¹

پس سخن کوتاه باید والسلام

Just in eighteen lines, Rumi delivers the essence of mystical thought by addressing subjects like exile, separation from the beloved, pain, suffering, body, soul, love, union. The

¹<http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/n-I-0004.html> as accessed on 16.06.2020

reed (flute here) sings its doleful song, in a *sama*, or a mystical concert of the dervishes. Only a few who have ascended to the realm of spiritual consciousness can understand the secret in its tune. The bodily ear or the eye can't fathom the depth of his sorrow, just as the soul, even though entwined within the body, remains invisible to the naked eye.¹ He describes the painful cry of the reed like a piece of iron in fire that possesses all the attributes of fire and consumes everything that comes its way. Sugarcane pipes, similarly combustible burn entirely in fire. Rumi says it is not the wind that makes the flute sing but the fire of separation and love for the beloved. It is love that makes it sing, and the ferment of that love which remains in wine. Only the intoxicated and the one lost in this wine can truly understand and sense the world and its sorrow, just like the ear (of the mystic) can alone fathom the secrets of the tongue. Unless one becomes like the fish that never gets sated with water, the state of being 'ripe' cannot be reached. And here, Rumi bids farewell, saying none of his words would make sense unless the readers have themselves arrived at maturity where, like the nightingale (to the rose), the moth(to the flame) or the fish(to water) he is ready to give himself up and burn in the fire of the beloved.

The pen would smoothly write the things it knew

چون قلم اندر نوشتن می‌شناخت

But when it came to love it split in two

چون به عشق آمد قلم بر خود شکافت

A donkey stuck in mud is logic's fate-

عقل در شرحش چو خر در گل بخت

¹ According to Sufism and the Quran the body is compared to clay while the soul has been compared to God's breath. This idea is predominant among Bhakti poets. Kabir writes : *Mat kar maya ko ahankar, mat kar kaya ko abhiman kaya gar se kachi.*

Pray do not take pride in your accomplishments
This body, fragile as clay, will return to dust.
(trans. Rajula Shah)

*Love's nature only love can demonstrate*¹

شرح عشق و عاشقی هم عشق گفت

In Sufi literature, the narrative is not necessarily guided by logic and reasoning but experiences from daily life. The earliest Sufis were against narrativising, often only delivering their teachings through oral stories which were transferred from *pirs* to disciples through *shaths*². The stories were nonlinear and associative where details were given importance over the narrative as a whole. Sufis were negligent of structure, organisation and assemblage of narratives. They were against philosophising and putting to writing and organising their system of thoughts. Hence their literature is scattered, and parabolic in form. Rumi refused organisation, hence *Masnavi* remains mostly improvised in its form and ends rather abruptly.

Incompleteness of the *Masnavi*

The last frame narrative in the sixth volume of *The Masnavi* includes 10 unrelated parables within it. It is named *The Castle of Conscious Stealing* or *The Castle of Images*.³ The story talks about a generous king who gave three of his sons a lavish sum to travel around the world, but he forbade them from putting foot in the Castle of Images. The sons travelled the world over, but curiosity about the castle made them restless. Soon they found themselves in it, scanning the myriad portraits and statues in its hall. A particular portrait of a beautiful lady enchanted them. At once they fell in love with the lady and wished to ask her hand for marriage. Two of the three brothers travelled to meet the king of China to ask

¹ Jawed Mojaddedi, Jalal ad-Din Mohhammad Rumi, *The Masnavi*, Book 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

² *Shaths* are paradoxical, blasphemous utterances by Sufi mystics often denying logic. The most famous *shath* belongs to Mansour Al-hallaj who said “*I am truth.*”

³ *Hooshroba ya Zaat o-Ssovar* (Arabic) / قلعه هوش ربا یا ذات الصو

his daughter's hand in marriage. They did their best to please him by showing their loyalty and made many efforts to win his attention. In the process, one of the brothers died in war and the other got consumed by ill health. The story abruptly ends with just one line stating that the third brother who made no efforts won everything.

"The third was the laziest of the three

و آن سوم کاهل ترین هر سه بود

[but] obtained both form and the meaning." (everything he wanted)¹

صورت و معنی به کلی او ربود

The final volume ends with this line, with no epilogue, unlike the other five. The Masnavi edited and translated by Reynold Nicholson in 1929 in Lydon ends abruptly too, but another version published in Iran has an additional part inserted later by Maulana's son who had asked his father the reason for the abrupt ending of the book.

Rumi had replied,

"My ability to speak has slept like a camel

گفت نطقم چون شتر زین پس بخت

Won't speak to anyone till judgment day

نیستش با هیچ کس تا حشر گفت

The story is unfinished but from inside

هست باقی شرح این لیکن درون

It has been closed and nothing flows anymore

بسته شد دیگر نمی آید برون

¹ Jalal ad-Din Mohhamad Rumi, The Masnavi of Jalal ad-Din Mohhamad Rumi trans. Reynolds Nicholson, vol 6, (Tehran: Dibaye Publishing House, 2014), 273

The rest [of the story] would be told without language

باقی این گفته آید بی زبان

In the heart of the one who has the light of the soul¹

در دل آنکس که دارد نور جان

Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) mystic poet, philosopher and renowned Sufi scholar took upon himself the task of organising the teachings of Sufism in a magnum opus entitled *The Meccan Illuminations (Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)*, originally published in 1240 and divided into 36 volumes and 560 chapters. Sufi philosophers believed that the classical concept of logic developed in ancient Greece, especially in Aristotle's logical treatises, seeking a universal method of reasoning, or logic- the organon or instrument- to understand and define reality - was not enough. Reality was vaster and beyond the realm of logic, even though reasoning was important in the journey toward self-discovery. In the words of Rumi from the *Masnavi*,

"You may ride on horse to reach the sea,

تا به دریا سیر اسب و زین بود

After that you will need a ship."²

بعد ازینت مرکب چوبین بود

The ship does not work on land and it is designed only for men of the sea. Conventional logic and rational reasoning can take one only so far in the Sufi journey toward self-discovery. Reason is necessary but limited like the horse which can only take the pilgrim

¹ Jaleddin Muhammad Balkhi Rumi. *Kulliyat Masnavi Ma'navi Mowlavi* ed. Badiozzaman Forouzanfar. (Tehran: Kanun Entesharat Elmi Publishing house, 1979), 1251

² Jalad ad-Din Mohhamad Rumi, *The Masnavi of Jalad ad-Din Mohhamad Rumi* trans. Reynolds Alleyne Nicholson, volume 6, (Tehran: Dibaye Publishing House, 2014), 260

to the brink of the sea.¹ The finest Persian Sufi texts written by Attar and Rumi told multiple stories which digressed from, and at the same time, supplemented one frame narrative. *Panchatantra*, *Jataka tales*² which have been widely translated from the old Sanskrit to Pahlavi Farsi, Arabic, and Modern Farsi, were known to be sources of robust references and inspiration for the Sufis, especially Rumi.³ All these texts were nonlinear in narrative structures, defying a synchronic movement, parabolic and replete with Quranic and local stories. The narrative of Attar's widely known work, *Mantiq ut tair*, Conference of Birds (1177 AD) revolves around a thousand birds undertaking a long, arduous and enlightening journey to Mount Alborz/Kaf to meet the grandest creature of the universe, Simorgh, to ask him to be their king. This frame narrative is sparse, breaking into innumerable parables which appear as stories of wisdom imparted by the *pir* (the hoopoe bird in this text) to the other birds to convince them to undertake the journey.

In *Mosibat Nameh*⁴ replacing the birds, a traveller (*Saleq*) undertakes the journey towards emancipation and inner development (*Solouk*) crossing 40 stops, each comprising elements like fire, water, wind, soil, plant, human, Mohammed, imagination, sense, soul, birds, firmament, Satan, Jesus, Noah, to finally reach paradise after passing through the final stop- the soul.

¹ Refer to page 163, 164 where the horse in Ghobadi's *Half Moon*, 2006 transports Mamo only till a certain distance, after which he must continue on foot.

² *Panchatantra* or *Five Treatises* is an ancient Indian collection of interrelated animal fables arranged within a frame story. Originally orally delivered, it has been written in Sanskrit prose and verse and is dated to roughly 200BCE-300CE

³ For example, in the first volume of Masnavi we have the story of the lion and prey (حکایت شیر و نخچیران - *Hekayat-e Shir va Nakhchiran*) where Rumi explains the dilemma of human will and determinism through a long conversation between the lion and other animals. "This is inspired by 'Kalile and Damene', the chapter of lion and buffalo."

Karim Zamani, *A Comprehensive Commentary of Mathnavie Ma'navi*, vol. one, (Tehran: Ettela'at Publishing House, 2017), 312

⁴ Faridoddin Attar-e Neyshaburi, *Musibat Nameh* ed. Mohammad Reza Shafe Kadkani. (Tehran: Sokhan Publications, 2020)

Influences

This associative style and structure in poetic prose gave rise to an emerging tradition in poetry and folk literature. *A Thousand and One Nights*, or *Arabian Nights*, structures folk tales into the frame narrative of the princess Shehrazadeh narrating 1001 stories to her husband, King Shahryar, set on a mission to kill all the virgins of the region after the infidelity of his wife. He marries all the virgins of his kingdom only to execute them the following morning. In an attempt to save her life, Shahrazadeh keeps the stories incomplete leaving the king curious to know the ending. Different stories branch out from the main story, often like parables and allegories covering varied topical themes. The poetic form of Masnavi structured by Rumi adhering to a meter of 10/11 syllables per line in rhyming couplets was inspired by the writings of his masters Attar and Sanai. Rumi, Hafez and many other Persian poets continued writing and developing this style and the poetic tradition of Attar.

Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980)

One of the significant voices in modern Persian poetry (and painting) along with Nima Yushij, Shamlou and Akhavan Sales, Sohrab Sepehri was noted for his lucid verses that were a reflection of his deepest personal feelings. A disciple of the Sufi tradition, he was well versed in Buddhism, Islamic mysticism and western traditions. His eight volumes of poetry, *Hasht Ketab*¹, borrowed from the mystical traditions of classical Sufi epic style of poetry but used the modernist Persian technique of *Sher e nou*, new verse, liberating couplets from the strict meter the traditional style adhered to. Classical Persian poetry strictly adhered to the mathematical precision between the number of short and long syllables in two

¹ Sohrab Sepehri, *Hasht Ketab*, (Tehran: Tahoori Publication House, 1990)

successive lines. For example, if the first line had ten syllables, the second line had to have the same number of syllables.

Nima Yushij (1897-1960) said to be the father of new Persian poetry revolutionised this meter suggesting that while the rhythm had to be kept intact, the meter need not be equal to the lines that successively followed in the poem. This new emerging style was called *Sher-e nou*, from which two distinct sub-schools emerged, *Sabke -e Nimai*, (school of Nima) and *Sher-e Sepid/Ashare Sepid*¹(school of Shamlou). The Book of Prosody by Sirous Shamisa explains this further, “Like traditional poems this new form is based on *aruz*²with the difference of the equality of the length of the lines. Therefore, the equality of the syllables is not obligatory.”³

Sepehri followed the school of Nima in his verses. In these lines from a longer poem from his collection of poetry published as *Eight Books*, we can see how the number of syllables and the lines have different lengths but the overall rhythm following the rules of traditional poetry never changes.

No one watches

کسی نیست،

Come, let us steal life

بیا زندگی را بزدیم، آن وقت

¹ The New Poem belonging to *The Nima School of Poetry* (شعر نوی نیمایی), is very similar to classic prosody (*Aruz*). The difference is that the lines could have different numbers of syllables but the order of long and short syllables come from classic *Aruz*. The Free Style has an unknown rhythm. A rhythm that is not justifiable by any means to the system of *Aruz*, or simply does not have a recognisable consistent rhythm. Shamlou is famously known for this style. This style is also called, *The Shamlu School of Poetry* (شعر شاملویی) or Prose-Poem (شعر منثور).

-paraphrased and translated by the author from Mahyar Abbas, *Prosody (Aruz) in Persian*, (Tehran: Ghatre Publishing House, 2014), 220

Shafiei Kadkani, *Music of Poem*, from the chapter ‘Prose Poem’ (Tehran: Agah Publishing house, 2009)

² *Aruz*, Arabic, means the science of prosody.

Sirous Shamisa, *An Introduction to prosody*, (Tehran: Mitra Publication, 2014), 23

³ Sirous Shamisa, *An Introduction to Prosody*, fourth edition, 2014, (Tehran: Mitra Publication, 2014), 25

And divide it between two gazes¹

میان دو دیدار قسمت کنیم.

Not only did Sepehri use the modernist form of the new meter, but he also re-interpreted themes like religion, love, fidelity, bringing them out of their conventional contexts in relation to the self. He concerned himself entirely with nature where nature became the/his universe, beloved, muse and the fountain of all inspiration. While his poem *By the Water's Footsteps* is written in the length and form of epic or the *Masnavi* style of Persian poetry, it comes out in the first person in the form of a lyric- epic)

I am a Moslem

من مسلمانم.

My Mecca is a rose

قبله ام یک گل سرخ.

My mosque is a spring, my prayer stone the light.

جانمازم چشمه، مهرم نور.

Fields make my prayer rug.

دشت سجاده من.

I make ablution with the heartbeat of the windows

من وضو با تپش پنجره ها می گیرم.

Moonlight flows through my prayers, the spectrum too.

¹ Sohrab Sepehri, *Hasht Ketab*, (Tehran: Tahoori Publication House, 1990), 395
trans. by Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani and Sreemoyee Singh
Faulon

Faulon Faulon Faulon

Faulon Faulon Faulon, Fa'al

(*Faulon* symbolises one short syllable attached to two long ones. And *Fa'al* symbolises two short syllables which only come at the end of a line.)

-Shamisa Sirous, *An Introduction to Prosody*, 36

در نمازم جریان دارد ماه، جریان دارد طیف.

My Kaaba lies by the water,

کعبه ام بر لب آب.

My Kaaba lies under the acacias.

کعبه ام زیر اقاقای هاست.

My Kaaba travels like the breeze, from one garden to the next, from one town to another.¹

کعبه ام مثل نسیم، می‌رود باغ به باغ، می‌رود شهر به شهر.

His poem *Address* depicts the Sufi notion of the onward journey/ the way, strewn in with parables and mysticism.

Kiarostami and Sepehri - Poetry and the Journey Narrative

Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home* (1987) is a dedication to the poet Sohrab Sepehri. The poeticism of the film cannot be separated from its narrative. It essentially runs through every scene of the film. The chiaroscuro images of Sepehri's valley of innocence constitute the very world of Kiarostami's protagonist Ahmad who decides to defy all organs of resistance in order to return a notebook to his friend. The twisting and uneven narrative (like the curved, narrow path demarcated by a poplar tree) evades a linear unfolding of events. By drawing our attention to a seemingly simple problem Kiarostami aims to take the viewer away from the reality of a child's journey to reveal the complex inner journey of a child on the threshold of innocence and puberty discovering the essence of friendship.

¹ Sohrab Sepehri, *Hasht Ketab*, (Teahran: Tahoori Publication House, 1990), 272

Address

نشانی

"Where is the friend's house?"

خانه دوست کجاست؟

Horseman asked by twilight and,

در فلق بود که پرسید سوار

The sky paused.

آسمان مکثی کرد

The passerby presented sands, the branch of light that he had in mouth

رهگذر شاخه نوری که به لب داشت

And pointed to a poplar tree and said:

به تاریکی شن ها بخشید و به انگشت نشان داد سپیداری و گفت

"Before reaching the tree,

نرسیده به درخت

There is a garden alley that is greener than God's sleep

کوچه باغی است که از خواب خدا سبزتر است

And in it, love is as blue as the feathers of honesty.

و در آن عشق به اندازه پرهای صداقت آبی است

Go to the end of the alley which stops at the back of adolescence.

میروی تا ته آن کوچه که از پشت بلوغ سر به در می آرد

Then turn to the flower of loneliness,

پس به سمت گل تنهایی می پیچی

Two steps short of reaching the flower,

دو قدم مانده به گل،

Stay by the fountain of eternal myth of earth

پای فواره جاوید اساطیر زمین می‌مانی

And you feel a transparent fear.

و تو را ترسی شفاف فرا می‌گیرد.

And in the fluid sincerity of the air, you will hear a scratch:

در صمیمیت سیال فضا، خش‌خشی می‌شنوی:

You will see a child

کودکی می‌بینی

Who has gone up the pine tree, to grab a bird from the nest of light

رفته از کاج بلندی بالا، جوجه بردارد از لانه نور

And you ask him

و از او می‌پرسی

Where the friend's house is¹

خانه دوست کجاست.

Every poem has a rhythm, so does a film- it is this rhythm in which the film finds its semblances with Sepehri's verse *The Address*. The structure of the film resonates with the structure of a lyric -the shots sway in a wind; discrete pieces of time join to give a rhythmic movement in time. The lyricism in the film also locates corners of narrative, where the focus of the audience is broadened, forced outside the context. Lyric is a style of formal/classical poetry which expresses personal emotions generally written in the first person. The term derives from a literary term in ancient Greek Literature, the *lyric*, which further comes from the word *lyre*², a musical string instrument. In Ancient Greece, recitations of lyric poetry were conventionally accompanied by the lyre playing in the background. The lyric in poetry

¹ http://www.perlit.sailorsite.net/Mahvash/sohrab_neshani.html accessed on 4.06.2020 at 11.05pm
Sohrab Sepehri, *Hasht Ketab* (Tehran: Tahoori Publication House, 1990), 358

² Ancient Greek classical stringed musical instrument. Generally, the lyre is a smaller form of the harp, originally made from a tortoise shell body with a varied number of strings.

may not rhyme conventionally but rather stresses on the rhythmic placement of words. (similar to the technique of *shere nou*)

The structure of the film *Where is the Friend's Home* resembles the structure of a lyric in cinema where a string of shots placed together accompanied by music creates a lyrical quality of poetry in cinema. When Ahmad finally breaks free from running the errands his mother subjects him to and the whims of his senile grandfather and runs uphill to return his friend's notebook, the strings of the rhubarb are strung as if to accompany the lyrical poetry that has translated into the language of cinema that quotes Sepehri's verses. The journey uphill attains a transcendental quality accompanied by the music of the string instrument resembling the classical lyric. The boy meets different people on his journey who often make him digress from his original quest, but like parables in the narrative technique of Sufi poetry that complement the frame narrative, it adds meaning to his journey. Ahmad meets a horse rider, an aged window maker and local folk on his way. He asks each of them where his friend's home is. The question is vague, and the answers are images and clues



Figure 42: Frame grabs from *Where is the Friend's House*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1987

mentioned in Sepehri's poetry. The window maker slows down the pace of the boy, but insists on showing him the way, often taking on the role of the *pir* in Sufism, an experienced mystic that shows his disciples 'the way'. Kiarostami often subverts this order of the *pir-shagerd*¹ relationship having the younger child take on the role of the teacher, like in this film and *The Wind Will Carry Us*.

The journey back is a journey too, the old man can revisit his youth only through this child. The adrenaline of the youth breaks the monochromatic life of the old window maker. They walk through a maze of beautifully designed reflections of windows as seen below. These shadows become symbols; the images become poetry. The 'loner lake' becomes an old man who makes windows, and the boy is 'in hope of a golden egg'.²

Borrowed from the verses of poetry, the narrative takes on the form of a parabolic journey breaking the syntagmatic storyline. The viewers who at the start patiently wait for all the digressions to meet the principal story, finally 'walk' on the journey themselves, often halting with the protagonist Ahmad as he hastily hands over the washed cloth that has fallen off a balcony, or pauses to take a look at the beauty of the doors the window maker painstakingly carves.

Foot replaces the Car: Pilgrimage and Journey of Bodies

This brings us to a point where 'the car' as the vehicle in road movies gets replaced with 'the foot' of the traveller who undertakes the journey, and the act of walking itself becomes the pilgrimage leading to self-discovery. The body replaces the vehicle of transportation and walking becomes the journey itself. The foot not only replaces the car, the car becomes the body journeying toward the ocean of life.

¹ *Pir -Mentor- shagerd*-Apprentice

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/78314/%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B1>

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/190047/%D8%B4%D8%A7%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%AF>

² Sohrab Sepehri, 'The Address', *Hasht Ketab*, 267-299

“Bidding adieu to my nomad and pilgrim

I find myself walking to the sea

Where all stories meet and mingle like salt in water”¹



Figure 43: Screen shot from *At Home Walking*, Rajula Shah, 2020

Rajula Shah in her meditative film on the pilgrimage undertaken by the varkaris in Maharashtra talks about the act of walking itself which forms the basis of a pilgrimage. Millions of pilgrims walk together miles across the Deccan plateau carrying on a thousand-year tradition to be united with their god, atoning for their sins and seeking blessings. They sleep in makeshift tents and carry their belongings with them. The filmmaker and her companion travel with them. Journeys begin journeys of observance, self-introspection, journeys of getting lost in the wind and the sea, journeys of archiving and collecting stories, all of which in the end dissolve like salt in water. Shah's journey ends at the sea just as Attar's does. Like salt that dissolves in the sea, the self-rids itself of all worldly ties (*maya*) and dissolves in the ebbing and flowing waves, leaving traces of its flow only on the sand. Only the traces of the journey remain, everything else passes.

¹ “Apne charware aur gharbari se vida lekar,
mein swawam ko sagar kinare ki or chalta hua par pati hun
jahan sari kathaye jal mein nun ki tarha ghul mil jati hain...”
Rajula Shah, *At Home Walking*, 2020

The film narrative corresponds to the pilgrim's progress as s/he walks from feeling tied and burdened to feeling freer and lighter. Sometimes knowing that the best things in life like rain, wind, stars & sunlight yet come for free is liberating; remembering that my two feet can often carry me farther than I can imagine, is a discovery.¹

Conference of Birds: Wing Replaces the Foot

This brings us to the role and the importance of the body as the vessel in the pilgrimage or the Sufi Journey. As seen earlier, this notion is depicted directly in Shah's and Kiarostami's film where the foot of the traveller replaces the car in the pilgrimage toward the truth. Similarly, in Attar's *Conference of Birds*, the wings of the birds take them toward Simorgh- the king of all birds. In both cases, the foot of the traveller, or the wing of the bird propels the journeys. The pilgrimage then is characterized by the journey of bodies. The narrative of *Conference of Birds/ Mantiq ut tair* in the original Farsi revolves around a thousand birds undertaking a long, arduous and enlightening journey to Mount Alborz to meet the grandest creature of the universe, Simorgh, to ask him to be their king. Guided by their *pir*, the hoopoe, they are warned that the road ahead would be turbulent and could destroy them.

As the journey begins, the birds cross the seven valleys of *Quest, Love and understanding, Independence and detachment, Unity, Astonishment and bewilderment, and Poverty and nothingness* to reach Simorgh.² Out of thousands, only thirty reach Simorgh at the end of their journey only to realise that *Si* (thirty)- *morg* (birds) is nothing but a mirror reflecting their own images. The moment the birds look at themselves, they see Simorgh in

¹ Rajula Shah, email conversations with the researcher. Dated 8. 06.2020 at 22.49pm.

² Faridoddin Attar-e Neyshaburi, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Sholeh Wolpé. (New York :W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), Introduction (pages not defined)
<https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=1C1542C8-E074-46DB-A3E4-54211012194D>

themselves and in Simorgh they see their own image. Simorgh literally means *Si-morg*, meaning thirty birds.

“ If Simorgh unveils its face to you, you will find
that all the birds, be they thirty or forty or more,
are but the shadows cast by that unveiling.

What shadow is ever separated from its maker?

Do you see? The shadow and its maker are one and the same,
so, get over surfaces and delve into mysteries.”¹

The seven arduous valleys would lead the traveller to the ocean of life which also signifies the great unknown, God or the beloved. On reaching the waters, he must surrender entirely to it. “A pure object dropped in the ocean will lose its specific existence and participate in the ocean and its movement. In ceasing to exist separately it retains its beauty. It exists and non exists...”²

Death as the Final Journey of Return

As discussed earlier, the journeys of protagonists in Iranian Cinema often end up in dugout graves, as seen in *Taste of Cherry* and *Three Faces*. While Badi wishes to go against Sharia norms and commit suicide, the elderly lady wishes to lay down in a grave dug out for herself in a cemetery till death takes her. In the film *Bab' Azeez- The Prince that Contemplated his Soul* directed by Nacer Khemir, (2005), a blind dervish and his granddaughter Ishtar undertake a journey through the desert to attend a gathering of Sufis. The nonlinear and complex narrative of the film that resembles the structure of Sufi epic

¹ Faridoddin Attar-e Neyshaburi, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Sholeh Wolpé. (New York :W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), Introduction (pages not defined)
<https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=1C1542C8-E074-46DB-A3E4-54211012194D>

² Farid-ud Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds, A Sufi Fable, Mantiq-Ut-Tair*, trans. C.S, Nott The Clear Light Series, (California: Shambala Berkeley, 1971),124,

poetry (*Masnavi*), stringing parabolic tales from Islamic mysticism with the onward journey of the dervish, also ends in a grave sequence. The journey, it is revealed, is not then to reach the carnival of the dervishes alone, but to reach the ultimate truth, or death. Amid thousands of dug out graves in which dervishes lie meditating to summon their deaths, the old *pir* reaches his own. He bids adieu to his granddaughter and sits by his grave waiting for death to ‘wed’ him. This further signifies reaching death, or the ultimate truth is in fact marriage with God or the beloved, which may either end in the sea (like Attar) or in wait for death.

“Bab’ Azeez, be careful of the pits under your feet

-These are not pits. They are graves.

But they are empty

-They are dug out for those waiting for their hour to come.

For me the time has come to find

What I had lost.”¹

Here *loss* refers to the primordial loss and separation or exile of the reed from the reed bed mentioned by Rumi in the opening lines of the *Masnavi*. Loss in Sufism is always referred to as a severance from the original home (paradise) through banishment. And only with death comes a marriage (reunion) with the beloved and a return to the original home.



Figure 44: The *pir* summons his death by his dug-out grave as Hassan waits up ahead in *Azeez-The Prince that Contemplated his Soul*, Nacer Khemir, 2005.

¹ Film, *Bab’ Azeez-The Prince that Contemplated his Soul*, Nacer Khemir, 2005.

Bab Aziz summons a local boy, Hassan, to witness his death and put soil over his body. When Hassan asks him why the dervish chose him for the task, despite his own fear of death, he gives an analogy of an unborn child in the darkness of its mother's womb that disbelieves the marvels of the world until he is born and witnesses them. Similarly, until the beauty of death is witnessed it shall only be perceived as fear.

“Hassan, don’t be sorrowful on my wedding night.

-Wedding night?¹

Yes, my wedding with eternity. The time has come now. “²

Journeys of Identity in the Cinema of Bahman Ghobadi

Having introduced the major Sufi beliefs and the roots of the journey narrative in the culture of Iran, let us now return to the pre-exile journey cinema of Ghobadi and see how all the elements of the journey narrative of exile culminates to journeys of identity centring around the border regions of Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Motivation for the Journey

In *Half Moon*, (2006), the famous Kurdish singer Mamo, having reached the penultimate moment of his life is driven by an inexplicable determination to journey with his many sons to Iraqi Kurdistan where he has made all arrangements and organised a concert. He dreams of journeying to the comparatively free-er land across the border where Kurds now have more rights. He wishes to be able to sing freely one last time. He arranges a minibus, procures permits to travel with all their musical instruments, passing many

¹ The 17th of December is called The Night of *Arus* or *Ors*. *Arus* is a Farsi word which means bride. This word was later included in the Arabic dictionary. In Arabic, it meant groom. (In Arabic a bride is called *Areesa*). Hence the night of Rumi’s death is called ‘The Wedding Night’ in Persian and Arabic, also signifying a night when two lovers finally meet each other.

² Film, *Bab’ Azeez-The Prince that Contemplated his Soul*, Nacer Khemir, 2005, Iran-Tunisia

checkpoints and government agents on the way. A patriarch, and an influential man in Iranian Kurdistan, Mamo has bribed many agents and procured permits to set on this journey, but he knows that there is nothing he can do that will get him permission for what he secretly wishes to take with him.

On the way, Mamo stops by a village where 1334 women singers have been exiled by the government. He wishes to meet his old acquaintance Hesho and take her along on the journey to sing at the concert. They stop by a village carved out amid rocky mountains where hundreds of houses lay etched on hills. A song is heard.

“What is this place?” one of his sons ask.

“- A place where 1334 women singers have been exiled

-Who is singing?

It is the voice of 1334 women. Listen.

It feels like the voice of a single woman. Hesho is here as well.”¹

As Mamo reaches the village alone, he is greeted by all the women standing on their roofs with *dafs*² in their hands. As Mamo takes Hasho (played by Hediye Tehrani) along with him, the village reverberates with the sound of women playing their *dafs* in unison.



Figure 45: Exiled women of the village playing *dafs* in Ghobadi's film *Half Moon*, 2006

¹ Bahman Ghobadi, *Half Moon*. 2006

² Also known as *dafli*. A Kurdish percussive instrument having a large, round frame similar to that of a drum with a goat skin and rings of one or more rows of metal tied to its circumference to create a jingling effect. It is used in classical and popular as well as religious music.

It is understood that Hasho, and Namo have a history of making music and performing together before the Islamic Republic banned women from singing publicly. It is Mamo's last wish, in the penultimate moment of his life, to be able to perform freely, like old times, with Hasho and his team, in front of an audience that would appreciate music, in a land devoid of watchmen and government agents. A patriarch in all other aspects of life, he possesses a gun and has total control over his sons and holds formidable respect in his village. In reality Mamo is vulnerable, mesmerized and dependent on the voice of a woman who can be his only deliverer.

"She has a celestial voice

We are incomplete without her"¹

We know Mamo and his sons must pay a price for attempting to smuggle in not just a woman but also a singer in the bus. In a land where music is considered *haram* and all its women musicians are exiled and banished to a village for the crime of singing; organising a concert with a female singer is a punishable offence and Mamo must pay with dear life.

Death in the Cinema of Ghobadi



Figure 46: Frame grab from *Half Moon*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2006

As discussed in the earlier chapter, the shadow of death looms large in Ghobadi's films. In Ghobadi's *Half Moon*, Mamo witnesses people carrying coffins throughout his

¹ Bahman Ghobadi, *Half Moon*, 2006

journey. He lays in dugout graves in graveyards and often witnesses a woman dragging a coffin along the ground. He also sees local men in the border between Iran and Iraq carry coffins amid bombarding, for people about to die. Toward the end, in a fatal sequence, we see Pappoola (enacted by actress Golshifteh Farahani) drag a coffin through the snow-laden terrain of Kurdistan to hide Mamo and cross over the border with him in it. She brings a horse to carry him to the border while the rest of the sons are transported in other different ways. The horse gets stuck in the snow. It collapses. She kisses it goodbye and moves ahead with Mamo. She looks back, and through her unsteady point of view, we take a look at the collapsed horse stuck in the snow. This signifies deeper gloom and Mamo's impending death. A coffin lies in the snow. Unable to bear the cold Mamo crawls into the coffin. We see a shot of Pappoola dragging the coffin through the snow. A dying Mamo takes a look up at the moon, we see an image of Hesho stuck in a similar position – lying in the bunker of the bus, before being found by the sniffer dogs of the police as seen previously in the film. A glance of the moon is seen before the sky is taken away at the drop of the lid of the coffin. When Pappoola and Mamo's son reach him, he is already dead, but safely protecting within his coat, the notes of music for the concert. Like the car and the rooftop in his earlier films, here the coffin becomes the interim space of refuge- and ultimate liberation.¹ Everything is destroyed, Mamo is dead, their musical instruments are broken, the minibus is stolen, Hesho is sent back to the village, but the notes of music survive.



Figure 47: Notes of music emerge from Mamo's coat in *Half Moon*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2007

¹ Refer to chap 3, page : 124

Mamo fears death, but at the same time death entices him. He seeks refuge in the coffin, and in the end, the coffin protects him not only from the bitter snow, but also transports him, albeit after death, to the concert. The next shot shows a bare-bodied, corpse of Mamo in the darkness of his coffin, smiling. He has finally reached the concert. The film ends here.

This further brings to attention the violent history of the culturally rich region of Kurdistan itself divided into four halves - a culturally homogeneous community of people scattered into four countries, severed by borders.

Kurdistan and Journey of Identity in Ghobadi's Cinema

If you ask me to define Kurd/ Kurdistan I would say it is the 'way' or the road. Kurd is a journey, it is a piece of luggage, Kurd is the lack of a place, it is insecurity. Most Kurds cannot find a place to live in for the next 10/20 years, they can't plan their futures - they have always been affected by external or internal wars and because Kurds in all four countries are living by the border. Now that there is a war between Turkey and Syria, Kurds from both sides are under pressure. When there was a war between Iran and Iraq it was the same. We are always on the front and the bearers of maximum damage. All that I remember is that some Kurds escaped from Iraq to us or we escaped to Iraq or Kurds from Turkey escaped to Syria or some escaped from Turkey to us...the motif of the journey comes from this..."¹

The motif of journeying continues.

¹ Ghobadi in a written interview with the researcher conducted via email on 27 April 2020

As seen earlier the car is replaced by the foot of the traveller (body) but here the traveller's body itself loses significance and is reduced to being a load or a piece of luggage. In war-torn Kurdistan depicted in the pre-exile cinema of Ghobadi, bodies no longer remain the active agent of journeying but must be passively transported as 'load' from one place to another by mules. Living itself becomes a passive journey, where, deprived of permanent homes, bodies like those of turtles must carry mobile houses on their backs.¹ In his first feature film, *A Time for Drunken Horses*, 2000, filmed in his native village in Kurdistan, Ghobadi depicts the life of the children from a family rendered orphans after their father is blown off in a mine. Ayoub, the son, only a teenager must take charge of his younger sister and his older handicapped brother. He needs to save money for his brother's operation while trying his best not to get his sister married off in a transaction. He must do the tedious and the only job that men in his village can do for a daily living- transport smuggled goods across the Iran border via mules for petty cash. Here horses are intoxicated with generous portions of whiskey to numb them from the bitter cold and provide necessary succour for them to go onward. Ayub fails to protect his sister who is forcefully married off in the promise of money for the treatment for the paralysed brother, but is duped and is only left with a mule as dowry. His sister is transported in a mule across the borders dressed as a bride, while the handicapped brother is dumped in a bag on another mule- both as unwanted pieces of load. In a desperate attempt to save his brother in the end, Ayub uses the mule to transport him across the border for treatment, facing many hurdles on the way.

I remember from childhood they were bringing brides from Iraq-Iran on horses. They were bringing sick people...a sick, pregnant woman to the hospital on a horse, or a

¹ Refer to the section on animal imagery in Chapter 3, pages 106-112

mule for 6 hours... I have seen horses at different points of my life. People use it for sending oil (for making heat), transporting dead bodies or pregnant women...¹

While the young girl becomes the helpless face of society who becomes nothing more than a piece of furniture to be transacted for a mule, the handicapped brother represents the terrifying, distorted, hapless face of the reality of Kurdistan- a community crippled, paralysed; a body disjointed and fragmented, with its limbs scattered in different regions across borders.

Journeys here then become journeys of survival and identity. Journeys to trace lost family members severed by borders and war, journeys seeking union with family or the hope of a complete home, a permanent address. Journeying here represents a community exiled within its own country, seeking desperate union with lost family members.

How then shall we begin to define the journey films of Ghobadi?

I was born in Baneh, Iran's closest border town to Iraq. It was the most dangerous area. It had the highest Iranian casualties both in internal conflicts as well as during the war with Iraq. The village where I then took refuge for three months was where I later shot *A Time for Drunken Horses*. I learned the meaning of "border" from childhood. I'm familiar with the smell of "border." There are 40 million Kurds dispersed through four or five countries, and there are even some in Russia and Europe, and they all have borders between them. Many of my family members live in Iraqi Kurdistan, and I have to wait months or a year before I'm allowed to go and visit them.²

¹ Interview via email exchange with Bahman Ghobadi conducted on 27 April 2020, (find full quote in page: 107)

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/movies/16scar.html> accessed on 17.05.2020

Border Disputes and a Brief History of Kurdistan (Iran -Iraq)

The hostility between the Iranian region of Kurdistan and that of Iraq dates back to the two states battling border disputes since the Ottoman-Persian wars of the 16th - 17th century. The first signs of truce were seen in 1937, with the signing of the treaty of Saadabad. The treaty recognised the Iran–Iraq border to be along the low-water mark on the *Shatt al-Arab's* (the Arab Shore) eastern side, except at Abadan and Khorramshahr, where the frontier ran along the deepest part of the river valley. The use of this important channel for the oil exports of both the states was aggravated by the Ba'ath Party coming to power by the coup of 1968, and the ascension of Saddam Hussain as the Prime Minister of Iraq in 1979 and his severed relations with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (and his growing military base funded by the support of America) who hindered his desires for invading oil-rich territories of Iran. This gave Iraq control of most of the waterway and required Iran to pay tolls whenever its ships used it. With the overthrow of the Hashemites in Iraq and the succession of the Arab Socialist Baathist party that disregarded all agreements made before and eyed the oil-rich Arab speaking territory of Khuzestan Province, problems intensified in the region. Saddam Hussain made efforts to invade Iran but failed as Iran had one of the strongest military bases in the world then. Under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iran abrogated the terms of the treaty in 1969 and stopped paying tolls to Iraq when the ships used the waterway. Meanwhile, the Kurds of Iraq were unhappy with the new Arab Nationalist party in power that failed to recognise them as Muslims. They sided with the Shah of Iran and made a coup against Saddam Hussain. He found out about the coup a day before and immediately executed hundreds of Kurds associated with the conspiracy. In his rule alone, Saddam Hussain unleashed large scale genocides on the Kurds and killed tens of thousands of them from 1968 to the two Gulf wars, intending to erase the entire Kurdish population. Soon the countries entered into a war that lasted eight bloody years and the

region witnessed the worst genocides, primarily the Al Anfal campaign, the Halabja genocide and the mass killings of the Feyli Kurds. To destroy Kurdish villages as a part of the Iraqi Arabization campaign Saddam Hussain had ordered the *Al Anfal* Campaign, code-named Sura8 against the Kurds of northern Iraq during the final stage of the Iran- Iraq war between 1986-1989. The campaign was headed by Ali Hassan Al Majid, Hussain's cousin, who initiated a series of violent aerial bombings, systematic destruction of settlements, mass deportations and firing squads, but his notorious use of chemical warfare earned him the nickname Chemical Ali. Chemical Ali's toxic campaign led to mass murder, deforming and maiming the Kurdish population who not only lost hands and limbs but also their voice. They were scathed internally. The few surviving the chemical campaign died on the way trying to escape the country. They were blown open by bombs and landmines dropped into streets from the skies via helicopter.

In the film *Marooned in Iraq*, (2002) Ghobadi refers to this history of violence meted out toward the Kurds in Iraq and Iran during Saddam Hussain's governance from 1979-2003 after which he was executed. The famous Mirza, a Kurdish musician, journeys with his sons to the Iraqi side of Kurdistan when he receives news that his ex-wife Hanareh is in trouble. They journey along the war-torn borders of a ravaged Iraqi Kurdistan where the sound of airplanes and bombs cutting open the skies have replaced sounds of nature and human life. Here petty theft is the only profession that thrives. The bazaar of stolen goods is where all the characters of the film come together: doctors who in the beginning boast of making a profit after Saddam Hussain bombed Iraq, must resort to selling stolen goods, or singing in weddings to make a living. In a bizarre, part-comic, part-desperate sequence, the father and the sons are robbed of their only possessions by thieves who have also robbed two policemen and now continue stealing wearing police uniforms. Like in all journeys, the travellers lose all their belongings - the bike, or the vessel transporting them, forcing them henceforth to

journey by foot. Barat's gold tooth is plucked out while Mirza loses all the musical instruments.



Figure 48: A frame grab from *Marooned in Iraq*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2002

No law or order prevails in Kurdistan. There is only war. As bombs pelt down the skies instead of rain, real policemen are seen handcuffed and running around, while the doctor sells AIDS vaccines for donkeys (donkeys and mules are prized possessions in Kurdistan, the only hope for livelihood). The motivation for the journey, in this case, the letter written by Hannareh for Mirza is never found, as a senile lady loses it in the layers of her hijab. She instead chides Mirza for disbanding and depriving his people of the joy of music.

“Why did you disband and take from us the joy of music?

Now there is no one to sing for the people.”¹

The father and son trio play their *dafs* and *kamanchehs* in war-torn Kurdistan as they move onward from one village to another. The joyous strains of Kurdish local music reverberate the sadness in the hearts of the grieving and ailing people in the refugee camps. In fact, it is the tradition of song and dance that keeps the people alive and makes life go on on this battlefield. The irony of the film lies herein; in a place raided by agents of the state,

¹ Bahman Ghobadi, *Marooned in Iraq*, 2002

people being penalised and robbed of their culture and community and tradition of music and dance for more than half a century for their ethnic identity of being Kurds, the wish of a musician to freely make music may come only with death. Yet Ghobadi says,

Music was the only thing that saved us Kurds. We even won over hunger - even when we did not have food, with music we could move ourselves. We always had happy, festive music despite the contrast in the rhythm of our lives. Our way of life is sad, but Kurds intelligently came up with festive music and with this, they could stay alive. They could smile to harshness, and garner a hopeful future for themselves.¹

In Ghobadi's films set in Kurdistan, musicians, as characters playing primary roles culminates into the making of *No One, Knows About Persian Cats*, (2009), an underground film centring around city-bred musicians who challenge the cultural restrictions imposed on artists by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Stories from the culturally rich Kurdistan naturally have male protagonists who are musicians like Mirza or Mamo and their sons, while Hesho represents the silenced voice of a woman exiled to a distant village with other women singers. While men are musicians representing the culture of music and dance in Kurdistan, women are rendered mute.

In a sequence from the film *Marooned in Iraq*, Ghobadi does a twin trick to throw light into the issue of music (deeply engraved in the patriarchal society of Kurdistan) while also adhering to laws of censorship. When Barat, one of Mirza's sons, accidentally hears the voice of a woman singing, he falls in love with it and proposes marriage to her. It is interesting to note that the woman singing is never shown frontally. While she sings, her

¹ Email exchange and Interview of Bahman Ghobadi with the author, 27 April 2020

face is never revealed. She is strategically only shown in shadows and silhouettes on the rooftop. This is a classic example of self-censorship that Ghobadi resorts to in many of his earlier films to prevent his films from being censored. The Ministry of Culture and Guidance in Tehran does not permit the screening of films with shots of women singing. This was a part of the modesty code that had to be followed after the formation of the Islamic Republic. The woman with the beautiful voice, who is aware of Barat's fame and his family lineage as musicians, tells him that she would accept his proposal if he allowed her to sing after marriage.

She walks away after his reply.

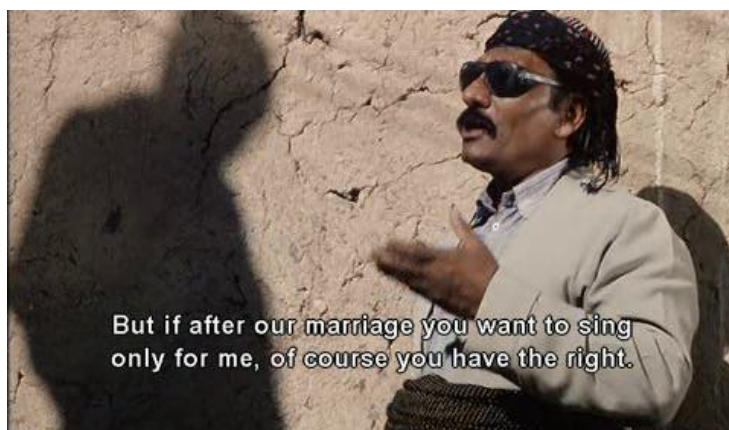


Figure 49: Screen grabs from *Marooned in Iraq*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2002

Ghobadi continues self-censoring himself in his next film, *Half Moon*, this time primarily delving into the theme of music. Despite using various tropes to evade censorship, the film remains the first of his films to suffer a ban.

Nobody ever permitted me to make a film in Kurdish. Slowly, and with many smiles, I was able to make the first Kurdish-language movie in the history of world cinema. But even though I'd made three "normal" films, with the fourth one, "Half Moon," right before filming, they called me and told me not to make it in Kurdish and to keep it to only 20 per cent of the dialogue. "I am a Kurd," I said, "I am an Iranian Kurd, and I have rights in this land. Kurdistan is "part" of Iran, and they have the right to have their own language. So, I made "Half Moon," but it's banned until now, and, interestingly, they are not giving me a permit to work on my next film.¹

When Mirza (in *Marooned in Iraq*) reaches the village of Raman he finds out that all the men have been killed by Saddam, and the women have been sent to camps. Hanareh is suspected to be there. In the end, when Mirza reaches the refugee camp, he learns that Hanareh has been a victim of the chemical campaign of Saddam Hussain that killed her husband Seyed (a musician who performed with Mirza in his band) and cost her the ability to speak.



Figure 50: A frame grab from Bahman Ghobadi's *Marooned in Iraq*, 2002

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/movies/16scar.html> accessed on 18.07.2020

He is told that Hanareh has left the village and is instead taken to meet Seyed's sister Mastooreh. Mastooreh is in reality Hanareh who veils herself and screeches painfully to talk. She does not wish Mirza to see her rendered an invalid. She tells him that it was Seyed's last wish to be buried by him, and that, after the death of all her sons, only a daughter survives Hanareh. As the sound of a bomb numbs the village it is revealed that the little girl is now in this fragile camp.

Broken, Mirza kisses the dead body of Seyed and places his *daf* over him. He covers his body with earth. The village mourns. Hanareh wishes Mirza to take her daughter to a safer land. The women of the camp hand over a little girl named Sanooreh to Mirza, who must carry her back to Iranian Kurdistan with him. As Hanareh looks on from a distance, the film ends with Mirza carrying her daughter over his shoulders towards the border. On reaching the barbed wires that define boundaries, creating a divided homeland of a community of the same people, united by their language and their songs; Mirza looks back. He crosses over with the girl and is bound homeward.

The mysterious Pappoola in *Half Moon* may be none but Sanooreh who grows up around the borders and helps transport Mamo to the other side.



Figure 51: Mamo crosses the border with Sanooreh in Bahman Ghobadi's *Marooned in Iraq*, 2002

The Sura 8 campaign culminated into the Halabja genocide - also named the Bloody Friday Massacre - in 1988 in the Kurdish city of Halabja in Iraq. The genocide that targeted mostly civilians in that region was one of the worst chemical massacres against humanity. Mustard gas and other nerve agents were brought in from Germany and were used to cripple any form of resistance from the Kurdish community, mostly from the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) militias joining forces with support from Iran. A five-hour attack crippled the residential town of Halabja, with chemical bombs dropping from the skies. Eyewitnesses narrate the catastrophic events of the day with memories of clouds of gases paralysing the city. Eyewitnesses recounted how clouds of white turned black and then yellow with 'smoke billowing upward and rising like a column about 150 feet (50 m) in the air.'¹

"It was a beautiful spring day. As the clock approached 11:00 in the morning, I felt a strange sensation; my heart convulsed as if it were telling me that we were on the verge of a major calamity. Within minutes, artillery rounds began to explode in Halabja and planes began dropping bombs on the town. The bombing was concentrated on the northern neighbourhoods, so we ran and hid in our basement [...] When the bombing stopped [...] a man came running into our house, shouting, 'Gas! Gas!' We hurried into our car and closed its windows. I think the car was rolling over the bodies of innocent people. I saw people lying on the ground, vomiting a green-coloured liquid, while others became hysterical and began laughing loudly before falling motionless onto the ground.

The chemical attack annihilated thousands in a few hours.

¹ "BBC ON THIS DAY | 16 | 1988: Thousands die in Halabja gas attack".
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/16/newsid_4304000/4304853.stm

Later, I smelled an aroma that reminded me of apples and I lost consciousness [...] When I awoke, there were hundreds of bodies scattered around me... It is a situation that cannot be described -- birds began falling from their nests; then other animals, then humans. It was total annihilation. Whoever was able to walk out of the town, left on foot. Whoever had a car, left by car. But whoever had too many children to carry on their shoulders, they stayed in the town and succumbed to the gas”.¹

Ghobadi's films recount this bloody massacre through personal accounts of the war.

Turtles can Fly (2004) also set in ravaged, war afflicted Iraqi Kurdistan is a grim tale of a bunch of children orphaned by war, robbed of their childhood, and turned into adults overnight, as their desire to cross the border and journey to a better place never gets realised. The rape of the child protagonist, Agrin at the hands of government agents during the chemical bombing at Halabja leaves her souvenirs- a bastard child, and a brother sans arms. Forcibly turned into a mother she finds herself unwillingly nursing a partially demented child- a deformed face and victim of a war economy, a constant reminder of her torture, the violent murder of her parents, and the disabling injury of her brother. While she tries in vain

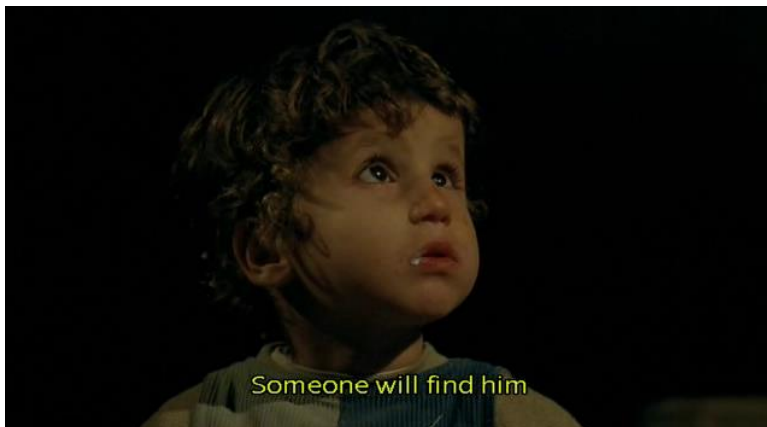


Figure 52: Frame grab from the film *Turtles Can Fly*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2004

¹ <https://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2008/3/independentstate2078.htm>

to persuade her brother to discard the unwanted baby and set off in the hope of a better life to the other side of the border; the brother, torn between moral duty, and human affections for the baby cannot leave. The film is a scathingly grim story of failed journeys, broken dreams and the impossibility which maims all children, scaring them mentally and physically for life.

Khak Satellite, the smart adolescent leader of all the children of the village is in awe of America. He speaks broken English, keeps track of the news of the war, and is in charge of installing satellite connections illegally in the village. While watching the news with the elderly religious men of the village he says, “*Here is Mr Bush, the world is in his hands...*”¹ The children of the village act on his command- he is a hardcore optimist and wishes to prepare the kids for combat for a war he believes will be declared soon. In this dystopian war economy torn between Iran and Iraq fighting each other, it is the children who take charge of the society. Orphaned, they must make ends meet, by working in dangerous situations by collecting mines, or tanks and selling them for a price. Khak Satellite acts as a middleman, getting other children jobs but also encourages them to sell their mines in exchange for guns and bullets, in preparation for war. “Look at what Saddam has done to us, we have no water, no electricity and no schools. They have deprived us of the sky. They don’t let our TVs work so we don’t hear the news about when the war starts.”²

Khak Satellite installs satellite dishes and fixes antennas in the village. While persuading an old village man to install a satellite in his village, the plight of the displaced people of Kurdistan into borders comes up. The older man in conversation with Khak Satellite says,

“We are just 30 families here.

-What about the houses on that side?

¹ Bahman Ghobadi, *Turtles Can Fly*, 2004

² Bahman Ghobadi, *Turtles Can Fly*, 2004

Now they are in Turkey

They have separated us. They won't let them pay for the satellite.

Your wife was from that side...now you are strangers?

They have separated us..."



Figure 53: Stills from a scene in *Turtles can Fly*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2004

Much like antennas of disconnected television networks, which does not bring news to the border regions, families have been severed and thrown into unreachable territories. Like the missing network, they are out of each other's reach. But unlike that (network) which can be illegally fixed by a teenager, there is no 'fix' for children who have been rendered orphans from the trauma of displacement and war.

The film begins with a disturbing sequence of a hesitant Agrin leaping from a hill, into deep waters below. Throughout the film, Agrin devises ways of ridding herself of her unwanted child, and failing to do so, tries to kill herself. The brother-sister duo joins the other kids for a days' work at a space piled with discards of war, broken machinery, tanks, machine guns. As the children disembark the metal tanks from the trucks, the clanking sound of metal thrown across the skies mix with the pounding sound of artillery which further mixes with airplanes slicing the skies and dropping bombs. The soundscape instils fear into the minds of the children, especially Agrin and her son. While Agrin lies transfixed, paralysed with the memory of the Halabja Massacre, triggered by the sounds of war, her son finds himself lost, peeping into the holes of cylindrical tanks, looking for a daddy he never had. His panic calls for his daddy are cut across with the piercing sound of airplanes. The setting of this space instils deep claustrophobia and agoraphobia. The holes piercing the space along with the sound of rockets piercing the skies give a feeling of breathlessness and unease, culminating in the harrowing image of the little kids drowning in water toward the end of the film. This extreme spatial claustrophobia, at its peak in *Turtles Can Fly*, later becomes a part of his cinematic language in his post-exile films, as discussed in the earlier chapter



Figure 54: Agrin (top) and her son (bottom) in a war torn region in Kurdistan in *Turtles can Fly*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2004

The victims of the war, ironically the same children representing the face of the future, find themselves a part of this terrorising society. Satellite's friend, rendered lame in

war, walks on crutches and tries to entertain the wailing baby using his paralysed limb in the form of a gun, shooting with it, from a distance to the guards at the checkpoint.



Figure 55: A child uses his limb as a gun in Bahman Ghobadi, *Turtles Can Fly*, 2004

As the war is announced according to the predictions of the handicapped brother who can foresee the future, and Khak Satellite loses his leg by stepping on a mine, attempting to save the child Agrin has cast away, the brother sees a tragic vision. He is in the lake with the fabled red fishes. He sees the child drowning. A turtle swims up. He, suddenly rendered armless, swims up like the turtle too. On awakening from his dream, he rushes to the lake to see Khak Satellite already sitting by it, shattered. He knows that the child is dead. He jumps into the waters, and finds himself in his dream - he swims like a turtle, but the child is already dead. The boys cycle up the hill, only to find the slippers of Agrin by its edge. Her brother lifts them with his mouth and gives them to Khak Satellite. Souvenirs from war-torn land where the horror will never cease. In war-torn Kurdistan, where most of its inhabitants have either escaped or been exterminated by Saddam's government, Khak Satellite looks on, limping on his crutches, as the American troops arrive. His loyal friend ecstatically says, "Didn't you want to see the Americans?" Khak Satellite turns around and walks away.

Journey Towards Iraqi Kurdistan

With the fall of Saddam Hussain and the formulation of the new Iraqi Constitution (in 2005) the region of Kurdistan in Iraq comprising four provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, Halabja and Sulaymaniyah and bordering Iran, Syria and Turkey has been given an autonomous position. Article 117 of the Iraqi constitution states, “This Constitution, upon coming into force, shall recognize the region of Kurdistan, along with its existing authorities, as a federal region.”¹ It further guarantees them a “new Iraq, the Iraq of the future, free from sectarianism, racism, complex of regional attachment, discrimination, and exclusion”²

Based on a secular, republican, federal, democratic, pluralistic system this new sovereign state of Iraq recognises Arabic and Kurdish as two of its official languages and vests its citizens with the right to educate their children in their respective mother tongues. Furthermore, it grants religious rights to its multiple nationalities belonging to different religious communities and sects such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandeans (article 43). There has been appropriate representation of the Kurds in the political sphere with a majority of the following presidents (after Saddam Hussain) having Kurdish origins³. The autonomous region of Kurdistan has its own flag and its national anthem⁴



Figure 56: The flag of the autonomous region of Kurdistan, Iraq with the coat of arms (right)

¹ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en, 35

² Ibid

³ Iraq had four presidents after Saddam Hossein, the first was Ghazi Mashal Ajil al-Yawar who was the president of the Iraqi Transitional Government in 2006. Except him all the rest (Jalal Talabani, Fuad Masum, and Barham Salih) were Kurds.

⁴ *Ey Raqib* (Oh enemy) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Of-cwz22lK8> accessed on 12.08.2020

Furthermore, this region has oil in Kirkuk, and is therefore economically more stable than other Kurdish regions in the neighbouring parts of Iran and Turkey and Syria. Kurds in these neighbouring territories seek such economic and political stability and autonomy. The constitution of Iraq also gives them the freedom to express and practice their cultural, religious traditions. Women are free to sing and engage in their cultural dance as opposed to their position in the Islamic Republic. “The state shall promote cultural activities and institutions in a manner that befits the civilizational and cultural history of Iraq, and it shall seek to support indigenous Iraqi cultural orientations.” Thus, journeys in the cinema of Ghobadi are directed toward Iraqi Kurdistan, now an economically, politically and culturally stable region.

Antagonism of the Islamic Republic towards Kurds



Figure 57: A map of Iran that shows Kurdistan scattered in the western and north-eastern parts of Iran

In Iran, the people of Kurdistan are dispersed in at least four or more different provinces. They inhabit Kurdistan, Kermanshah, parts of Gilan and West Azerbaijan on the western parts of Iran and parts of North Khorasan in the North East, sharing borders with

Turkmenistan. A majority of Turks reside mostly in Azerbaijan with Mahabad having a large population of Kurds. Dividing the Kurdish population by scattering them in different parts of Iran and further dispersing them in regions dominated by Turks, Azeris and other ethnic races was a part of the divide and rule policy by the administration of the Pahlavi dynasty to prevent any form of uprising resulting from their union.

A few months after the revolution was won, in the September of 1979, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou was elected to the post of Assembly of experts¹ representing the province of West Azerbaijan.² Among others, the function of the ministers in the Assembly of Experts included supervising the supreme leader, choosing the next leader, and above all writing the referendum for the new constitution. Ghassemlou, originally from Orumiyeh had devoted himself to secure regional autonomy, fair representation and recover the rights of the people of Kurdistan, denied to them since the Pahlavi Dynasty. Kurdistan, due to its strategic, geographic placement and its cross-border alliances was feared to be vulnerable to exploitation by foreign powers by the Shah (and later the Islamic government) who kept tight vigilance on its people via its *gendarmery*³

Born in an affluent family, where his father worked as an adviser to the Shah of Iran, Ghassemlou became a co-founder member of the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) at the age of fifteen. Sensing trouble with his early participation in politics his father sent him abroad for further studies. After completing his higher education from Sorbonne in Paris, he returned to Kurdistan in 1952. In 1973, during the Third Congress of the PDKI (Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan) he was elected to the position of secretary-general of the party, a position to which he was re-elected several times until his assassination.

1 [https://web.archive.org/web/20150924115857/](https://web.archive.org/web/20150924115857/http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/elections/experts/1979/)

<http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/elections/experts/1979/>

2 Muhammad Ghaed, 'Three Harbingers' from *Dastan-e Ayandegan*, (unfinished book, published in the author's website)

<http://www.mghaed.com/ay/Three%20Harbingers.pdf>

³ French : gendarmerie, Persian : gendarmery : police of the roads in the time of the Shah.

In 1979, his party supported the revolution which ended with the fall of the Shah. By supporting the Islamic Republic his party and the Kurds had hoped for a fair representation and assimilation of Kurdistan with the central government of Iran. Ghassemlou was elected by the people of Kurdistan to the Assembly of Experts to represent their voices and contribute to the drafting of the new constitution. His credentials were rejected and his appointment cancelled. Khomeini was not happy with their participation which came in only at the final hour. Kurdistan, now heavily guarded with the revolutionary corps of the Islamic republic by the day, was guarded by armed rebels from the KDP and PDKI by night.¹ Trouble between the two armed groups created a tense atmosphere in the region. Infuriated, Khomeini demanded the Kurdish militants surrender their weapons. Ghassemlou and his party, demanding political autonomy refused to surrender and further boycotted the referendum to the new constitution which had no provisions for them as minorities. Bloody confrontations between the Kurdish rebels and the government agents turned into violent civil wars in the town of Paveh. Ayatollah Khomeini soon declared holy war on the PDKI and the Kurdish rebel forces by assigning the famous commander in chief Mostafa Chamran to take control of the situation. Ebrahim Hatamikia later made a film named *Che* in 2014, based on the accounts of the civil war of Paveh, and the complex portrayal of Chamran who was given only 48 hours to clear out the region.

Qaid's unpublished book has a mention of Khomeini's threats. He writes,

Ayatollah Khomeini fiercely threatened the administration [in Tehran] that if they did not take necessary actions, he would himself come from Qom to Tehran and make the hanging noose. They declared Ghassemlou criminal and subject of

¹ Muhammad Ghaed, 'Three Harbingers' from *Dastan-e Ayandegan*, (unfinished book, published in the author's website)
<http://www.mghaed.com/ay/Three%20Harbingers.pdf>

prosecution and his travel to Tehran to participate in The Assembly of the Experts, or for any other reason, was cancelled” The attendance of Abdorrahman Ghasemlou, the leader of the Democratic Kurdistan Party of Iran, was intolerable. Apparently, they already decided to not allow him to set his foot in Tehran. The situation was not apt for his assassination or arrest yet.”¹

The Kayhan newspaper had more direct quotes by Khomeini, “... [if we had] put hanging nooses in the big squares/maidans and have scythed the corrupted, these troubles would not have happened” [they were afraid] that [in the speech room] the mullahs would be overshadowed by a Kurdish Sunni communist...”²

Assassination

After the end of the Iran -Iraq war in 1988, Ghassemlou, then living in Vienna was invited to a delegation by the Iranian Government with the promise of a truce. Following several meetings in Vienna where Ghassemlou represented his party with a delegation of two other members, a final meeting was set on the 13th of July in 1989. On that day Ghassemlou was shot with three bullets at very close range. The other two party members were shot dead too by the representatives of the government who both escaped back to Iran. Ghassemlou was succeeded by his deputy Sadegh Sharafkandi after his assassination, but even he was assassinated in Berlin in 1992 by agents of the Islamic government.

¹ Ibid, 3

² Kayhan Newspaper 18th of August 1979

<https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/uk-ac-man-scw:15m4277?style=librarysearch>

Ghobadi on the Present Condition of Kurdistan of Iran

In a video series posted on social media (Instagram) Bahman Ghobadi brings attention to a television series, *Noon Khe* which currently airs on Iranian national television.¹ He mentions that while filming a series in Kurdistan, is a step forward in the representation of Kurdistan in national media and television, the series is far from depicting the harsh reality of life in Kurdistan. I have translated and broken down his entire statement in parts for the purpose of this chapter. What he says is extremely important for understanding his position and the politics of the region in contemporary Iran. In his statement, he accuses the Islamic Republic of not permitting the filming of any tv show, or documentary in Iranian Kurdistan, thereby never showing the massacre and persecution of the Kurds at the hands of the agents of the state, the abject poverty that grips the region, or the sufferings of the *koolbars*² for forty years.

They portrayed Kurds as a community that beheaded Iranians and incited violence. When in the old times my friends and I visited Tehran they would casually ask us, are you still beheading people? The Islamic Republic shows Kurds not as second grade, but third-grade citizens. We are wounded.

His anger and disgust for the Islamic Republic are evident as he holds them responsible for the present plight of the region.

But was it not you who provoked the idea or desire for independence in the mind of Kurds? When the revolution took place, you disintegrated Kurdistan. Now

¹*Noonkhe*, TV series portraying the life of a Kurdish family directed by Saeed Aghakhani and Hamidreza Azarang and written by Amir Vafae. It ran for three seasons from 2018-2010.

² Persian for load bearers, who navigate mountains on mules and get furniture and electric goods for Iranian Kurds.

Kurdistan is divided into five different provinces [...] After the Revolution, you differentiated between the textbooks in schools for Shias and Sunnis. You widened the demarcation between *Fars*-Kurd; Shia-Sunni. All the representatives of the government even today are all *Fars*¹ [...] They send people to Kurdistan from other parts of Iran only to vandalise our land. You never allowed any representation from Kurdistan in cultural, political or governmental positions- such as the manager of TV. The minimum budget is always given to Baluchistan and Kurdistan. You send drugs to Kurdistan by your officials to destroy the youth and tarnish the image of Kurdistan [...]

Now his tone becomes desperate,

You kicked out a person like me when I should have been there making a film as a Kurd...and here I am now in Greece, making a film in Greek. I needed to be there. I had to make films in Kurdistan. A lot of artists are dying in Kurdistan due to lack of opportunities...think about the musicians- what have you done to the musicians? A lot of the music you hear in this tv series has been banned by the Islamic Republic for many years. The singers and musicians are now either dead or in exile. They died out of poverty. Shame on you! Shame on You! Shame on the Islamic Republic of Iran and its television!

He asks pertinently why the Kurdish show now airing on Iranian television did not show Kurds speaking in their mother- tongue. The series paints a perfectly colourful image of Kurdistan where men and women gather, play music and live in harmony.

¹ In this context *Fars* refers to Iranian who speak Persian as their mother tongue

In the village of Palangan, a gathering of more than five is forbidden. The region is watched and heavily and guarded by the agents of the Islamic Republic. In reality, *besieges* and revolutionary guards crowd the old nook and crannies of the valleys of Kurdistan. The warmth of the beautiful Kurdish gatherings and traditional Kurdish life has been destroyed by you! It doesn't exist anymore. It did before the revolution. You bring people from the notary offices to our villages so people cannot give their newborns Kurdish names. No one has Kurdish names anymore [...]

He continues by saying that the series misrepresented every aspect of life in Kurdistan. It showed that mullahs¹ were invited to Kurdish weddings. He vehemently states that to be a lie. 'Kurds would never invite Mullahs to their weddings.'

The Fars mullahs came only to execute our people, loot and plunder the region. In fact, Kurdistan now teems with government agents raiding weddings, terrorising and intimidating people. No court can remember even one wedding without molestations and harassments by the agents of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Where are your agents in the series? Where are their insults? Where are the drugs that you smuggled? The unemployment?"²

¹ a Muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law. Used in this context and in the present context of Iran as a derogatory word, mostly a slang for religious clerics, seated in government positions, ruling the country in the name of religion.

² Instagram post: https://www.instagram.com/tv/B_U1eufHo84/?igshid=3eewdapd8ye0 accessed on 1.05.2020 translated by the author

Conclusion

The Kurds on both sides of the border have been deemed to be anti-nationals and accused of separatist sentiments. While the Iraqi national Arab government penalised them for conspiracy with Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Khomeini accused them of conspiring against the Shia government. Persecuted for years, denied of their language, traditions, the culture of music and dance, and always watched over by government agents who have a history of harassing, molesting them, Kurds have been a community struggling for their existence and rights as citizens of their host countries for years.

Journey in Ghobadi's films have undercurrents of notions of the Sufi journey, only here the final journey involves a quest not to reach the absolute truth or God, but to trace a lost family member, the beloved, or members of a community in exile severed from their kith and kin and translocated by borders in four neighbouring countries of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Kurdistan (a place for Kurds) then comprises one region and one people but divided into four separate parts, falling under four different countries, under the leadership of four separate governments. Borders and laws not only separate the community and its people politically but also culturally.

Unlike the Sufi journey which gives the earliest instances of exile in Iranian Culture, literature and cinema where the origin of all journeys beginning with displacement are undertaken to be one with the beloved/God; in Ghobadi's cinema, all journeys (also stemming from Exile) are undertaken to be united with severed homes and estranged family. In doing so, the body remains, not just as the necessary active agent (subject) of journeying, (as the foot or the wing of the traveller/ bird in Sufism) but is reduced to a load, or a passive object. Journeys become physical more than metaphorical, real, rather than mythical.

The concept of mysticism/ *erfan* in Sufism cannot be afforded by Kurds any longer. It is a journey just to be alive, just for survival. It is very distant from Mantaqotair which is a search for truth, a journey to find the truth. They are two completely different words, coming from two different routes.”¹

¹ Interview with Bahman Ghobadi with the author via email exchange on 27 April 2020

Chapter 5:

The Cinema of Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Introduction

As explained in detail in chapter 2, the phenomenon of Exile can be classified into five overlapping forms: exilic, diasporic, emigre, ethnic and cosmopolitan. Earlier I borrowed from Hamid Naficy's fourth volume in his Social History of Iranian Cinema series and referred to his classification to study the exilic subject in the prior chapters by giving a detailed account of Bahman Ghobadi's cinema before and after his de-territorialisation. In this chapter, I wish to look at exile from the other side by tracing the cosmopolitan aspects of it and bring light to the cosmopolitan filmmaker, or the one who is in denial of his exile and preoccupies himself with homelessness as a universal predicament and a global phenomenon. While Sohrab Shahid-Sales is a classic example of the cosmopolitan filmmaker, his life and cinema have been analysed in detail by Naficy. In this chapter, I wish to probe into the life and works of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of the most prolific filmmakers after the revolution in Iran. He was exiled in 2005 after agents of the regime dropped a war grenade on the sets of *Two-Legged Horse* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2008) in Afghanistan. I attempt to chart his life in Tehran simultaneously by referring to his cinema, deeply autobiographical at the beginning, and show how his gradual disillusionment with the Islamic Republic resulted in a changing form and a vastly different body of work. I divide his works broadly into three phases, the first phase, where films like *Boycott*, (1985), *Peddler*, (1987), *Cyclist*, (1987), and *Marriage of the Blessed*, (1989) point toward a graph of steadily increasing doubt and delusion with the regime; the second phase where he wished to redeem himself through pedagogy and cinema, giving birth to masterpieces like *A Moment of Innocence*, (1996), *Test of Democracy*, (2000), *Kandahar*, (2001), *Afghan Alphabet*, (2002); while the third phase, after his exile, focuses on analysing in-depth two films made in vastly different countries, *The Gardener*, (Israel, 2012) and his latest film *Marghe and Her Mother* (Italy, 2019) with characters speaking in different languages.

Methodology

While writing this chapter I was translating a large body of Makhmalbaf's untranslated and unpublished poetry which spans three decades of his life and simultaneously attending a workshop on *the Art of Filmmaking* that he was conducting online for thirty women filmmakers. Both his poetry and his workshop lectures functioned as precious, unexplored research material that gave me rare access to the life of one of the most influential intellectuals after the Revolution in Iran. I got a unique opportunity to meet him in London in March 2020. In our conversations, a lot of which centred around poetry and his cinema, he promised to share with me the poetry he had written in his lifetime. While his short stories and novels have been published alongside his screenplays, little is known about his poetry beyond niche peer groups. He permitted me to translate them and use the excerpts for my thesis. Over a span of six months, as promised, Makhmalbaf generously sent me most of his poems, some had been written years ago, while he lived in Tehran, but most of them were written while living in London in exile. At times, he would often send his recently finished poems.

Makhmalbaf has been devoutly writing poetry all his life. As he kept sharing his unpublished poetry, I spent most of the year 2020 translating them. While a good number of verses have been lost, I have tried to preserve and catalogue whatever was available. They comprise a series of long and short poems describing Tehran in the 1960s that he grew up in, the rented houses they lived in, his adolescence, romances, all celebrating a childhood, which despite being steeped in poverty was enjoyable. A significant chunk of poems, on the other hand, after his migration reject most memories associated with his past. Some poems tell directly about his own exile. He often talks of life as an unintermittent, ongoing journey and sees himself constantly on the move, never halting, or wavering even for a moment. Often his poems have trains and flying birds that bear a sense of movement. In fact, he

remembers that cinema intrigued him in the first place over novels, or working as a writer in the national radio, or as an active participant in politics is because cinema ensured movement. In the book *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf* written by Hamid Dabashi, he says,

I love filmmaking because there is motion in it. I couldn't go to a location and work in the same place every day. My entire life is caught up in motion and constant change.¹

“...I am sitting in a train

من در قطار نشسته ام

The train stands still

قطار ایستاده است

You go by.

تو می روی

Buildings go by.

ساختمانها می روند

Trees go by.

درختان می روند

Light poles go by.

تیرهای چراغ برق می روند

A kid waving his hand goes by.

کودکی که دست تکان می دهد می رود

Sheep go by.

گوسفندان می روند

¹Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, (London: Seagull Books, 2010), 93-94

Meadows go by.

دشت ها می روند

Jungles go by.

جنگل می رود

River goes by.

رودخانه می رود

Day goes by.

روز می رود

Moon goes by.

ماه می رود

Night goes by.

شب می رود

Days go by.

روزها می روند

I am sitting in a train

من در قطار نشسته ام

The train of life... ”¹

در قطار عمر

¹ Unpublished poems of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, shared with the author via email and WhatsApp.
Translated by the author with Majdeddin M. Arsanjani from Persian to English.

Phase 1: The Birth of the Rebel Artist

Childhood

One of the pioneers of the New wave in Iranian Cinema, Mohsen Ostad Ali Makhmalbaf was born in 1957 to a poor family in the south of Tehran. His mother was first married off at the age of twelve to a man more than double her age, and when that marriage failed, she left to study and work as a nurse. Makhmalbaf was conceived years later in a marriage that lasted only six days. The husband, already a married man, desired a son but left soon after being pressured by his first wife. Thereafter Makhmalbaf grew up under the care of the women of the household, namely his grandmother and his aunt, while his mother would be off to work, doing night shifts in the operating theatre. He remembers being in fear of his father who devised ways to kidnap and take him in his custody. Locked up in his tiny house, with his grandmother keeping him company and made literate by his younger aunt, he spent his childhood reading profusely. He remembers his grandmother tenderly, who he says resembled an angel, telling him bedtime stories of prophets while fear of his father loomed heavy in his heart. These stories calmed him and made him feel invisible to the world outside.

The God that rests in the depths of my heart looks like my grandmother. When I was younger, there was a cabinet in our house and in it was a picture of my grandfather wearing a hat. I used to think that God was an old man. But later, God became an old woman...¹

His grandmother frequented the mosque three times every day. Unwilling to leave him alone

¹Houshang Golmakani, *Stardust Stricken, Mohsen Makhmalbaf: A Portrait* (documentary), Tehran , 1996.

at home, she would take him along. He spent his childhood mostly in the mosque, where stories and sermons offered would leave an impression in his mind. So much so that he dreamed of becoming a cleric and even appeared for examinations to become a seminarian.

I became first a *mokkaber* [one who says 'Allah-u Akbar' to alert people who are praying to change their ritual positions], then a *mo'azen* [one who recites the call to prayer before every fixed time for prayer] at the mosque.¹

They changed rented houses over thirteen times in his childhood², but the mosque had become a home he could always go back to no matter where they were, and it dominated most of his early writings, especially his short stories and poems. His novel *Hoz e Soltun* is narrated by a woman who is exploited by society all her life and must resort to marrying men with many wives to fend for herself. Ousted from all walks of life she often finds herself without a roof. She says, "I came back. After all, the well pigeon can't live far from the mosque."³ The mosque is where she, like a *well pigeon (kaftar-e-chahi)* returns to.

In contemporary Iranian culture there has been mentions of two kinds of pigeons, those that are rare and of a higher breed like the *Kaftar-e-Toghis*⁴ and *Pa-paris*, and the abundantly available, lower breed of *Kaftar-e Chahi* or rock dove in English. Pigeons of the first categories are considered rare and valuable and are used in pigeon racing⁵ as they are

¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, 19

² Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy's School*, UK, 2014.

³ Makhmalbaf Mohsen, *Hoz- e Soltun*, (Tehran: Hoze Honari Islamic Development Organization, 1984), 22
<https://www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=Book/sultans-lake>
[http://dl3.takbook.com/pdf/ebook3707\(www.takbook.com\).pdf](http://dl3.takbook.com/pdf/ebook3707(www.takbook.com).pdf)
برگشتم. کفتر چاهی، جلد مسجد

⁴ In Persian, the word *kabootar* or *kaftar* means pigeon. But in the sport of pigeon racing, pigeons are called *Kaftar*.

Togh means necklace in Arabic, referring to pigeons with blue-green neck patches. *Toghi* is also the name of a film by Ali Hatami in which the main character is a man who races pigeons. *Pa-paris* are pigeons with decorative feathered feet.

⁵ Like Falconry, but for the commoners, or pigeon racing. Pigeon racing is considered to be one of the oldest sports, pigeons being one of the first domesticated birds.

obsessed with returning to their nests, no matter how far they fly off. They often build nests in human houses. The well pigeons, *Kaftar-e Chahi*, considered to be of the lower breed due to their abundance, remain homeless and stick to mosques, the only place where humans tolerate and feed them, to atone for their sins.

Makhmalbaf found a home, a place of respite and shelter in the mosque, amid sermons of God, kindness and generosity. He grew up within its walls. It was a haven where like him, his distressed characters were welcome despite being admonished and jilted by society. In a poem titled *Kowkab* written later in London, he describes his childhood under the influence of religion, in a rented house, on the verge of adolescence, on the brink of discovering love, or sexual fantasies. While images of the mosque and the *moazzen*'s cries form the setting of his writings, they merge love, fantasy, desire and a romance with nature where the beloved, and religion all come together forming a humourous, sarcastic and ironic invocation of everything that love could mean to a growing teenage boy.

*Kowkab*¹

کوکب

On the roof of a rented home

روی بام خانه مستاجری

*I lay asleep, wrapped in a chador*²

خفته بودم لابلای چادری

Tired from a long day's work

¹*Kowkab* کوکب is an Arabic word that means a star. It is also a name given to women.
<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/264874/> کوکب

² Chador- tent like cloth, used as tent, or fabric to wrap body. A chador is a tent like (black) cape to cover a woman's body in Islamic countries.

According to the online dictionary of Dehkhoda:

Chador/ Chadar/ Chader چادر: Tent; shelter; top cover for women; a cloth women use to cover the face, hands, other parts of the body, or a fabric to be worn over other clothes,
<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/108566/> چادر

خسته از کار زیاد روزها

On the rooftop, I slept like a log

مرده بودم روی بام کاهگلی

A hundred galaxies spread o'er my head

بود بالای سرم صد کهکشان

Dazzling and dull, I counted stars instead.

می شمردم کوکبی یا اختری

On the roof of the five doored room

بود بالای اتاق پنجدری

Stood the girl next door, an angel in my gloom...

دختر همسایه ای همچون پری

Named Kowkab with lips abloom

اسم او کوکب لبانش غنچه ای

Wrapped in a chador covering her bosom.

هیکلش پوشیده در یک چادری

The great bear and full moon adorned her neck

سینه ریزش دب اکبر قرص ماه

In clusters of jewels, her ears were decked

گوشوارش خوشه خوشه گوهری

I stole her heart and she, mine

من از او دل می ربودم او ز من

Until the Moezzen¹ sang Allah-o-Akbar in the shrine...

تا موزن خواند الله اکبری

¹Moazzen is the person who sings the azan, or first sentence *allah o akbar*, at the crack of dawn.

According to the Oxford Dictionary

This word with this spelling is an English word. The definition from Oxford Dictionary:

muezzin noun

/mu'ɛzn/ , /myu'ɛzn/

a man who calls Muslims to prayer, usually from the tower of a mosque

She stole one look at the minaret of the mosque

يك نگه سوى منار مسجد و

And the other with the intention to steal my heart

يك نگه سوى خيال دلبرى

I stood up as they stand for prayer

من ز جا برخاستم قد قامتى

I stood ready without ablution in this affair

بى وضو قامت ببيستم در دمی

I said Allah-o-Akbar to her face

رو به او تكبير گفتم با ندا

Oh goddess Kowkab, my enchantress!”¹

يا اِلاها كوكبا افسونگرى

-Mohsen Makhmalbaf (unpublished), London, 2020

In a neighbourhood pinned by the mosque, possibly with connecting rooftops as seen in films like *Toghi*, (Ali Hatami, 1970), *Harmonica* (Amir Naderi, 1974) or the Film Farsi *Mohallel*, (Nosratolla Karimi, 1971) made around the same time, rooftops transformed into spaces for private moments where people professed love as in *Toghi* and *Mohallel*, spent moments of seclusion, or contemplation, away from the prying eyes of an ever-watchful society.²In *Harmonica*, Amiro reaches the rooftop to devour a few pieces of a stolen watermelon and eat it peacefully without being rebuked by his family.

Makhmalbaf's life was so deeply governed by the ideas of Shia Islam in this phase that they manifest discernably in his film, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989, where the

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Kowkab*, unpublished, London 2020. Trans. Sreemoyee Singh with Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani, May, 2020

²Refer to chapter 4, page 124

protagonist Haji, tormented by the pressures of an unequal society, asks his fiancée Mehri if “it is possible to live as happily as Ali and Fatemeh, or only a dream?”¹ Earlier in his film *Boycott* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1985), the protagonist Valeh’s comrades Fatemeh and Ali sacrifice their lives in a bloody confrontation with the SAVAK. For a devout Shia Muslim, whose world is so deeply informed by the doctrines of Islam, it is not surprising that Fatemeh and Ali (the daughter of Prophet Mohammad and her husband) are the role models of an ideal conjugation- a relationship embodying love, faith, sacrifice, upholding the notions of the ideal family. As Prophet Mohammad called his daughter Fatemeh by the name *umme abiha*² or ‘mother of her father’, the idea of the perfect woman for the young and rebellious Makhmalbaf then was Fatemeh, and the ideal society was the one envisioned by Ali. A society with no distinctions between the rich or poor, a society characterised by equality, and justice where one could find happiness in leading meagre lives, eating simple meals and living in a simple room. It is not by coincidence that the couple who sacrificed their lives in *Boycott* are Islamic socialists hunted down by the Shah’s secret police. Yet it is a coincidence that Makhmalbaf’s first wife was called Fatemeh, and she, like how he had envisioned her, turned out to be quite the ideal woman who would take care of everything around him, the household, their children, and also assist him in his films.

I wanted (us) to be like Imam Ali and Fatemeh. Of course, her name was Fatemeh. That's what it was like, with these slogans in our heads . . . At that point, it was impossible to live without those slogans; all I had then were these slogans.³

Immediately after the Revolution was over, when the whole country was being run by

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989.

²Jafar Shahidi, *Zandegani Fatima* (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Farhang-e Islami Publications, 2014), 40

³Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, (London : Seagull Books, 2010), 80

*Komitehs*¹, they got married, and set up a tiny room “with a couple of mattresses, a couple of lamps, some plates, some forks and moved into a tiny room fit for a cockroach”² just as Haji and Mehri discuss in the film saying,

“We could live in a single room.

-Could we live only on one meal?

-We could lead a frugal life.”³

In *The Marriage of the Blessed*, Haji, the disillusioned photographer who has returned from the war front to the trauma care hospital and then to civilian life is haunted by the horror of the images of violence and death, difficult to be erased from the mind's eye. He tells his fiancée Mehri that she would not be happy with him. With marriage, they will have found themselves absorbed in earthly life – a life of inequalities, where the young are sent off to the war front to sacrifice their lives while a nation makes a business out of martyrdom. An unequal world, unchanged by the Revolution and the promises of equality made to its people, a world not so different from the famine-stricken regions of Africa where starving children are at the mercy of food being dropped from helicopters (this becomes a recurrent image in his later films *Test of Democracy*, 2000, *Kandahar*, 2001). In a sequence shot in the form of newsreel footage, the camera violently transgresses the boundaries of encroachment as Haji (a reflection of Makhmalbaf himself riding a bike in his youth) speeds through the dark alleys of Sooshk square with his camera advancing toward the poor and the homeless. The incessant sound of the shutter and the burn of the flash are designed to emulate the violence on a battlefield. The camera here exposes brutally. Any sentimentalisation with the poor is avoided, the camera does not show compassion to empathise with the displaced, now forced to make bed sheets of newspaper to sleep in the

¹Committees of Islamic Revolution, were responsible for enforcing Islamic regulations and moral standards on social behavior after the Islamic Revolution.

² Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, 82.

³Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989.

street. The camera eye mechanically encounters life. It shows. Inspired by the Soviet school of filmmaking, Russian Formalists, who took the intellectual circuit in Iran by storm in the 1940s and early 1950s, cinema for Makhmalbaf was not mere entertainment, fandom or art, but a tool for social change. Dziga Vertov in various polemical essays criticised narrative drama or the inability of fiction to excite the audience's mind¹ but lull the viewers into an illusory deception, like hypnosis. This illusion could only be combated by a conscious effort of unfolding reality. The narrative of *Marriage of the Blessed* is interspersed with newsreel footage and shots documenting tangible reality, that jars the audience back into a conscious understanding of the world.

After the failure of the regime, Makhmalbaf invested all his hopes in cinema. Haji, a reflection of the filmmaker himself, feels betrayed by the regime he and his generation got to power. He takes upon himself a duty to reveal and throw light on the lies propagated by the regime, thereby depicting the reality of society. The camera throws new light, the flash burns through the dark alleys making visible a community of the poorest, unseen, unnoticed by the society. In a long sequence, it is through the light of the flash the viewers get to see the squalid face of Iran that the regime has been covering for so long. In the absence of street lights (bare necessities that the government does not provide to keep the community hidden forever), the camera provides light and makes it visible. The self-reflexivity in this scene reaches its peak with not just the boundary between reality and fiction merging, but with the boundary between the actor and the filmmaker diminishing. The police storm in questioning Hadi about his intentions. Soon the film set is revealed. Makhmalbaf intervenes as the filmmaker informing that they were shooting a documentary, signalling his cameraman to continue rolling. The policeman asks him, 'What is a documentary?' Makhmalbaf replies, 'Recording whatever there is.'²

¹Vertov, *Kino-Eye : The Writings Of DzigaVertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 63

² Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989

Within the first ten minutes, the film establishes a war-torn society led by a newly elected government that has forgotten all the promises it made to its people. The title track and the opening credits roll over a stark juxtaposition of a Mercedes driving through the streets lined with shabby shacks housing the poor and hungry as the graffiti on the wall testifies the long-forgotten promises made by various leaders of the revolution,

Volunteer combatant/ Baseigi¹, a lion on the battle field, a martyr in town.

The country belongs to the slum dwellers: Imam Khomeini²

We will drag all the capitalists and the feudal lords to the court of justice: Imam Khomeini

The crop always belongs to the farmer: Imam Jafar Sadegh³



Jan. 23, 1979, Imam Khomeini: "In the Islamic governance there is no dictatorship."
 Jan. 22, 1979, Imam Khomeini: "I will not be the chief of the state"
 Jan. 16, 1979, Imam Khomeini: "The Marxist will be free to express an opinion."
 Feb. 8, 1979, Dr Mohammad Mokri: "The Islamic Republic is different from theocracy."
 Feb. 19, 1979, Abulhasan Banisadr: "The Islamic governance is the governance of the idea."
 Feb. 13, 1979, Dr Karim Sanjabi: "The Islamic Republic is essentially democratic."
 Dec. 10, 1979, Ayatollah Khosrow Shahi: "Don't buy houses, we will make everyone a house owner."
 Dec. 30, 1979 Imam: "The Clergy must not become President."

Figure 58: collage of different issues of the Keyhan newspaper shows the promises made by the officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Source: www.irdc.ir/fa/news

¹volunteers who train for a few weeks to go to war.

<https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-50548344>

Baseij is a part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Corps of volunteers originally consisted of young volunteer soldiers at the time of Iran-Iraq war. Now it is an organised institution with the mission of recruiting, training, organising volunteers to fulfil the purposes of the Islamic Revolution and protect its achievements
<https://basij.ir>

²Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989

³This is a *hadith* from Imam Jafar Sadegh who is considered to be the 6th Imam for Shia Muslims.

At the time of the White Revolution, Reza Shah and Muslim clerics used it to abolish feudalism in Iran.

Muhammad ibn Yaghub Koleyni, *Al-Kafivol* 5, (Tehran: Dar ul-Kotob Al-Islamieah publications, 1986), 296

The irony and sarcasm in the juxtaposition of the irresponsibly rich and the unfortunate poor is a recurrent theme of the film, one that is the cause of Haji's numerous anxieties and breakdowns. In one of the most impressive sequences in the history of Iranian cinema, Haji makes a delirious speech on his wedding day. Standing atop his balcony, he looks down at guests and addresses them in the manner of a dictator. His speech begins with humour but turns harshly political. Haji's obsession with the word *lenge-be-lenge* or mismatched speaks of his anxiety with the unequal society where like socks, wives are mismatched and what is *haram*(prohibited) is desired. Delirium overtakes, his mind turns into a warzone. Like a devout Muslim grieves recounting the events at Karbala, he swings his head violently repeating these lines in the form of a slogan- a direct attack at the forces of capitalism represented by the rich family of his fiancée for whom a daughter is but a commodity, a transaction in marriage. The unthinking, unaffected masses begin raising their fists and sloganeering before realising the fingers are pointed at each of them. Haji chants,

"Guests with mismatched shoes are welcome
 Guests with mismatched cars are welcome.
 Guests with mismatched wives are welcome...
 Dirty money (haram) is delicious."¹

From inside the Mercedes of Mehri's rich and exploitative father, Haji sees a billboard with the poster of a film, *Diar e Ashegan, Land of Lovers* (Hasan Karbaksh, 1982) being razed down, as a new one, *Taraj, Plunder* (Iraj Ghaderi, 1984) is pinned up. The violent ripping off of the poster of *Diar e Ashegan*, a *defaye moqaddas*/sacred defence film, dealing with the life of a soldier in reserve, Ali, who prefers to remain around the margins by working in the kitchen, till he meets a true *baseigi* who inspires him to fight for his nation unconditionally. The film brings back memories of the battlefield for Haji and the scene,

¹ Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989

seen through the viewfinder of his camera, soon transforms into a war zone, with armed men, gunfire and panic. In Persian, the name *Haji* could be given to a person who travelled to *Haj*, or for children born on the day of *Bakri-Eid/Qurbani*. It also refers to *baseigis* who during the Iran-Iraq war, were not given military ranks in the army such as a commander but unofficially called ‘Haji’. This suggests that the protagonist of the film was a commander in the army.¹



Figure 59: A pigeon is hurled on Mehri. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989

In another remarkable sequence, after one of Haji's hallucinations, Mehri peels some pomegranate to feed him. Her deranged, physically stunted, self-indulgent brother, always consumed in petty games, hurls a pigeon on Mehri's face. The glass plate full of pomegranate falls to the white sheets. His maniacal laughter, Mehri's cries and the pomegranate juice mixed with Mehri's blood (as she begins to pick the fruit) trigger images of war. These conjure the memory of 'the bloody hand' Haji caressed on the battlefield, only to later realise

¹<https://vista.ir/m/c/i0x3y/%E2%80%8C> Accessed on 5.04.2021

it was detached from the body of a fellow soldier.

It must be noted that the image of the bloody hand and the pigeons are borrowed from the

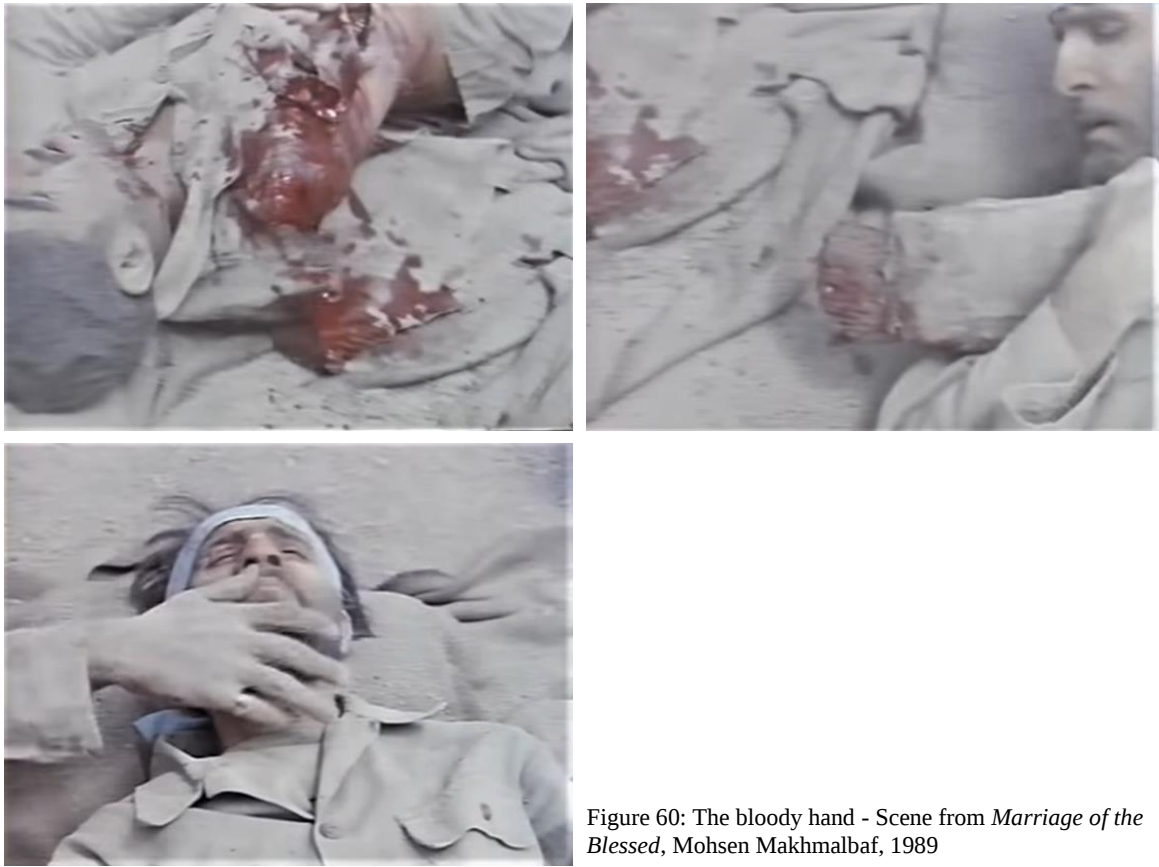


Figure 60: The bloody hand - Scene from *Marriage of the Blessed*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1989

repository of Shia beliefs and culture with specific reference to the story of Faithful Abbas. Abbas, half brother to Imam Hossein was tortured brutally. His limbs were amputated before he was killed while he went to fetch water for the thirsty Imam. In rituals commemorating the battle of Ashura, his hands become a major visual symbol holding a prominent position



Figure 61: The bloody hand of Abbas on Alams

atop Alams carried over the shoulders of mourners. Alams signify the hand of Faithful Abbas or the one who offered his blood with his own hands.

Pigeons form another major motif on the *alams* carried during Ashura. While *Kaftarbazi* was considered a pervert, sick sport for the indulgent, pigeons in Islam refers to freedom and innocence, all of which now are at the immature, irresponsible hands of the spoilt child.¹ The retarded child, the perverse face of society is always seen violently playing with pigeons. In a sequence where his mother goes to get a charm from a local sorceress to make Mehri fall out of love with Haji, she is advised to use the immature boy's urine as a spell. The immature boy is seen in the background tormenting pigeons. According to Shia beliefs, pigeons were witnesses to the martyrdom of Imam Hossein. It is said that they stained their wings with the blood of the martyrs in Karbala and flew to Medina as messengers carrying the news of Imam Hossein's death.²



Figure 62: Pigeons on Alams

Early Politicisation

By the time he was fifteen, Makhmalbaf had already begun writing plays and was a part of an armed resistance group with others his age. Ali Shariati was active in the political sphere of Iran at the time, and his desire for a revolution within Shiism made him a suspicious figure creating factions even within the deeply religious.

¹Pigeons represent innocence not only in Islam, but also in Christianity. Jesus while sending apostles to other places says:

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Mathew 10:16 (New International Version (NIV))

²<https://namnak.com/علم-عاشورا/p57243> accessed on 21.11.2020

We were already beginning to think more seriously about armed resistance and when this person came along, by the name of Shari'ati, who was beginning to undermine Shi'a concerns, it seemed imperative to find him and kill him.¹

Yet as soon as attended one of his lectures in *Hosseiniyeh Ershad*² the young Makhmalbaf became his devotee. He read his books over and over again and distributed leaflets for people to read (mostly transcripts of his speeches) The whole neighbourhood turned against him and they were forced to move houses.

Shariati and his Political Ideology

Ali Shariati (1933-1977) was one of the most influential intellectuals of Iran in the 1960s- 1970s. Deeply influenced by the international Socialist and anti-imperialist waves at that time, he like many Muslim intellectuals in Islamic countries wished to consolidate Islam within the praxis of revolution. Having identified the revolutionary potential of Shiism, the major religion in Iran that formed a significant part of the Iranian identity, he interpreted religion as a major tool for revolutionary emancipation. With no formal Islamic education, he did not refer much to Islamic texts such as *hadiths* but based his interpretations on the social and historical events surrounding the life of Imam Hossein and the battle of Karbala.³

¹Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, (London : Seagull Books, 2010), 29

² a religious temple built by Shia Muslims, named after Imam Hossein. As opposed to the clergy, Shariati gave lectures only in the Hosseiniyeh, which was a centre for specific Shia rituals dedicated to Imam Hossein which are not commonplace in a mosque. According to Dehkhoda:

Hosseiniyeh حسینییه : A house dedicated for mourning rituals of Imam Hossein

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/124063/حسینییه>

Hossainiyeh Ershad started started functioning in 1965 and was closed temporarily by the king of Iran's direct order in 1972. It was an unusual religious center. It had seats like a church whereas in a mosque or in a traditional Hosseiniyeh, people sat on carpets on the ground. Hossainiyeh Ershad was not like any other Shia's religious center, mosques, Tekiye (another place to commemorate Imam Hossein's rituals), or even other Hosseiniyehs. It was the symbol of modern Shiism that was formed in the Pahlavi's era.

<https://www.bbc.com/persian/47279042>

³<http://talar.shandel.info/thread-239.html> as accessed on 13.12.2020

He interpreted the events surrounding the battle of Karbala as a revolutionary act thereby identifying Imam Hossain as a rebel against injustice and bigotry. Before his theory, Imam Hussain was not understood as a rebel by Shia Muslims. For them, the story of Imam Husain was a tragic history that made him the greatest of all martyrs. Shariati's revolutionary interpretations of Shiism made him disliked both by the Shah and the clergy. Shariati's ideas had an enormous influence on the minds of the young and the religious frustrated by the corruption and injustices of Shah's system and his forceful modernisation campaign that undermined the Islamic traditions of Iran. Shariati's lectures at the *Hosseiniyeh Ershad* became popular and they spread rapidly by word of mouth among all spheres of the society. This aroused the suspicion of the Shah's government who quickly termed him as the ideologue of 'Islamic Marxism'. Subsequently, he was arrested in 1974. Widespread pressure from the people, and an international outcry, eventually led to his release on 20 March 1975, after eighteen months in solitary confinement.¹

Raised in the religious, conservative environment of the mosque, Makhmalbaf was surrounded by clerics who vehemently rejected the figure of Shariati. Earning a PhD in Sociology from the University of Paris in 1964, and having collaborated with the Algerian National Front, translated Frantz Fanon into Persian and acquainted himself with Jean-Paul Sartre, Dr Ali Shariati returned to Iran in 1964. He started teaching at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and gave lectures at the *Hosseiniyeh Ershad*. He made public appearances suited up in western clothes and openly spoke about his wife and family, neither of whom wore a hijab in public appearances. It was obvious he did not belong to the conservative faction of the society. Unlike the clergy, his speeches were not strewn with Arabic words and phrases. He spoke in simple and eloquent Persian that could be understood by all factions of the society. He was abhorred even more because of what he intended to

¹tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/3087/روایت‌تاز-ه-حسین-نصر-باشاه-مذاکره-کردم-شریعتی-آزادشد accessed on 19.12.2020.

do: recruit the youth to believe in the potential of religion as a major tool for revolution. He took out the anti-religious sentiments associated with the leftist movements in the 20th century and compensated it with acceptable religious rationale making the act of revolution justifiable under Shia beliefs. It was Shariati's teachings that fueled the fire for revolution in the young Makhmalbaf.

In a sequence from the film *Marriage of the Blessed*, Haji looks out to see large posters of Ali Shariati emerging from a distance. He brings his camera to his eyes and clicks. The posters vanish. In a few moments, a different set of posters emerge. This time of Morteza Motahari, a member of the clergy, and a writer well versed in Islamic texts, and a long time apprentice of Khomeini. When Khomeini had returned to Iran from his exile, he had elected a council of the revolution with Motahari in it. His books such as *The Issue of Hijab*



Figure 63: Posters of Ali Shariati emerge in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989

(published one hundred and twenty-one times till 2019) *The Sexual Ethics in Islam and the Western World, Islam and the Human Necessities, A Critique on Marxism*¹ were advocated by the Islamic Regime of Iran. About four months after the revolution he was shot in the head by a radical Islamic group named *Forghan*.² This infuriated Khomeini, who, after his assassination declared, "All works of the martyr Motahari with no exception are good and

¹ <https://motahari.org/معارفی-آثار-استاد/>

² <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/241678/مطهری-چگونه-متروک-شدند/>

contain human values.”¹

With this sequence, Makhmalbaf not only depicts a change in time from before and after the revolution, but through Haji’s camera he also divulges how the new regime rendered the revolutionary rhetoric of Shariati useless after the revolution was won, and replaced him with the ideas of Motehari, an insider who believed that an Islamic state could only be ruled by the clergy.² The ideologue of the revolution, a man influenced by the third world anti-imperialist revolutionary ideas was replaced by a wise but conservative mullah propagating moderate, traditional values of Shiism and the clergy. A new history was written by the new regime, a new ideology was constructed in support of the new system, and older values were erased.



Figure 64: Posters of Motehari in Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *Marriage of the Blessed*, 1989

Even though the regime changes and the arrival of new heroes are celebrated, the promises of development have not been met. Chador clad women shouting slogans, “Down with America” are seen both before and after the revolution. Not much changes, except the tighter hurl of the *chadors* that turn entirely black after the revolution, signifying the imposition of mandatory hijab which was announced a few weeks after the revolution. By

¹<https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/4448289/> امام خمینیرہ آثار شہید - مطہری جی - استثناء - خوب و انسان ساز - است پی دی اف - همه - آثار - استاد شہید

²Morteza Motahari in a letter to Khomeini about Shariati said: "The least sin of this man is defaming the clergy".
dastan-jadal.ir/fa/article/49556/

1984 this turned into a law, mandating all women to make public appearances only in Islamic hijab, the breach of which would entail up to seventy-four lashes.¹ Makhmalbaf and Haji's camera constantly asks the pertinent question, 'What change has the revolution brought?'

"For me somehow Che Guevara and Islam were fused together.

I wanted to be Iran's Che Guevara."²



Figure 65: Scene from *Moment of Innocence*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996.

When we were involved in resistance before the revolution, the ideology of the revolution was inspired by Islam, but the practical way of achieving it was through armed resistance. It was mostly inspired by heroes like Che against dictators of their time. We imitated the behaviour of Che Guevara. Che had invaded a police station in Cuba to take down a dictator of Cuba, Batista. We wanted to invade the police so we could have the gun and take down the dictator of our time.³

Around the age of seventeen in 1974, he formed an armed group with two other friends and together decided to steal the gun of a policeman working for the regime of the Shah as an act of protest. While he carried a knife, the other friend was responsible for

¹Clause 102 of Islamic Penal Code passed in 2nd November 1983.
<https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/90789> accessed on 19.03.2021.

²Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy's School*, UK, 2014

³BBC interview of Mohsen Makhmalbaf by Hassan Solhjoo on *Moment of Innocence* on *Aparat* program
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fA79gYw51hI> accessed on 2.11.2020

stealing the policeman's gun, and the third friend was supposed to block the alley with a Molotov cocktail. Things went wrong, and while one of his friends managed to escape, Makhmalbaf narrowly survived a shootout after stabbing the policeman and spent the next four years in jail till the regime changed and all political prisoners were set free under the orders of Khomeini.

My friend who was trying to draw the policeman's gun out of the holster was having some trouble. He was afraid, and he didn't realise he had to release the gun from the holster by pushing it down first—he thought there was some kind of button somewhere...he gave up and ran away. As I stabbed him, four times, he pulled the trigger and shot me in the side.¹

The film *A Moment of Innocence*, 1996, made seventeen years after the Islamic Revolution is not just a redemption through cinema for Makhmalbaf but a review of the method of revolution in itself. “The question it raises is if a revolution achieves victory through violence, can it bring peace and kindness or should we rethink this method as well?”²



Figure 66: Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *A Moment of Innocence*, 1996

¹Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, (London : Seagull Books, 2010), 34

²BBC interview of Mohsen Makhmalbaf by Hassan Solhjoo on *Moment of Innocence* on *Aparat* program <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fA79gYw51hI> accessed on 2.11.2020
Trans. From Persian to English by Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani and Sreemoyee Singh.

With the excuse of criticising myself, I created an opportunity to criticise the Islamic Revolution and the violent method by which it achieved victory.” Here Makhmalbaf re-tells this moment from his youth when he had shot a policeman, but this time accountable before his camera. The camera here makes the characters of the rebel and the policeman confront each other, to re-enact the scene of the duel in their youth. Things don't quite unfold as planned and violence represented by the gun and knife is replaced by a flower pot and a piece of bread.

Prison

“After the first school of poverty in childhood, the prison became my school until the revolution happened.”¹

As depicted in his film *Boycott*, which draws on the act of rebellion in his youth for which he was jailed; the first six months in the Pahlavi prison were macabre. Makhmalbaf was interrogated and tortured by the SAVAK till his body broke down. Thereafter he was hospitalised for months to have surgeries to heal the broken limbs. Once he recovered, he was sent back to prison to be tortured again. Cables of different thickness were used to lash their soles. When the body got used to the torture, they would use the thinnest cables to inflict more pain. A doctor was always present. He ensured that the blood pressure of the captives did not fluctuate much. After lashing their feet, the prisoners were made to run to reduce the swelling. Once the body healed, they would be beaten again.²

Boycott begins with the protagonist's wife being admitted to the ICU to deliver their child, while he leaves on a guerrilla mission. The secret police trace the whereabouts of him and his comrades. They shoot his friends, a couple named Fatema and Ali and arrest him soon after. The protagonist Valeh, played by Majid Majidi, is tortured brutally in prison, but

¹Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy's School*, UK, 2014

² Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, (London : Seagull Books, 2010), 45

torture by the SAVAK does not seem to be the only nightmarish thing about prison life. The “fascist tendencies” within some break away left factions in prison, dominated by the Mujahideen, leaves him disillusioned. When he attempted to debate and question their beliefs he was accused of siding with the secret police, called a traitor, and boycotted.

The torture in prison, where both, the agents of the government of the Shah he opposed, and his comrades in prison agonise and rip apart his soul. These become the main theme of his short story *Jarrahi ye Ruh (The Surgery of the Soul)*. In his short story *The Surgery of The Soul*, an unnamed protagonist narrates the story of his torture in the first person. His body is lacerated, experimented upon, continually tortured upon, even after his death at the hands of the ‘SAVAK of the dead’¹. This bears semblance with the opening scene in the third story of *The Peddler* directed by Makhmalbaf in 1989. The protagonist, a peddler who falls into the hands of the mafia and the drug lord is chased, tortured, beaten and finally shot. Even after his death, he continues fighting, like the goat that struggles after its throat is slit off at the beginning of the story. The third story of the film *The Peddler* begins with a shot of a *maidan*/ square that transforms into a *bazaar* space where all kinds of petty businesses take place in both the central space situated beside a *howz*,² and the first-floor balcony that overlooks it. The expository scene begins with a man forcefully feeding water to a goat, then dragging and overturning it on the ground with its feet tied together. He sharpens his knives and in an instant slits its throat. The blood oozes out and passes through a pipe that empties itself into the *hows* below. As the camera pans to the busy market scene below, it passes the slaughtered goat, and a kebab shop barbecuing meat right next to it. The blood flows to the *hows*. The camera tilts down to reveal a group of men huddled together selling second-hand clothes below. The sound of slaughter is intercut with the sound of

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Surgery of the Soul*, (Tehran: Soroush Magazine, 1988)

www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=fa/article/جراحی-روح

²Small pool in the courtyard of old Persian households, or in the centre of maidans.

dripping blood as the goat is skinned, its meat hung for display, immediately turned into kebabs as another goat is made ready for slaughter. A peddler is escorted by two armed men through the bazaar. He is brought into a dark, underground *qahve khaneh*¹ frequented by snake charmers, Afghan workers and drug lords. In this underground, dark, noirish space, where the only light that enters is through ventilators on the wall, the peddler is made to violently confront a drug lord, who hires poor peddlers like him to sell drugs in the folds of second-hand clothes. There has been a breach of trust and the poor peddler must die a violent death like the goat in the first scene. Like the goat that is forcefully fed water before its slaughter, he is offered tea as the drug lord says in a voice steeped with fake compassion, “don't cry, drink your tea, it shouldn't get cold.”

After resisting the goons, he is shot, but his body continues the struggle. On finding his way outside he asks for help from the cars passing by. Finally, a truck stops to pick him up, but to his horror, he sees that the truck has no driver. Horrified, he screams and is woken up by a group of men who welcome him to the world of the dead. As he looks at the street, he sees the truck that dropped him has a huge clock at its back... It is the same clock that stops ticking with the death of the mother in the second story. It signifies the end of life for the peddler in the third. Torture does not end with death.

Surgery of the Soul is a detailed report on torture. The protagonist here is forbidden to introduce himself or divulge details of the historic time that forms the backdrop of his story. He is also not allowed to talk about his political affiliations, beliefs and ideologies, even though he confesses that he no longer believes in them anymore. This is similar to the story of Valeh in *Boycott* who must die for a cause he no longer upholds. The narrator of the short story, once a part of an armed resistance group is arrested by the authorities who put him under extreme torture. He is made to believe that he is to be executed. He is taken to the

¹Old coffee houses in Tehran

gallows and is hung, but in reality, not killed. The execution is but a show. Declared dead legally, he now becomes a pawn in the hands of the agents of the regime who experiment on his body and mind with different torture devices, such as the *Apollo*¹ (a machine invented by the SAVAK, in use since 1974), slow cooking or *ghapani*,² (attaching one hand from above the shoulder to another hand from behind with handcuffs to cause extreme pain) among others. These devices are displayed in the Ebrat museum in Jomhuri in Tehran³ and were actively used since the time of the Shah to break dissidents of the regime, and set an example to prevent others from rising in protests. “In a moment, a person is put under so much pressure that all of his beliefs are lost to him.”⁴

The story refers to real accounts of torture meted out to political dissidents in the time of Shah and the mass executions of political prisoners that took place against a fatwa issued by Khomeini in 1988. The torturer's objective in these torture houses that keep recurring in Makhmalbaf's films like *Boycott* and *Peddler*, in the form of slaughterhouses and asylums- is to find out the exact “curvature of tolerance”⁵ in humans, or the extent to which a human being can tolerate torture and how even after his body crumbles, his soul can still be tortured. This is called the surgery of the soul by the torturer. In the end, the narrator breaks and is forced to become a good citizen.

¹In this torture, the prisoner was tied to an electric chair with the iron made helmet. He was attached in position by shackles. The torturing process included simultaneous use of the lash, electric shocks, burning skin with cigarettes, taking out fingernails, etc.

<https://rasekhoon.net/article/show-14782.aspx>

ابو عسکرنجهدر خاطر اتمبارز انسیاسی؛ از «آپولو» هواکر دانشکجه گران تاکشیدننا خنبا انیر دست ۹۰

“One of the most horrible means of torture for the inmates was Apollo. It was so-called because it looked like an Apollo spacecraft. In this tool of torture, the head was placed in a helmet-like case with the hands and feet fixed by metal shafts. While being whipped, the helmet-like case caused rough sounds and damaged the psychological balance of the inmate. On the other hand, the metal shafts were fastened so tightly that the inmate sustains wounds on his or her hands. Besides whipping, they sometimes used electric shock. The electricity with a mortal voltage was connected to the inmate's sensitive parts such as the earlobes, lips, noses, and even his penis or his genitals which caused internal bleeding. Then the inmate would discharge urine and blood for some days...”

²<https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-54681902>

³<http://ebratmuseum.ir/portal/en/home/?235287/ebrat-home-page>

⁴Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, (London : Seagull Books, 2010), 43

⁵Mohsen Makhmalbaf , *Surgery of the Soul*, (Tehran: Soroush Magazine, 1988), pages not mentioned.

1988 Executions

On his website just before the story begins, there is a note which says that the *Surgery of the Soul* was written in protest of the mass executions of political prisoners in the prisons of Iran, authorised by Khomeini in the summer of 1988¹. The story was first published in *Soroush* magazine later that year. Below is a part of the *fatwa* that issued the order,

“[In the Name of God, The Compassionate, the Merciful,]

As the treacherous *Monafeqin [Mojahedin]* do not believe in Islam and what they say is out of deception and hypocrisy, and

As their leaders have confessed that they have become renegades, and

As they are waging war on God, and

as they are engaging in classical warfare in the western, the northern and the southern fronts,

and as they are collaborating with the socialist Ba’ath Party of Iraq and spying for Saddam

Hussein against our Islamic nation. As they are tied to the World arrogance, and in light of their cowardly blows to the Islamic Republic since its inception,

It is decreed that those who are in prison throughout the country and remain steadfast in their support for the *Monafeqin [Mojahedin]* are waging war on God and are condemned to execution.”²

The short story condemned the heinous act of the Khomeini and the Islamic Republic that executed over 30,000 dissidents serving prison sentences including minors, women and atheists over a series of informal interrogations about their religious affiliations. The majority of those killed were supporters of the left-leaning Islamic extremist group called People's Mujahedin of Iran. The supporters of other leftist factions, including the *Fedaian* and the Tudeh Party of Iran, were executed as well. Because of the large number, prisoners

¹www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=fa/article/جراحی-روح accessed on 2.11.2020

²Translated text from Persian, available in <https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/106> as accessed on 2.11.2020

were loaded into forklift trucks in groups of six and hanged from cranes in half-hour intervals.¹

In this planned political purge that erased thousands of dissident voices in a matter of five months, the prisoners were executed based on the answers they gave over their belief in God, the Quran and Islam. Marxists and atheists were promptly hung. The whole affair was hushed up, with no reporting done in news, television or radio. Thousands of bodies were never returned to their respective families and dumped off in the unmarked Khavaran cemetery. The graves in the cemetery have no markings on them as the Islamic Republic did not permit families of the dead to mourn or identify the bodies of their lost family or relatives. The portion of the cemetery where these political prisoners are buried is called *Lanatabad* or the place of the damned.²

This event marked the disillusionment that took over Makhmalbaf, after which he became a vehement critique of the regime. But before reaching that phase he was actively working with the leaders of the regime and indirectly with Khomeini himself. After the Revolution, there was a shortage of people to fill the infrastructure of the government. Khomeini needed people to occupy the posts of governors, ministers, military commanders. Makhmalbaf was in charge of identifying people who had qualifications to fill these posts.

But after six months, I began to fall out of line with this group... I decided right then that even if we were to undergo thirty more revolutions...until our culture undergoes an essential change, nothing will change...So I resigned and began working at the radio as a simple News-writer.³

¹Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, (Berkeley: Calif: Univ. of California, 1999), 209-228

²<https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-42916072>

³Hamid Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, (London : Seagull Books, 2010), 52

Initiation into Cinema

Having written for the national radio and also published his collection of short stories, some of which were also made into films by other filmmakers, Makhmalbaf remembered watching a film by Iraj Ghaderi, named *Barzakhiha, The Imperiled* (1982), that had left him feeling rather insulted. It was so bad that instead of merely criticising it, he was overcome by the desperate urge to begin telling his stories through cinema, despite not knowing a thing about the audiovisual medium. Far from having any knowledge of cinema, Makhmalbaf had grown up in a conservative religious family that considered listening to music or going to the cinemas as *haram*. His religious upbringing did not permit him to partake in the pleasures these mediums offered.

My grandmother's influence on me, as a kid, led me to refuse even to listen to music...Even if I passed by a store that was playing music, I'd put my fingers in my ears to not hear it. I would occasionally go to the cinema with my mother and my stepfather, who was religious and political. But I'd continually argue with my mother about whether her chador was on right, and so on, and I'd tell her that she'd go to hell for going to the cinema¹

Within a month after watching Ghaderi's film, he found himself immersed in making his first feature, *Nasuh's Repentance*, (1983) with money lent from his stepfather with which he brought a camera, a projector and some lenses. The film fared well, and from the profits, he set a sound studio in the arts centre *Andishehvahonar e Islam*, started by Mustafa Roksefat, a leading Muslim intellectual activist of the time.²

¹ Dabashi, *Conversations with Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, 62

² Ibid, 65

Phase 2: To Speak a True Word is to Transform the World: Dialogue and the Language of Revolution

Self-education: Formation of the Makhmalbaf Film House

Makhmalbaf recounts a memory from his childhood.¹ By the time he was five he desperately wished to work as his mother. On his insistence, his mother took him to the ‘*crooked chinned cobbler*’ whose shoe shop was just around the corner. While he wanted to learn the art of stitching a shoe, his crooked chinned *ostad* found the most meaningless job for him. He was assigned the job of collecting screws strewn on the floor, segregating them according to their size, and organising them in different folders. After doing this for months, he asked his master how one could learn the meaning of life from the most meaningless job of sorting screws! Only later, while in prison, he realised the true meaning of the task the cobbler had assigned for him. In prison, when not being tortured, prisoners were allowed to read. To make good use of the ample time he had, Makmalbaf would read one book each day. They were not allowed to take notes, so he started creating folders in his brain, where he categorically catalogued the wisdom gathered. Upon his release, he put it all down in a pocket-sized diary. Whatever he learnt about filmmaking too was put in a diary, and this is how his education began. He never went to a school officially but became the centre of the cinema movement after the revolution. His poverty and social constraints were the initial reasons for his absence from school, but with his disillusionment with the regime later, he denounced state-sponsored education altogether. In a documentary made on his family called *Daddy’s School/ Baba Film* by Hassan Solhjoo and the emergence of The Makhmalbaf Film House, he mentioned how his daughter Samira had suddenly decided to drop out of school one day. She found that the environment in school stifled her, and was in marked contrast

¹ Notes from workshop
Also mentioned in his unpublished poem titled *The Crooked Chinned Cobbler*

with the kind of education given at their home. She missed getting her degree but demanded that her father teach her everything about cinema. Makhmalbaf began teaching her but later opened the classes for all other members of the family. Both Samira and Maysam joined. His wife Marzieh remembers how he insisted that she took part too, “Mohsen was adamant I joined too. I had to think if it was the right thing for me to do, or if I’d rather prefer a normal life. I knew getting into the film business would completely change my life...”¹

The school started growing. Filmmakers, technicians and their children would partake in these underground classes that would stretch across not just aspects of cinema, painting and liberal arts, but also music, dance, driving, cooking, stitching, exercise, swimming- after all cinema was made of life with all its elements. His younger daughter Hana, only five then, would escape from her school every day and find her way back home to attend her father’s classes. His son Maysam recounted, “We felt the contrast between the environment in the school and our home...our house was a very open place frequented by political activists who would often have open debates but at school, everything was tightly controlled and ideological...”²

Samira continued, “...They didn't teach us to ask questions, and if we did, we were taught to learn the cliché answers. Above all, there was no freedom of speech, something that we had in our house. As a girl, you were made to feel like a second class citizen.”³

Weary and entrapped in the school and coming home to a vast new world opened by dialogue and discourse centring around cinema and arts, she declared she was going to drop out and become a filmmaker.

This brings to mind Paolo Freire’s notion of Pedagogy of the Oppressed in his book by the same name. Freire urges for a new kind of education, the pedagogy of the oppressed,

¹Marzieh Meshkini in *Daddy’s School*, Hassan Solhjoo, UK, 2014.

²Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy’s School*, 2014, UK

³Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy’s School*, 2014, UK

or a system of education constructed from the bottom-up, formulated by the oppressed themselves based on their lived experiences as opposed to state-sponsored, conventional education that is designed to pacify and make the student a compliant object of control. Freire mentions that the struggle to be human is above all the struggle to be free. Oppression further dehumanises the poor and the only way for them to claim their humanity is through pedagogy. The key tool for human liberation is education. Freire critiques the system of conventional education that he insists suffers from “narration sickness” and compares it to banking in the second chapter. Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to mechanically memorize the narrated content. Worse still, it turns students into ‘containers’ or receptacles to be filled by the teacher. The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are¹

Afghan Alphabet

In the documentary *Afghan Alphabet*, 2002 filmed in the villages on the border of Iran and Afghanistan, Makhmalbaf’s film crew enquires why children of Afghan refugees in Iran are not entitled to an education. Here the only education that is allowed for boys is religious education offered in the mosque where they are taught to memorise the Quran word by word. Little boys sit in rows, looking sombre in their religious caps, nodding their heads and swinging back and forth while memorising the Quran loudly. A loud buzz fills the *madrese* in the local mosque. What they are chanting is no longer decipherable. A few pans show some children with their tattered books, with peeling off pages. A couple of shots later a room full of little boys screaming out their lessons loudly is revealed. The teacher watches. Makhmalbaf engages in a conversation with the kids, asking questions like, ‘Who has written

¹Freire, Paulo, Myra Bergman Ramos, and Donaldo Pereira Macedo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 2005),71

the Quran?’ The boys reply, ‘God has’. ‘Who is God?’ he asks. The kids can’t tell. ‘Do you like God?’ –‘Yes’. ‘What about God do you like?’ –‘God is Muslim’.¹

Banking focuses on memorising through repetition, turning young learners into machines. Young students are encouraged to learn by heart the state propaganda till it is inculcated into their very conscience. This is propaganda, something far off from pedagogy. This further obliterates any possibility of enquiry. The oppressed are never taught to question. The banking method of education cannot be used for liberation Freire insists because its objective is to mould the consciousness of the oppressed so they learn to adapt to the condition of oppression. ‘No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why?’²

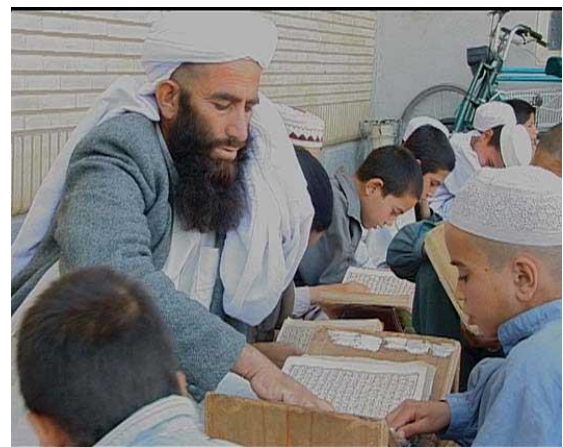


Figure 67: Afghan Boys read the Quran out aloud in a religious school in *Afghan Alphabet*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2002

Solhjoo’s film *Daddy’s School* made on the formation of the *Makhmalbaf Film House* begins with major functions of cinema as reiterated by Makhmalbaf.

Cinema sawalast- cinema is an enquiry.³

Cinema khiyalast- cinema is imagination

Cinema vaugheyatast- cinema is reality

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Afghan Alphabet*, 2002

²Paulo Freire, Myra Bergman Ramos, and Donaldo Pereira Macedo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 2005), 86

³ Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy’s school*, UK, 2014

Cinema zindegist- cinema is life.

In the year 2000, urged by Makhmalbaf's letters written to President Khatami, UNICEF and the Literacy Movement Organisation of Iran organised educational and life skill classes for about 8000 children, mostly Afghan Refugees, who despite residing in Iran could not attend school as they lacked ID cards. The filmmaker follows one of these classrooms set up only for young women and begins a dialogue with the young girls who are tightly wrapped in their *burqas*, even though they do not live in Afghanistan anymore. While some only have eyes visible, one has a burqa with no openings at all. Her face and body are entirely covered in black. When questioned about why she does not want to take the veil off her face, she replies it is a sin to do so. When the teacher asks how she knew it was a sin, she answers, Mullah Omar¹ told her so. She continues by saying that Mullah Omar had told them that their prophet would keep his wife in a box. He would step inside the box to smell her when he desired to, but never allow her to come out of it. The words of Mullah Omar have percolated this young lady's conscience so deeply that no effort by the teacher to get her to remove her veil works. She does not see clearly, her movement is limited, and yet she believes it is sinful to wash her face thereby revealing it to a roomful of other girls. It is obvious that these fears have been implanted by the Taliban represented by a faceless Mullah Omar. After a lot of coaxing by the teacher and a close acquaintance who tells her she could later repent her sins by praying by her dead father's grave, she agrees to wash her face. The

¹“Mullah Omar, or Amir-al-M’umineen, the faceless politician, apparently chosen by the people, represents the faceless nation of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

Afghans revered him, and considered him as the representative of God on earth, despite never having seen him. Every Afghan has stories to tell about Mullah Omar. Some say he is forty years of age, with one eye dysfunctional, but there is no image to prove it.

“Everyone I ask about Mullah Omar says he is a representative of God on the earth who instead of human laws brought the Qur’an as the country’s constitution”

They tell me that he is an ordinary clergyman who dreamed of Prophet Mohammad one night and the Prophet commissioned him to save Afghanistan. Since God was with him, he was able to conquer Afghanistan in one month

But Mullah Omar remains unseen by the people who got him to power.”

Makhmalbaf Mohsen, *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* (Tehran: Tarh-e-No Publications, 2001)

<http://www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=film/afghan-alphabet> accessed on 1.12.2020

film ends with her taking off her veil and sprinkling water over her face. The camera freezes over this moment of liberation.

Of course, some people believe that if a woman changes her burqa into a less concealing veil, she may be hit by God's wrath and turned into a black stone. Perhaps, someone has to forcibly rid her of the burqa, so she'll realize that the assumption is untrue.¹



Figure 68: Photographs from the sets of *Afghan Alphabet*, 2002.
Source: Makhmalbaf Film House

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*. (Tehran: Tarh-e-No Publications, 2001)
<http://www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=film/afghan-alphabet> accessed on 1.12.2020

Afghanistan: A Country Without a Face



Figure 69: Afghanistan, *a Country Without an Image*. Photo credit, Makhmalbaf Film House

In a book written by Makhmalbaf entitled, *Buddha was not Demolished in Afghanistan: It Collapsed out of Shame* written on his experiences while filming *Kandahar*, 2001, and *Afghan Alphabet* in parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the border regions of Afghanistan and Iran, Makhmalbaf describes Afghanistan as ‘a country without an image.’ Not only are Afghan women rendered faceless, but any kind of photography or painting is also forbidden by the Taliban. There is no television broadcasting, and while he was there, there were only three black and white newspapers by the names *Shariat*, *Haved* and *Anise* permitted by the Taliban. These two-page newspapers comprised only written information with no images. When Makhmalbaf had represented his film *Kandahar* at the Busan Film Festival he was shocked to learn that no one knew what, or where Afghanistan was. The unfortunate 9/11 attacks brought Afghanistan into the limelight of global news, but for reasons far off from reality. *Kandahar* released in 2001, was the only major film made on the plight of Afghanistan then that the international world could hold as a point of reference. In *Kandahar*, Makhmalbaf identifies this nameless country as one suffering from abject poverty, in the lack of any natural resources- a country where cattle grazing and agriculture suffer in the hands of drought and famines, forcing a large part of its population to enter the

army or the opium trade. A country forever involved in tribal feuds. Perhaps the only country in the world without schools, a country that makes its women captives of their burqas with representation only in its harems. With no suitable occupation, millions of Afghan families flee the borders to reach Peshawar in Pakistan or Iran. Makhmalbaf mentions in his book that while the Iranian government has been hostile to them, unwilling to tackle the influx of a large number of Afghan refugees, Pakistan welcomed their children into theological schools, offering food and shelter in return for training them as *Mujaheds*, soon to be members of the Taliban. Having trained the Afghans with the lure of bread, Pakistan set up a satellite Government by the name of “Taliban” in Afghanistan. In his book, Makhmalbaf explores why Pakistan dealt with the issue of “Afghan migration” so seriously, given the historical disputes centring around the “line of Durand”.¹

Among the 3.5 million Afghan refugees who went to Pakistan, a few of them found the chance to attend the special Taliban schools. In these schools instead of teaching the Afghan children how to live a better life, they taught them violence. Refugee children who generally entered the Taliban schools to be able to avoid hunger were sent back to Afghanistan after finishing school as the armed forces of the Taliban to whip Afghan men and women in the streets.²

The creation of the Taliban by Pakistan for vested political interests in theology schools to rule over a starving nation is the most accurate example of the dangers of state-sponsored,

¹ “The British drew the Durand line dividing the region between the two countries, on the condition that after 100 years Afghanistan regain control over the Indian part of Pashtunistan. Later on, when Pakistan declared independence from India, the Indian half of Pashtoonistan became half of Pakistan. On completion of this term, Pakistan was supposed to cede Pashtoonistan back to Afghanistan according to international law provisions.”

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*. (Tehran: Tarh-e-No Publications, 2001)

<http://www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=film/afghan-alphabet> accessed on 1.12.2020

²ibid (no page demarcations are available in the book available on his website)

religious education and what it can turn the oppressed into. Despite their fundamentalism, the Taliban were welcomed with white flags as they ensured security, unseen in Afghanistan before. The Taliban imposed severe punishments like amputation of the hands for theft, stoning and public executions for petty crimes. Thousands of hungry Afghans lining the streets would await inevitable death but not dare take a piece of bread lying around.

Position of Women

“Time and again I asked myself, did the Taliban bring the burqas or did the burqas bring the Taliban? Does politics affect cultural change or does culture bring politics?”¹

Makhmalbaf notes that even before the Taliban about 95% of women were deprived of education. With their arrival, the remaining few were banned from going to schools too. In the film *Afghan Alphabet*, even after escaping to Iran and attending school young Afghan girls think it a sin to reveal their faces. In this land (Iran) Mollah Omar and the Taliban do not exist but the fear of retribution implanted by their culture still does. This culture of patriarchy and misogyny propagated by the Taliban are depicted in both films *Kandahar* and *Afghan Alphabet*.

Kandahar

Kandahar tells the story of Nafas, an Afghan Canadian citizen, compelled to journey to Afghanistan via a helicopter to save her sister who threatens to kill herself on the night of the next eclipse. Here the eclipse not only indicates an external pressure or force of time to intensify the drama and bring urgency to the narrative but it is also associated with the covered face of a woman, forever eclipsing beneath the *burqa*. The original title of the film, *Safar-e Kandahar* refers to the famous Persian expression, *safar-e Kandahar*, which

¹ibid

signifies an impossible, arduous, debilitating journey thus preparing the viewers for Nafas's *ssafar-e Kandahar* in the film. In Persian *nafas* means breath. It also means soul.¹ Nafas is made to smother her body and her face with the burqa, and the only way she can navigate this hostile terrain is by feigning to be one of the many wives of an old Afghan man. *Nafas* (breath) chokes not only under the folds of the imposed *burqa* but stifles in the land of Afghanistan. The journey of Nafas toward liberation essentially comes with a desire to breathe again.²



Figure 70: Nafas being examined by a doctor through a hole in a curtain

She faces many dangers on the way, witnessing many sights on the road, reminiscent of Buddha's forbidden sights in childhood. In this war-torn land where mines have maimed more than half its population, prosthetic legs fall from the sky and men on crutches speed toward them, sparked with a desire to walk again. Here, a husband desires a pair of dainty prosthetic legs for a handicapped wife he can dance with. Nafas is numbed to see the abject conditions in which life goes on in this forgotten land. On taking ill, she is escorted to the village physicist where she learns a woman must not communicate directly with the doctor but through a male mediator and a curtain that segregates the doctor and the patient. Only through a hole in the veil is he allowed to examine her. Most illnesses, it is learnt, are caused due to hunger. The doctor hands out bread instead of medicines to patients whose illnesses come from acute hunger. For Makhmalbaf the audiovisual mode of cinema must also

¹ In Afghanistan and Iran, when they want to say my dear, my love, one could say “نفسم” (*My nafas, my breath*).

² The way of *Nafas* (breath) has been impeded".
راه نفس گرفته

activate the remaining senses. Here, the curtain, by removing touch and sight, brings the focus back on the visual and tactile senses. The lips and the eye seen through the hole in the curtain intended to reject sexuality ironically brings the focus back on sexuality and desire that must be missing from the post-revolution cinema of Iran.

Shedding the Skin of Culture

Both *Kandahar* and *Afghan Alphabet* never show the Taliban even though it is the primary cause of the miseries of the Afghan population. The Taliban remains unrepresentable, as culture or fear does not have a face. This is in stark similarity with the case of Mullah Omar who earned the reverence of the people despite never having revealed his face to them. The Taliban then is nothing but the culture of Afghanistan that has found a name.

I'm against many cultures. Often our habits and attitudes emanate from culture. I make films to criticise cultures. Culture is nothing but a bad heritage of the past. Why must a little girl marry an old man in Afghanistan? Because of culture. Culture segregates us by boxing us into different religions and ethnic groups.¹

The Taliban feeds on the misogyny and patriarchy already prevalent in the culture of Afghanistan. They instill a culture of fear in the name of religion.

Culture creates binaries, like man and woman, sir and mam. Earlier we were homogenous. Culture emphasises gender, feeds on binaries, beliefs, superstitions and ethnic groups. We make films to put a question mark over this belief and religion

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf's ideas on culture, taken down as notes during the workshop, *The Art of Filmmaking* conducted by him in association with A.R Rahman Foundation, India. November 2020.

that divides us.¹

‘Culture’ (that institutionalises and customises creativity) is the antagonist in most of Makhmalbaf’s films, not people. His characters are mostly grey. By critiquing culture, Makhmalbaf renders people innocent (as victims of power politics). It is not the Taliban that stands as an impediment to Nafas’s way, it is the culture that has given birth to Taliban's in the society. The oppressed are often prisoners of the culture in which they have grown up and must bear the given condition throughout their life. The character of the father in *At Five in the Afternoon* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2003) a religious man who mutters prayers of atonement every time he accidentally sees a woman. He is not a dark character for Makhmalbaf but only a product of the culture of fear and terror the Taliban has injected in their hearts. He suffers too. His son never returns from war, and he loses his newly- born grandson to hunger. We empathise with the people for whom hunger is a far more alarming issue than the desire for freedom. The grandmother in *The Day I Became a Woman* (Marzieh Meshkini, 2000) is but the face of religion and tradition that restricts a girl child at the brink of puberty from going out to play with boys. It is not the characters but the culture of Iran and Afghanistan that does not permit men and women to look at each other while talking, or forbids women from riding bikes (Ahu in *The Day I Became A Woman*), laugh openly, or be educated. Grey characters are not to be judged; they are only ignorant.

The Taliban was not a political regime in Afghanistan but they are still a culture. You cannot free a woman who is imprisoned in the burqa with a rocket. The Afghan girl needs education. She doesn’t know that she doesn’t know. She is imprisoned but she does not know that she is a prisoner of poverty, ignorance, prejudice, male chauvinism and superstition.²

¹ ibid

²Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*. (pages not mentioned)

Dialogue

‘To speak a true word is to transform the world.’¹

For Freire and Makhmalbaf, only through dialogical education can a critical consciousness be developed and humanization be affirmed. Dialogue is the key tool for social progress and change in the path of attaining human freedom. Only by the rejection of conventional education embedded in the oppressive structures can society prepare itself for dialogue. Dialogues often come with enquiries. Only with dialogue can the oppressed claim back their humanity.

From being the rebellious youth who had shot a policeman wishing to bring about a rebellion by mindless violence, Makhmalbaf now vests in cinema the capacity to restore to society what religious propaganda has taken away from it. For him Cinema teaches to enquire, cinema creates a space for conversations and dialogue, arguments, reflections and introspection. *Moment of Innocence* is a dialogue between two times spirally moving into each other, between two generations of people, two selves of the same persons, and finally between the one who incites violence and the one who is the bearer of violence. The film opens up a dialogue between not just the actors playing their younger and older selves but also raises larger questions, “Is it possible to reach peace through violence? To reach justice through armed resistance? And if it is not possible then what is the solution?”²

As discussed earlier violence is not only rejected as the gun is replaced for a piece of bread and a flower pot, the story changes from the desire for a revolution to change the world by violent methods, to the desire to bring about a change via education and eradication of poverty.

¹Paulo Freire, Myra Bergman Ramos, and Donaldo Pereira Macedo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 2005.), 87

²From workshop notes. *The Art of Filmmaking* conducted by Mohsen Makhmalbaf in association with A.R Rahman Foundation, India. November 2020.

Only through dialogue between the teacher and the young girl who has covered even her eyes under the burqa in *Afghan Alphabet* does the moment of liberation arrive. Contrary to it, in the boys' schools run by the religious authorities, as the film shows, no dialogue is entertained. The filmmaker is seen in constant conversation with the Afghan immigrants at the border following a cinema verite style and the young boys in religious schools, and girls attending school for the first time. In a sequence from the film *At Five in the Afternoon* made by his daughter Samira, after the defeat of the Taliban, the camera observes and records the accounts of two young girls who debate about how they could change the world if they became the President of Afghanistan with a classful of other young women.



Figure 71: A scene from *At Five in the Afternoon*, Samira Makhmalbaf, 2003

While others think it is an impossible dream for a woman living under the shadow of the Taliban's rule, the protagonist, Noghreh, a Pakistani immigrant in Kabul is driven by her ambition to secretly attend school and change the world for the better. In another sequence, Noghreh establishes a dialogue with a French military soldier posted in Kabul. She tries to speak in English and asks him who the president of France was and why he voted for him. In a half comic and part-dream sequence that follows, another immigrant and her admirer, tells him that she is going to be the next president of Afghanistan. The soldier, hardly aware of what is going on, stands in attention and gives her a military salute. Not only does he create the space for dialogue in his cinema with the pro-filmic subjects, the audience and the oppressed, but he also raises a voice with people in power who possess the ability to bring

about a change. In a letter written to the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan Makhmalbaf asks,

Why don't you, as the UN Secretary-General, ask the government of Iran and Pakistan to allocate at least one chair in each school, high school and university class for the education of Afghans to take a significant step in the human development of Afghanistan? And upon return, why don't you ask the United States of America to spend only USD 1 on the flourishing and renovation of Afghanistan more than what it spent in bombarding the country? ¹

He also wrote to President Khatami bringing to attention the devastating consequences of expelling Afghan immigrants from Iran. Proposing a meticulous plan for educating the Afghan refugees in Iran he mentioned,

The goal of the project (under discussion) is to eradicate illiteracy among a minimum of 500,000 Afghan refugee children in Iran. Their education is a necessity but they lack the needed permission and facilities. Yet with a minimum budget of USD 30.00 per Afghan child refugee, in the course of an intensive 10-month project, we can make them literate. Bringing literacy to Afghan refugee children in 10 months can be considered as a kind of vaccination against ignorance.

Following his request, President Khatami had allocated a budget for the project and five teachers were recruited for five months from the budget of the movie 'Kandahar' so that each of them would teach a class of 20 students for four hours a day. They taught reading

¹ Makhmalbaf Mohsen, <http://makhmalbaf.com/?q=article/letter-mohsen-makhmalbaf-kofi-annan>

and writing in Persian, and gave classes on individual and family hygiene to more than a hundred students each day. This dialogue resulted in the lifting of the education ban on Afghan children and even those lacking legal residential permits. The government sanctioned more funds thus obliging the Ministry of Education and the Literacy Movement Organization (LMO) to include the Afghan children as a part of their educational programs.

I swear on milk so white

قسم به شیر سپید

I swear on mother's breast

قسم به سینه مادر

The hungry infant

قسم که طفل گرسنه

Will be fed.

سیر خواهد شد

I swear, the yellow meadow

قسم که دشت زرد

Will turn green

سبزه زار خواهد شد

I swear to the blossoms

قسم به شکوفه

They will bear fruit

که میوه خواهد شد

I swear, the parched desert

قسم که خشکی صحرا

(and) the thirsty valley

قسم که دره تشنه

Will abound with water.

پر آب خواهد شد

I swear on the bowl of water

قسم به کاسه آب

I swear on the food table lying empty

قسم به سفره خالی

I swear on bread and salt

قسم به نان و نمک

The poor

که آنکه فقیر است

Will be fed...¹

سیر خواهد شد

Alternative Education

First Case, Second Case, 1979, Abbas Kiarostami.

In one of the first films Abbas Kiarostami made after the revolution for the Institute of Intellectual Development of Young Adults (IIDYA), he opened up a discourse on education with members of the society from different political and social backgrounds, most of who were to soon become dissidents of the system. Apart from the fathers of students themselves, they comprised intellectuals, journalists, filmmakers like Massud Kimiai, actor Ezratulla Entezami, the Minister of education then, Gholam Hosseini, famous novelist, Ehteram Gorumand, female T.V commentator,²Nader Ebrahimi and Nouredin Kianouri,

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, excerpt from *Train of Life*, London 2020, unpublished poems, trans.by the author with Majdeddin Mahoodi Arsanjani.

²She left Iranian TV after hijab became mandatory and was sacked from IIDYA within a year

(General Secretary of the Tudeh party-1979-1984)¹. The interviewees also included party officials and major political figures of the time, such as right-hand officials in Khomeini's government like Ebrahim Yazdi (minister of foreign affairs of Iran, official translator to Khomeini), Doctor Kamal Kharazi (the director of the IIDYA then who later went on to become the foreign affairs minister under the presidency of Ahmadinejad), Sadegh Ghotbzadeh (Director of radio and television, Iran), and Sadegh Khalkhali (Head of Islamic Revolutionary Courts, appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini, also in charge of executions in Iran 1979-1980). A teacher takes a class. One among the boys in the classroom creates a ruckus. Kiarostami suggests two possibilities: one where the students disclose the name of their classmate to escape punishment, another, where they do not disclose the name of the culprit and must all be punished. He opens up a discourse with members of society asking, what according to them would have been the right thing to do.

In *Homework*, (1989), again made for the Institute, Kiarostami interviews school children about a load of homework given in school, how much time it took to be completed and who helped them with their studies at their homes. The children confessed innocently that often there was no one to help them with their dictations as their parents were either working or were illiterate themselves. In tender conversations with the filmmaker and each of the students, not aged more than four, or five years of age, about what good grades meant to them, the film served as an inquiry into the failure of schools, the pressures it put on young minds, and the absurdity of state-sponsored education that stressed above all on competition while ripping apart the joys of childhood involving playing games, watching cartoons, spending time with family.

While *Two Solutions, One Problem*, (1975) proposed an alternate system of

¹He was later put in jail with his wife Mariam Pirouz. He wrote an open letter (dated, 5.02.1990) to the current leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, about the tortures meted out to him in prison when he was 80 and his wife in her 70s.

https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2012/01/120124_nk_toudeh_party

understanding friendship, and gave lessons in dealing with anger, and solving problems, things that are never considered a part of the school syllabi, *Where is the Friend's Home*, (1987), and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, (1999), depicted life from a child's perspective, where despite oppression by agents of society represented by family, elders and neighbours who act as extensions of the state apparatus in its mechanical insistence of values and codes of conduct, it is the children who take on the role of the *pir*, often guiding adults into journeys through which they discover deep truths. The child protagonist from his early film *Bread and Alley*, (1970) to *Where is the Friend's Home* (1987) and Farzad in *The Wind Will Carry Us* is always seen with his notebook in his hand or tucked into his arm. Should we say this is reminiscent of the famous line of Bertold Brecht's poem, 'In Praise of Learning', *Hungry man reach for the book, it is a weapon?*¹

Exiled

When it was time for the release of *The Moment of Innocence*, the Ministry of Culture and Guidance agreed to screen it only after censoring innumerable parts. To resist and hold back the screening, Makhmalbaf would have to compensate the producers of the film himself. The only thing valuable he and his family possessed was their house. It not only sheltered them but also housed the classes which had by now expanded and were regularly frequented by many enthusiasts. Makhmalbaf recollects, he had his family members cast

¹Bertold Brecht, *Selected poems of Bertolt Brecht*; (NY: Grove Press; London: Evergreen Books, 1959)

Learn, man in the asylum!

Learn, man in the prison!

Learn, wife in the kitchen!

Learn, man of sixty!

Seek out the school, you who are homeless!

Sharpen your wits, you who shiver!

Hungry man, reach for the book: it is a weapon.

You must take over the leadership.

http://links.org.au/node/733#_ftn1

votes. They had to decide whether to show the censored film, as deemed fit by the Islamic Republic, or give up their house, to pay the producers. They voted to give up their house. His youngest daughter, Hana Makhmalbaf confessed in Solhjoo's film, "We became homeless but saved the film".

Maysam Makhmalbaf added, "Instead of the solid footing of a house, we chose the solid setting of cinema. Cinema became our home. Cinema became more important than a roof."¹

For years I have been making films in Iran and many of them were censored. Films like *Time for Love*, *The Nights of Zayendehrood* (1990) were censored indefinitely while films like *Once Upon a Time Cinema*, (1992) *Silence* (1998) and *Peddler* (1987) were banned for a long time. I remember in the final years, we were living in Iran but making films out of Iran to evade stringent censorship codes. Films like *Kandahar*, *Silence* or Samira's film, *At Five in the Afternoon*, have been filmed out of Iran.²

Makhmalbaf remembered how the regime had dropped a war grenade on the set of his daughter's (Samira's) film, *Two-Legged Horse* (2008) in Afghanistan. The film was completed, but they could never return home again. In an interview with me in London, he said,

The Iranian government sent a terrorist to the film set who detonated a war grenade injuring twenty crew members, killing one. We finished filming but knew we needed to move farther away from Iran.³

¹ Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy's School*, 2014

² Interview with Mohsen Makhmalbaf conducted in Persian by the author in London, March 2020

³ Interview with Mohsen Makhmalbaf conducted in Persian by the author in London, March 2020

Thereafter cinema became the roof they chose to live under. Their life was in flux again. Their flight had begun, toward less hostile environments. Like Saless, Makhmalbaf along with his family carried the roof of cinema over his back and migrated in search of places that could allow them to continue making films. Thereafter they moved to Tajikistan for making the film *Sex and Philosophy* (2005) and then travelled to India to make the *Scream of Ants* (2006). After leaving Iran he briefly lived in Tajikistan where along with his wife Marzieh he filmed *The Man Who Came with the Snow* (2009). After that, the family lived in France for two years, and now they live in London but continue travelling to other countries to make films. Since then he travelled to Israel to film *The Gardener* (2012), to Georgia to make *The President*, (2014) to Italy to make his latest film *Marge and her Mother* (2019). Life for Makhmalbaf is consumed and defined once again by constant onward movement.

Phase 3: Flight of the Well Pigeon

Tracing the Exile of the Baha'i Community

In the film *Gardener*, 2012, a bird takes flight and reaches Haifa to document the history of a community of people persecuted, penalised for their religious beliefs and exiled off to different countries. The journey of the bird is shown, and the story of Baha'u'llah is narrated from its point of view. The bird takes on the role of the *pir*, taking us along with it in its flight as the filmmaker narrates the history of the Baha'i Faith. The film opens with an invocation by the filmmaker proclaiming himself as an agnostic yet curious to open a dialogue about the Bahai faith with the rest of the world.

The garden they arrive at for filming is the centre of the Baha'i faith, the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, in the city of Haifa in Northern Israel. The film is a dialogue between the father and son. While the son, representing the negative aspects of the Baha'i religion, is a reflection of Makhmalbaf's younger agitated, restless self, Makhmalbaf represents its positive aspects, with his patient, and calm demeanour which seems to be at peace with the tranquillity the garden offers. The father and son duo take the viewers from the garden to the shrine of Bab, (represented by the bust of an eagle) or the one who foretold the arrival of the Baha'i faith.



Figure 72: A framegrab from *The Gardener*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2012

A girl practising the Baha'i faith runs around the garden with outstretched hands holding a scarf resembling wings, while the filmmaker films her along with other birds resting on trees, and journeying to distant lands, before reaching the sea. The gardener at the centre plants seeds tends to blooming flowers and often takes a nap in between his daily chores. He looks up at the skies watching the flight of birds, till sleep engulfs him.

As the bird takes the viewers across time to the past, the coloured image of the girl flying like a bird changes to black and white and she begins narrating the history of Abdul Baha (the eldest son of Baha'u'llah). In the reverie of the gardener, we see a bird take flight passing by shrines, and gardens guiding the spectator to the prison where Baha'u'llah was exiled to.

As Makhmalbaf's camera lingers on the black and white image of the charred prison walls, he narrates the sufferings of Baha'u'llah in exile. He says that when Edward Browne had come to visit him in prison, Baha'u'llah had said,

“Thou hath come to see a prisoner and an exile

We desire nothing but the good of the world

And the happiness of the nations

Yet they deem us a stirrer of strife and sedition

Worthy of bondage and banishment”¹

History of Bab and Bahai faith



Figure 73: Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *The Gardener*, 2012

In the 19th century, a man from Shiraz named Seyyid Ali Mohammad Bab² claimed to be the gateway to the twelfth or the Hidden Imam in 1843.³ His claims had precedence in the ideas of Shia thinkers of the time. He proclaimed himself to be a mediator, an occult

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *The Gardener*, 2012

²Bab means door or doorway in Persian

³Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 138

*I am a gateway to a greater manifestation of God which is yet to reveal itself*¹

Shia Muslims in Iran believe in the existence of twelve Imams. While there is historical evidence of the existence of eleven imams, it is believed that the twelfth imam is yet to reveal himself. It is said that the eleventh imam had a secret child, who has been living for all these years and will only reveal himself at the end of time with Jesus Christ to kill Antichrist (a person prophesied by the Bible to oppose Christ and substitute himself in his place.) In Islam, Antichrist is believed to arrive as *Al-Massih o-Daj-jal*. *Daj-jal* has been described in Islam with many strange attributes in different texts. Some claim him to be a one-eyed man, believed to originate from the Jewish neighbourhood of Esfahan, with the word infidel written on his forehead. Some others believe that on arrival he will have a green donkey playing music from its ass. It is believed that he passes earth each of his steps will cover the distance of a mile, and when he reaches a fountain, the fountain will dry till the end of time³ The Hidden Imam is given the title of Mahdi. The Twelfth Imam Shias are always in wait for Mahdi to return. This notion is very close to the idea of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Mahdy is believed to return with Jesus who will kill *Daj-jal*. Throughout history, innumerable people have claimed to be in touch with Mahdy who is believed to be

²The ulama were the institutional expression of the power of Islam, the expositors and guardians of its doctrine and the enforcers of its Jaw, and among their functions was the rebuttal of heresy and innovation. -Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906*, 79

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hidden. Some have even claimed to be Mahdy.¹

In 1850 Bab was executed by 750 gunshots in the citadel in Tabriz after being imprisoned from 1846-1850. His body was brought to Haifa in Israel where his shrine lies.² After Bab, few people declared that they were the Greater Manifestation he was proclaiming to be a door to. The most successful of them was Mirza Hossein Ali Nuri (born in 1817) who eventually was named by his followers Bahau-llah (meaning glory of God). In 1852, two Babi persons tried to assassinate Naser al-Din Shah Qajar(1848-1896), the Shah of Iran. After their failure, 20,000 Babis lost their lives in an extensive pogrom and Baha u-Allah was put in a dungeon (*siah chal*, سیاه چال) and eventually exiled off to Baghdad. He was chained throughout his life in the dungeon in Iran. It is believed that his corpse bore the marks of the leaden chains even after his death. Later Nasser al-Din Shah asked the Ottoman king Ambulmajid I to send Baha u-llah farther than the borders of Iran. He was first banished to Iraq, later to Adrianople in Turkey and eventually sent to an infamous prison in Acre³ (today's Northern Israel). In exile and prison, he developed his religion and wrote the holy texts of the Baha'i religion in Arabic and Farsi. He died in exile in Acre in 1892, and his grave, Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, (روضه مبارکه) or the blessed garden) is the holiest place for the followers of the Bahai religion.

Persecution of the Baha'i Community

The Baha'i community in Iran has suffered ongoing persecutions at the hands of the ruling bodies throughout its existence of 150-170 years. The community exists on the brink

¹https://fa.wikishia.net/view/مدعیان_مهدویت

²https://www.bahaisofiran.org/باب_سید_علی_محمد_شیرازی

³Friedrich W.Affolter, "The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Baha'is of Iran", War Crimes, Genocide, & Crimes against Humanity Vol 1, no. 1 (Jan 2005) 81
https://www.bahaisofiran.org/بهاءالله_میرزا_حسینعلی_نوری

of an Ideological genocide¹ with aggression from the majority ruling bodies which intends to destroy and exterminate the community as a separate religious entity.

Through the 1950s private organizations were set up with the government's aid to resist the spread of the Baha'i religion in Iran. In 1955 the Baha'i National Headquarters was destroyed thereby suppressing all Baha'i activities. Their holy places were occupied, cemeteries desecrated, houses burned and looted. Baha'i women were forced to marry Muslims and children expelled from schools. Some were whipped, others, such as Muhammad 'Ali Barfuriishi, were paraded around the bazaar with blackened faces and burnt beards.²

Even before his return to Iran, Khomeini had proclaimed publicly that Bahai's were traitors, zionists, and enemies of Islam. After the 1979 revolution and the declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the pressure on the Bahai community intensified manifold. The constitution of Iran did not recognize the Bahai faith as a legitimate religion unlike Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam.

The establishment of the constitution of 1906 provided the legal justification for treating Bahá'is as outcasts and to deny them any form of recognition, with the result that they were legally "non-persons" in Persian public life³

In September of 1979, the government destroyed the house of Ali Mohammad Bab situated in Shiraz. This was one of the holiest places of pilgrimage for the Baha'i community.

¹The Genocide Convention adopted by the United Nations defines the crime of genocide as "acts committed with the intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" by killing members of the group, causing them serious bodily or mental harm, creating conditions calculated to bring about their physical destruction, preventing births, or forcibly transferring children to another group (cited in Staub, 1989, p. 6).

Staub himself describes the meaning of genocide as an attempt to exterminate a racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, or political group, either directly through murder or indirectly by creating conditions that lead to the group's destruction.

-From Affolter's "The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Baha'is of Iran", 76,77

²Hamid Algar, *Religion and state in Iran, 1785-1906*, 138

³Affolter, "The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Baha'is of Iran", 82

After razing it down, the regime built a mosque of Mahdy over it¹ Between 1979-1984, 166 Baha'is of Iran were killed or executed by the Islamic Republic.² Furthermore, Baha'is in Iran are deprived of pursuing higher education and having their own business.³ The history of the aggression meted out to them is covered by a curtain of silence. The new constitution grants them rights as regular citizens so long as they do not indulge in activities surrounding their faith, and publicly recant their beliefs.⁴

Actor Daryush Farhang states in an interview that one of the numerous anti-Bahai slogans taught to children in the 1960s '*Apple is better than pear, a dog is better than a Baha'i*' referred to the magnitude of shaming done to the Baha'i community.⁵ This persecution and deep-seated intolerance resulted in a mass exodus of the Baha'is who now remain scattered in different parts of the world. The famous Baha'i architect from Iran, Hossein Amanat, (also the brother of famous historian Abbas Amanat) who designed The Seat of the Universal House of Justice, in the gardens of which the film *The Gardener* was filmed, had also designed the famous Azadi tower in Tehran, previously named Shahyad Tower, or the Shah's Memorial Tower when he was only twenty-four. After the revolution,

¹(Unknown Author), *Diyanat-e Mamnu Azar va Taqib-e Baha'ian dar Iran* (U.S: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2014) , 5-7

²<https://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-48692836>

³https://www.radiofarda.com/a/b5_bahais_conditions_in_iran/29612522.html

⁴Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906*, 100

In the Golpaygani Memorandum, the official blueprint for the destruction of the Baha'i community, signed between Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani and Ali Khamenei in Dec 31, 1990, the following are mentioned:

Provision B. Educational and cultural status:

1. They (Baha'is) can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá'ís.
2. Preferably they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.
3. They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís.

Provision C: Legal and social status:

3. Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá'ís.
4. Deny them any position of influence, such as it is in the educational sector, etc.

-Affolter, "The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Baha'is of Iran", 110-114.

⁵ <https://farsi.arada.org/2018/06/داریوش-فرهنگ-باز-یگر-کار-گرداندر-بیجگی>

the Islamic Regime accused him of incorporating Baha'i motifs in the tower. All Baha'i houses of worship are nonagons. Their holy number being nine, all their temples of worships have nine sides each. Amanat refused their accusation that was based on the top of the tower having nine windows. Unable to convince the regime otherwise, Amanat was forced to flee from the country and live in exile, in Canada.¹

In talking about a faith, the origins of which were in Iran, Makhmalbaf not only disregards any nostalgia or desire of a return associated with the original home but also, uses particularity associated with the original seat of the religion only as a fact in history. The Baha'is may have originated from Iran, but they don't nurture a nostalgia for a lost home or a country. Baha'u'llah propagated the idea that all universe was one homeland and everyone on earth is a citizen.²In *Gardener*, Makhmalbaf tells the story of an international religion, the holy book of which is also written in English by the sons and grandsons of Baha'u'llah, Abdul Baha and Shoghi Effandi. Their official website affirms the international nature of the Baha'i religion with no stress over its roots in Iran and Shiism. Herein lies a similarity between Baha'u'llah and Makhmalbaf himself. His later films, made after his exile, vehemently deny the necessity of an identity attached to a homeland. They mostly talk about homelessness as a modern predicament. It is hardly decipherable which country his stories now belong to. He removes all traces of religion and particularity that stems from indigenous cultures from his narratives. His stories could originate anywhere. Origins matter less, homes have been forsaken. Like the Baha'is who took flight away from their native homes, Makhmalbaf seems to be forever caught in flight.

His search for 'home' has ended. In the refusal of his past, and his roots/origins and most significantly a home, much like the Baha'is, he is finally liberated from the fear of losing it

¹ <https://sanix.org/ایرج-آزادی-و-حسین-امانت/>
BBC documentary *From Shahyad to Azadi*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWkk80QeJ6o>
²<https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/b/GWB/gwb-117>

(home), or the anxiety of finding a newer, ideal home (idealised elsewhere). He instead, is forever caught in flight.

The flight of a bird goes well with flashbacks to history. The film is poetic and the flowers, trees and birds while being tools for poetic expression also activates the imagination of the spectator who understands the subject better through flight than reasoning. And most importantly a personal reason. I love flying. I fly in my dreams.¹

Re-situating Exile and a Critique of the ‘Idealised Elsewhere’

Marghe and her Mother, 2019, begins with the struggles of a young, single mother who must be away from her five-year-old daughter Marghe to earn a buck to survive. The struggle for survival is a never-ending one in a world caught in the stronghold of Capitalism and Privatisation, where growth and development are at the hands of the fluctuations of the all-permeating market. There are no secured jobs for the young who must scavenge on whatever they can lay hands on every day. Situated in a quaint town in Italy, where all its youth have migrated to main cities to pursue better jobs, Marghe's mother and her friend Julia seem to be among the only few left behind. In this world dominated by the gig economy, (low income and exploitative but generally easy to get jobs with flexible hours, low or no training costs) where one can be hired and laid off with equal ease, the working conditions are precarious, with no assurances, protections, compensations, minimum wage protections, insurances, provisions for paid leaves, compensation for injuries, or the ability to protest by organising into unions if all the above are not granted.² As opposed to the old, traditional structures of employment which gave workers many of these rights, even in the

¹Interview with Mohsen Makhmalbaf conducted by the author, London, March 2020.

²Jane Dokko, Megan Mumford, and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, “Workers and the Online Gig Economy”, A Hamilton Project Framing Paper, Dec 2015

absence of good salaries, this form of new labour, or the precariat as explained by Guy Standing in his seminal book, *Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, creates a new class in the making. The term 'precariat' was first used by French sociologists in the 1980s to describe temporary or seasonal workers. Standing develops it further by explaining that the term 'precariat' by combining two words, an adjective, precarious and the noun, proletariat to represent a newly emerging class in the global market system of the twenty-first century. Stressing on the need for a new vocabulary to define the class relations of this new market, he further goes on to identify a hierarchy comprising seven groups, at the bottom of which lies the precariat. At the top of the hierarchy are the Elites, followed by the Salariats, Proficians, the diminishing manual employees; remnants of the old working-class with the precariats at its pit.¹

The film deals with a group of four young adults always on their feet, looking for jobs, which seldom last more than a day, mostly advertised through online platforms or social media. They travel to wherever there is a call for a job in the hope of earning two hundred euros which could sustain them for half a month. The women are exploited, and mostly never paid their due. They have dreams of becoming actresses but must instead sell pizza on the streets, the advertisement of which is done on their bare legs. Their bodies are fetishized as commodities meant to be consumed by society. Women thus commodified with their fragmented bodies move in a circle shouting, 'Pizza! Pasta!' representing the vicious circle of life in this exploitative economy where one must strip his/her soul bare to 'fit into' this world. As if having their bodies rendered into a canvas to sell products of the capitalist market/economy is not enough, the women are lured by a television host to be part of a 'quiz show' with the promise of two hundred euros that could redeem them, momentarily.

¹Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2011), 7-8



Figure 74: The advertisement for pizza and pasta on the legs of women in *Marghe and Her Mother*, 2019

On the sets of the tv show, they are presented to a live audience as the host asks, ‘What do you want these beautiful girls to do for you tonight?’ A bottle is turned as each of the contestants take turns, singing or dancing according to the whims of the audience. When one of the women is asked to sing, she begins singing *Bella Ciao*. The song instils the audience with the feeling of rebellion much to the dislike of the host of the television show. They begin singing with revolutionary fervour and stomp their feet. The brief spark in their eyes is cut short, as the host abruptly stops the girl and asks her to sing something else. She sings the upbeat and entertaining *La Bamba*. The audience whose hearts were ignited with revolutionary angst with the lyrics of *Bella Ciao*, now nod their heads and clap their hands to the beat of *La Bamba*. The same group of individuals ask the next contestant to imitate a monkey’s cry. Coaxed by the host to make a more sensational demand, they now clap their hands, roaring ‘Naked! Naked! Naked!’ demanding Julia to strip. The host tells Julia that the audience wants her to feel free. ‘Take your clothes off. They want to see you naked.’ Embarrassed, she declines and storms out. Both the money and her dignity as a human being are lost. Throughout the performance, and the changing room sequence women are seen holding onto their bodies.



Figure 75: The low angle filmed through a mirror floor, the angle adopted by T.V channels. Frame Grab from Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Marghe and her Mother*, 2019

There are two angles in which the performances are shot: the angle adopted by the filmmaker that records reality as it unfolds, and the other one adopted for telecast on the television channels. The angle of the tv shot from below, via mirrors, strips the women bare, thereby advocating the idea that to be free one needs to be naked. This also signifies the flawed notion of liberal capitalism propagated by the West, where freedom is believed to be synonymous with unclothing women. There are mirrors everywhere in this television set, representative of the society outside. The floor is a mirror too. There is no shelter from the mirrors that strip one further. Rips him/her open. There is no home one can hide in. This world has no walls. The next sequence cuts to the image of sheep grazing in the field. This is a representation of what the capitalist state apparatus turns its citizens into. People resemble mute cattle, ready to graze any ground, nodding their heads and moving along the whips of the state, controlled by its police, television and the church lashes on them. “For hundreds of years, the relation between power and the people in Iran has followed the pattern of “the shepherd and the flock” and still does”.¹

¹ Mohammad Rasoulof, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6779> accessed on 1.10.2020

Tv is nothing but the propaganda machinery of the state, like *man o tu*¹ which was America's propaganda, supporting the Shah of Iran. The west is no paradise. These so-called democratic countries where people are free to vote, are not free from propaganda injected in their minds through the tv that influences you and claws you into its clutches. They decide for you, and you keep thinking you made a choice.²

Nomadism as Exile

In the film, the two struggling independent women meet two struggling young men who at first try to dupe them by pretending to be a filmmaker-producer duo looking to cast young actresses. Later it is revealed that they are only looking for love and companionship, both of which are impossible to find in this world. Frustrated by the exploitative nature of the only jobs available in this town, they devise a new plan of making money which entails moving to richer cities. Henceforth they keep moving to wherever work takes them. In a society where there is no work for the uncompromising youngsters, they devise an absurd plan to kidnap the dogs of the rich pretending to be a team of dog rescuers. They return the dogs to the respective owners in exchange for a hefty sum of money. Marghe's mother packs her bags, drops off her daughter in the church and sets off with the other three. Their lives are on the move henceforth.

As the last few youngsters leave, the old town of Italy now left with only its elderly men look on. Jan Brenan in his study on migrant workers in India, uses the term 'footloose proletariat', referring to workers dispossessed of agrarian property, forced to look for employment outside of agriculture with agricultural production reduced to 15% of the

¹*Manotu* (Me and you) is an international free-to-air Iranian television channel based in London. Its programs include documentaries, news reports, films and tv series.

²Mohsen Makhmalbaf in an interview with the author, London 2020

national income. This group of footloose workers are compelled to roam around the country for gainful work not available locally.¹

He calls this a modern form of nomadism to ensure that the workforce at the bottom of the economy, shorn of social security and protection, can be bought at the lowest possible price and hired for as long as their services are required.

With no income to spend on their daily needs—food and cost of makeshift or rental accommodation. Who are these people forced to remain circulating between their place of residence and worksites, far away from home? ... Many of them tend to be hired and fired according to the need of the moment, are paid cheaply for their low-skilled drudgery and have to work without minimal access to legal protection or social security.’²

The characters in the film do not belong to the working class of old factory workers, or the middle class as Standing rightly explains but consists of this new class of footloose workers who are intended to work in precarious conditions. According to Makhmalbaf *Marghe and her Mother* then is but a story of exile, not brought by the State or a government due to an act of political offence anymore. It is society and culture under the stronghold of the Global Capitalist order that now fragments the lives of the young, uproots them from their homes, separates them from their families, forcing them to migrate to metropolises to look for jobs and exiles them forever. Capitalism and the increase of the private sector while creating new jobs and changing the structure of Labour itself with the emergence of malls, cineplexes, complexes, has replaced old forms of Labour. The new workers, mostly from the

¹ Jan Brenan, “The Pandemic in India and Its Impact on Footloose Labour.” *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Springer; The Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE), vol. 63(4), (2020): 901-919

²Brenan, “The Pandemic in India and Its Impact on Footloose Labour”, 904

age group 18-30 are not promised much pay but are groomed to make them look presentable and desirable. In India, they are taught to speak in English and coached in western standards of etiquette. This results in the rise of a new class. A class that is possessed by the newest inventories of the capitalist market, its latest electronic gadgets, bikes, smartphones, and makeup kits, but don't have a single penny in their pockets. This class of people survives on loans. The market reinvents them, gives them a new face, severs them from their homes, traditional structures, and keeps them forever looking for new jobs. They can no longer assimilate into their families that are too orthodox and primitive for them, and neither are they accepted among the educated, rich, or the elites. The nature of work is frivolous, yet demanding, requiring them to stand all day, compromising values for sticking on in the system. The unfit or uncompromising are laid off, as there is no dearth of labour. The young, find themselves forever stuck in the limbo of job finding and joblessness. Home becomes a distant memory, a onward movement consumes their living. They seek stability, love and companionship. 'A home is just not a structure, but a structure built on these values. They find themselves unable to love, or feel affection. They find themselves alienated and out of place, and out of home in an alien land.'

Conclusion

Having charted the journey of Makhmalbaf from his childhood when he became a frequenter of the mosque with his pious grandmother, to disarming and stabbing a police inspector as a teenager, and participating actively in the Islamic revolution, it can be said that Mohsen Makhmalbaf embodies the history of a generation of intellectuals who shared their disillusionment with him. Despite their diverse backgrounds and political affiliations, this generation went through three distinct phases: belief in the cause of the Islamic Revolution, followed by doubt and disillusionment after the new regime failed to fulfil its

promises, and finally, rejection of the original political ideas that they believed the Islamic Revolution exemplified. Sharing a similar fate with his character Valeh in *Boycott* who suffers for a cause they no longer uphold, Makhmalbaf says himself,

I doubted the revolution. I thought the problem was the revolution itself. I became suspicious of the dogmatic religious perspective. Like a snake, I shed my skin and realised I wasn't alone with these doubts. I was representative of a generation.”¹

In him is visible the transformation from a rebellious activist who represented the doctrines of the Islamic republic to a disillusioned filmmaker who harshly attacked the regime that emblematised him as the ideal representation of the Islamic Filmmaker. His films were to be seen in contrast with the ‘pervert’ Film Farsi’s emblematised by Fardin or the ‘elite’ Mehrjui.² Most of the people who participated in the revolution were rejected by the regime, but because of his early religious and cultural indoctrination in a pious household, Makhmalbaf was turned into a role model for all artists of the Islamic Republic. He became the face of the ideal intellectual who rose from the dregs of society, was raised in the local masjid, with little or no education, in a conservative family that struggled to make ends meet. He epitomised the Islamic intellectual or the Muslim revolutionary artist created by the regime. This could not have been possible in the case of filmmakers such as Dariush Mehrjui and Ebrahim Golestan who came from elite, wealthy and prosperous backgrounds and had spent a large chunk of their lives in the West. They had not witnessed and participated in the glorious Islamic Revolution. Makhmalbaf was given more freedom, and liberty than any other filmmaker. The first three films he made were considered to be sheer Islamic

¹HoushangGolmakani , *Stardust Stricken*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf: A Portrait. (documentary), Tehran , 1996.

²https://www.bbc.com/persian/blogs/2015/09/150925_l44_nazeran_iran_cinema accessed on 10.04.2021

propaganda. The names of the first three films, *Nasuh's Repentance*, (1983)¹, *Esteazeh*, (1984)², *Two Blind Eyes*, (1984)³ bear roots in the Quran. He was deeply invested in propagating the message of the newly formed Islamic Regime through cinema. Yet when he tore apart that image with films that were severe attacks on the system, beginning with *Boycott*, *The Marriage of the Blessed* (films that represented his second phase consumed in doubt) and direct attacks with *The Nights of Zayandehrood*, *A Moment of Innocence*, the regime began censoring and confiscating his films and refused to have them screened in Iran. In his last few years in Iran, Makhmalbaf mostly made films outside of Iran, beginning with *Kandahar*, *Silence*, *Two-legged Horse*. Restrained by the restrictions imposed by the regime, he decided to migrate from Iran with his family.

Thereafter Makhmalbaf and his family did not stick to any country for long but kept moving from one country to another, making films along the way. The propelling energy with which he had disarmed the policeman in his childhood was kept alive in his cinema. With his geographical displacement and exile, the energy was diverted from attacking the enemy without - (the totalitarian regime) to the one within (years of social, cultural and religious indoctrination implanted within him from the mosque, his family, and the Islamic government.) Some of the very first films made by him after his exile addressed issues of music, dance (*Sex and Philosophy*, 2005) sexuality (*Scream of the Ants*, 2006) and the Baha'i faith. (*The Gardener*, 2012) These were considered blasphemous subjects a religious Shia Muslim is conditioned to steer clear of. His rebellion lay in confronting a part of himself- his earlier dogmatic self for whom addressing all of the above were but acts of desecration. His rebellion was now directed inward, to erase the years of indoctrination at the hands of

¹*TobehNasuh* is an expression that comes from Quran Chapter 66, verse 8 meaning absolute repentance.

² Meaning seeking refuge in God. It is very common among Muslims to say the words, "I seek refuge in Allah from the accursed Satan" before beginning to recite the Quran.

<https://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/عود-ياالله-من-الشيطان-الرجيم>

³ The film deals with the miraculous power of the Eighth Imam of curing incurable illnesses.

culture and the political state apparatuses of the Islamic Regime.

Having thus confronted his fears he found harmony and peace and was imbued with a sense of tremendous hope. When I asked him in an interview, where this unwavering hope stemmed from, he replied,

Every morning when I wake up I repeat a few *Dhikrs*¹ to myself which makes me happy:

1. Burry the past.
2. There will neither be catastrophe nor miracle; the future would be either a little better or worse, but certainly better than my fears.
4. Be good in your standard, not favourable for people...

These *Dhikrs* prevent me from falling into depression or anxiety.²

This optimism and active denial of the past is not symptomatic (of his displacement and exile) but is cultivated as a solution to attain hope and harmony. Aware of his denial he consciously blocks out any memories attached to the past. He confessed, “A few days ago, an old acquaintance sent me some old photographs of us from my mother’s house in Tehran. The photographs filled me with acute melancholia. I promptly deleted them and requested him to never send me anything unearthed from the past again”.

Like Bahaullah who universalised the concept of a home after being sent to exile propagating the idea that all universe was one homeland and everyone on earth was a citizen, Makhmalbaf renounces the need or desire for a native home and rids himself of any attachment and nostalgia associated with the homeland and his past. In this denial he adopts

¹ *Dhikrs* is a Sufi/Islamic term which literally means reminding. In Islam it is a word or phrase which affects the mind of the Sufi through repetition.

² Conversation of Mohsen Makhmalbaf with the author via WhatsApp, June 2020.

a position similar to Sohrab Shahid Sales for whom the homeland could be situated at any place where there was freedom to make films; yet in his disregard for the idea of a homeland, and hence a secure home in itself, he takes a more radical stance. In the absence of a home, it is under the roof of the cinema that he and his family have chosen to take shelter in. His son Maysam Makhmalbaf had said in the film *Daddy's School*, "Instead of the solid footing of a house, we chose the solid setting of cinema. Cinema became our home. Cinema became more important than a roof."¹

He not only denounces the idea of a secure home, in his ongoing journey, but he also refuses to live in a specific geographical place for a long period. He thus also denies the concept of an adopted home, which for Naderi became America and for Sales to some extent was Germany. In this, he denies the need to be attached to any national identity, culture or learn a specific foreign language. For instance, Makhmalbaf can never be tagged as an Iranian-British filmmaker even though he lives in London at present. He vehemently denounces any such attachment to citizenship, language, nationality or culture. Herein lies the cosmopolitan nature of him and his cinema. He disaffirms and denies that the peace and harmony that he has attained is the result of his geographical dislocation and exile to the West. In fact, he disregards his exile, stressing his choice of leaving. His denial thus is not symptomatic. It is a theological solution to come to terms with the trauma/agonies of displacement itself. He denies that he has been exiled out of Iran. He believes it is he who actively decided to move out.

For Makhmalbaf liberation did not come with his displacement to Israel, Tajikistan, India, Paris, Korea or London. Since he was liberated already, it did not matter where he was located geographically. His liberation began in Iran the day he and his family voted to give up their only possession-their house for saving their film. "I remember in the final years we

¹Hassan Solhjoo, *Daddy's School*, 2014

were living in Iran but were making films outside to evade stringent censor codes. Films like *Kandahar* or Samira's (daughter) film *At Five in the Afternoon* have been filmed out of Iran. They would not permit screenings for my films in Iran. In 2005 I left Iran to make films out of Iran without censorship."¹

Henceforth Makhmalbaf has made films in at least ten different countries, with people speaking in diverse languages. Most people do not know where he lives presently. He seems to be forever caught in flux, as in his poem 'the train of life and its ongoing journey, and as the bird in *Gardener*, forever caught in flight.

In his vehement denial of a native home and an adopted homeland, Makhmalbaf once again takes a rebellious stance. Unlike Sales, who lived in utter misery in Germany and later died in the USA, and Ghobadi, who is eternally torn by his desire for a reunion with his homeland and his severed family, and Vossoughi's failure to assimilate and express himself in the West, due to his inability to express himself in a foreign language, (like Sales's character from *Far From Home*) Makhmalbaf's migration does not bring with it a compromise. With his active denial and ceaseless ongoing movement, he is not forced to adhere/comply with the rules and cultures of different countries. He is not limited by the constraints that a homeland or an adopted country imposes/posits. Herein lies his ultimate act of rebellion.

In the book *Kabus Namih*, the author narrates an anecdote about the famous Sufi sheikh named Shebli who overhears the conversation between two kids studying in a nearby mosque. It is understood that one of the kids belongs to a rich family while the other is poor. The poor kid asks the rich kid to give him a piece of *halva* so he can eat his bread with it. The rich kid tells him, "Be my dog if you want my *halva*". The poor kid begins barking like a dog in his greed for halva. On sight of this Shebli bursts into tears and tells his disciples,

¹ Interview with Mohsen Makhmalbaf conducted in Persian by the author in London, March 2020.

“Had the poor child been content with plain bread his greed would not make him bark like a dog.”¹ This further brings to mind Amir Naderi’s film *Harmonica*, 1975. Here the desire to play a western musical instrument that belongs to the son of a rich merchant makes the poor protagonist Amiru get on his arms and legs, as a dog and let the rich boy ride on his back.

By rejecting the obligation to assimilate and be accepted into a foreign culture, Makhmalbaf is saved from the anxiety conformity brings with it. In choosing not to compromise his ideals to ‘fit into the culture of an adopted homeland, he rejects the *halva* that brings with it ‘the need to bark’. In being content with the liberty he has cultivated within him, and the ‘plain bread of life’, he forestalls his fall from grace.

This non-conformity and active denial of a home and his position as an exile are the most important aspects of his poetry and yet these two concepts are deliberately avoided in most of his poems. In poems written throughout his lifetime and those that have been preserved and translated for this thesis, it can be said that ‘home’ or ‘homeland’ as entities are altogether missing from all his poems, save only two. His rejection lies in not mentioning them at all, or at times substituting them with concepts that are placed as neutral terms that could mean an array of ideas, including them. His rejection is active. In the two exceptional poems that talk about home, one is based on himself and the character of his wife where their identity is less as two independent individuals but more as projected parts of each other they are not comfortable acknowledging. He displaces his relationship to his homeland onto his wife. The character of the wife represents a part of the filmmaker who does not deny the existence of such feelings. As a poet, he projects this part of his self in the character of his wife. This is also the only poem² that addresses concepts as homeland and exile.

¹Al-e Ziar, Unsur al-Ma’ali Kaykavus ibn Iskandar, *Kabus Namih* قابوس نامه (Tehran: Li. D. Scientific / Cultural Publications Company. 1992), 262

²from about fifty unpublished poems that I read and translated for the purpose of the thesis.

My wife wears more clothes these days,

زنم تازگی بیشتر لباس می پوشد

To bandage her pain.

تا دردهایش را ببوشاند.

Her clothes have wrinkles.

لباس هایش چروك می شوند.

...

My wife

زنم

Misses

دلش تنگ است؛

A homeland occupied under the name of God.

برای وطنی که به نام خدا اشغال شده است.

...

My wife is afraid.

زنم می ترسد.

Her heart warns her.

دلش گواهی بد می دهد.

Something bad will happen

يك اتفاق بد خواهد افتاد.

....

My wife goes to the mosque for prayer,

زنم برای دعا به مسجد می رود،

to church, to temple;

به کلیسا، به معبد؛

God is absent everywhere.

همه جا خدا غایب است.

...

My wife is not political,

زنم سیاسی نیست،

But politics does not know it

اما سیاست این را نمی داند

And has sent her to exile.¹

و او را به تبعید فرستاده است.

The only other short poem which has a mention of the house associates paradise with the mother's home. For the one who has experienced paradise, the search for an ideal home is over.

On a starry night

در شبی پر ستاره

With a clear conscience

با وجدانی آسوده

I am sleeping on the earthen roof of my mother's house

بر بام کاهگلی خانه مادرم خوابیده ام

The promised heaven is here.

بهشت موعود همینجاست

The hadith “*loving one's homeland is part of faith*”² has a twist of meaning in Sufism.

As discussed in chapter two, homeland is interpreted as the intrinsic origin of humanity (in

¹Excerpt from an unpublished poem by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, London, 2020.
Trans. Sreemoyee Singh with Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani

² <https://hadithanswers.com/hadith-loving-ones-homeland-is-part-of-iman/>

Rumi's term *Neyestan*). Sheikh Baha'i the Iranian philosopher, architect, mathematician, astronomer and poet in his small book *Nan o Halva (Bread and Halva)* addresses this point:

The treasure of hidden and visible knowledge (Prophet Muhammad)

گنج علم مآظهر مع ما بطن

Said: loving one's homeland is part of faith

گفت: از ایمان بود حب وطن

*This homeland is not Egypt, nor Iraq, nor Levant*¹

این وطن مصر و عراق و شام نیست

This homeland is a place that has no name

این وطن جایی است کانرا نام نیست

Those lands belong to mundane world

زان که از دنیاست این اوطان تمام

*And the best of men (prophet Muhammad) never would praise that*²

مدح دنیا کی کند خیر الانام

This brings to mind the lines of Sohrab Sepehri from his poem, *The Water's Footsteps*. Makhmalbaf, a devout admirer of Sepehri's worldview and philosophy also borrows his universalism and true cosmopolitan spirit. In his poem, Sepehri says he hails from Kashan but says nothing local about the town of Kashan that would foster feelings of nostalgia or familiarity. That he is a native of Kashan is but a fact he acknowledges. He denies it to be his town. He attaches no nostalgia with it as his homeland. He has built a house on the 'other side of the night', a metaphor for a mundane world. Only after denying the mundane world as his home, he feels true security which ironically lies in the laps of

¹large area in the Eastern Mediterranean region of Western Asia

² Sheikh Muhammad ibn Husayn Baha'i, *Divan'e Kamel Sheikh Baha'i* دیوان کامل شیخ بهایی. Edited by Saeid Nafisi. (Tehran: Golshaei Publications, 1989), 124

nature. Here Makhmalbaf's denial of the homeland is close to Sepehri's. Makhmalbaf and Sepehri build their own home in the spiritual realm (that has representation in their artistic expressions) passing through the mundane world and its nations.

I'm a native of Kashan, but

اهل کاشانم، اما

My town is not Kashan.

شهر من کاشان نیست

My town is lost.

شهر من گم شده است

I, with endurance. I, with fever,

من با تاب، من با تب

Have built a house on the other side of nighttime.

خانه‌ای در طرف دیگر شب ساخته ام.

In this home, I am close to the humid anonymity of grass.¹

من در این خانه به گم نامی نمناک علف نزدیکم.

Makhmalbaf's poems are consciously empty of cultural specificities. The subject of adulation in his poems is either nature with its flora and fauna, or human nature with its emotions such as laughter and love; universal concepts that do not originate from a specific region or culture. For him, there is perfect harmony between the natural world and human nature. Deeply inspired by Sepehri and the ideas of Buddhism he adopted in his life, for Makhmalbaf entities like the 'past' and the 'future', the 'home' and the 'world' are but the same, just as the 'river' and the 'sea' or the 'horse' 'pigeon' or 'vulture' is for Sepehri.²

¹Sohrab Sepehri, *HashtKetab* هشت کتاب (Tehran: Tahuri Publications, 1990), 285-28

²*I don't know*
من نمی‌دانم

These ideas are expressed in his poem named *Bodhi* written in 1990:

Bodhi

'I' is lost, 'she' is lost.

من رفته او رفته

From 'we' 'us' is lost

ما بی ما شده بود

Beauty is left desolate

زیبایی تنها شده بود

Every river becomes the sea

هر رودی دریا شده بود

Every existence becomes the Buddha¹

هر بودی بودا شده بود

Individualised identities are annihilated. 'I', 'he' and 'she' is removed as 'we' is ripped off its components. There remains no demarcation between existences/بودها (*bud-ha*) The ultimate manifestation of the unity of existence for Sepehri was Buddha.²

In his self-aware, conscious and active state of denial, Makhmalbaf emphasis what

Why some say that the horse is a noble animal, the pigeon is beautiful

که چرا می‌گویند: اسب حیوان نجیبی است، کبوتر زیباست؛

And why no vulture dwells in any person's cage

و چرا در قفس هیچکسی کرکس نیست.

I wonder why the clover is inferior to alfalfa

گل شبدر چه کم از لاله قرمز دارد.

One must wash eyes, look differently to things words must be washed

چشم‌ها را باید شست، جور دیگر باید دید. واژه‌ها را باید شست.

The word must be wind itself, the word must be the rain itself...

واژه باید خود باد، واژه باید خود باران باشد.

Sepehri, Sohrab. *HashtKetab* (Tehran: Tahuri Publications, 1990), 291-292.

¹Sohrab, *HashtKetab* (Tehran: Tahuri Publications, 1990), 240

Excerpt from the poem *Bodhi*, translated by Sreemoyee Singh.

²The word *Bud*بود in Farsi means existence, being. It also means was. It is a pun with the word Buddha.

he accepts, rather than what he rejects. While ideas like the past, nostalgia for a homeland, and the need for a secure home are rejected, universal human emotions like laughter, tears, and love are celebrated.

Before migration, I used to think it is culture that has changed humans. After living in different lands, I have realised we humans are the same everywhere protected by the thin skins of our cultures. If only we go only a little deeper, we can see how humans are the same everywhere. Everywhere human beings fall in love the same way, cry in the same language and express happiness in the same manner.¹

If I am not laughing

وقتی نمی خندم

What is truth to me?

حقیقت به چه کارم می آید

I have stolen this secret from the kids.²

این راز را از کودکان دزدیده ام

In the poem above truth/*haqiqat* could signify any of the abstract concepts of homeland, religion, God, culture or any such idea that he prefers not to address in his poetry. None of the above substitutes would be a bigger exaggeration than truth itself. Truth could mean to represent the ultimate meaning of everything. Here Makhmalbaf takes poetic liberty to use ‘truth’ to express concepts that he is not comfortable addressing directly or concepts he consciously rejects. For example, ‘truth’ could most definitely be substituted with the homeland.

¹ Interview with Mohsen Makhmalbaf conducted by the author in Persian, March 2020, London.

² Interview with the author, London, March 2020.

I've come to this world today

در امروز به دنیا آمدم

I've grown up today

در امروز بزرگ شدم

I've fallen in love today

در امروز عاشق شدم

I've become a father today

در امروز صاحب فرزند شدم

I've grown old today.

در امروز پیر شدم

I've heard of yesterday and tomorrow,

از دیروز و فردا شنیدم

But I haven't experienced it.¹

اما آن را تجربه نکردم

In another poem written in London, he resists attachments with the past that possesses the power to overwhelm his consciousness. Thus cultural concepts like homeland that are intrinsically intertwined with his past lose meaning. In this denial of yesterday and tomorrow, he is rejecting more than just a homeland. He rejects the reality of his status as an exiled self. In his rejection of the past and the future, and a dwelling with the present, he disowns his past that includes the history of his exile. He consciously buries it with all its memories. In doing so, he finds a way to write himself 'anew', thereby becoming *A man, pastless and content*.

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, unnamed, unpublished poem, London, 2020.
Trans. Sreemoyee Singh with Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani.

Memories of the past

خاطرات گذشته

sometimes

گه گاهی

Make me

حال من را

Feel bad/ sad.

خراب می سازند

The past that,

گویا آن گذشته

inside the present

در اکنون

burns

همچو شمع و چراغ

Like a candle in the lamp

بمی سوزند

Who am I?

من کی ام

The one who's suffered so much

آنکه رنج برده بسی

Who am I?

من کی ام

The one with rights taken away

آنکه حق او خوردند

I don't want

من نمی‌خواهم

this bad/bitter past

این گذشته بد

I am moving

می‌روم من به

Toward the moment of now

لحظه اکنون

Who am I?

من کی‌ام

A man without his own past

مرد بی‌گذشته خود

Who am I?

من کی‌ام

A bit of a better man

مرد یک کمی بهتر

Who am I?

من کی‌ام؟

A man whose life is a gift by the wind

مرد هر چه بادا باد

Who am I?

من کی ام؟

[A man of] A moment over a hundred years

لحظه ای به از صد سال

Who am I?

من کی ام؟

A man of the moment of flight

مرد لحظه ای پرواز

Who am I?

من کی ام؟

A man who sleeps under the trees

مرد خفته زیر درخت

Who am I?

من کی ام

The one who writes himself anew

آنکه خود نوشت از نو

Who am I?

من کی ام

A man, pastless and content¹

مرد بی گذشته و خوش

¹Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Memories of the Past*, unpublished poem, London, 2020.
Trans. Sreemoyee Singh with Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani.

Chapter 6:

Internal Exile: The Cinema of Jafar Panahi

Internal Exile: Analogy of the *Chador*



Figure 76: Inside the ladies' compartment of a bus. Tehran, February 2016. Photograph taken by the author

Imprisonment as a modern form of punishment replaces death and torture with mechanisms of immobility, where punishment begins with the “economy of suspended rights”.¹ Freedom of mobility and movement is considered one of the essential rights of a modern citizen. Internal exile seizes one of the basic rights to movement. In contemporary Iran, this idea could not be reinforced better than by drawing an analogy with the forceful imposition of the veil after the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The veil/curtain/hijab and the chador/tent-like black cape covering the female body, institutionalized through the Sharia Law in Iran, prescribed that a woman's garment should cover her whole body, except her face and hands, and be loose enough to conceal her figure. The term tent or chador then signified a prison a woman was mandated to entrap her body into to step outside, or (ironically) make herself visible in society. Latifa, the pseudonymous author of *My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story* writes about the chador: “This is not a garment, it is a moving prison”.²

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 11.

²Farzaneh Milani, *Words Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*. (New York:

“A woman in a burqa is more like a live body locked in a coffin...” observes Zoya in *Zoya’s Story: An Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom*.¹

The main purpose of the chador thus was not just to cover the woman’s body to make her less attractive or provocative to men but to limit and remove her from the streets, or the public arena considered to be a masculine territory. The moment a woman stepped out of her home into the public domain, she was mandated to cover herself in her ‘moving prison’, a constant reminder and visual proof of her own segregation from society. The veil thus aimed to segregate; immobilise and confine her to the domestic sphere. She could dress the way she wished to inside the confines of her house, the *andarooni*,² (the inside, the inner, the indoor), *zananeh* (woman’s space), *chahar divari* (the four walls) *khaneh* (home). But was the house, signifying a place the chador could be shed, really a free space? Could a woman be free just by shedding off the symbolic prison/ the veil/*chador*?

Did this free space exist?

‘For centuries, masculinity and femininity were designed and defined in relation to space in Iran. Mobility was a desired trait in men; in fact, it was a prerequisite of virility and manliness.’³ Men engrossed themselves with activities in the public sphere, discussed politics and the marketplace, while women were relegated to the domestic sphere. Terms like *mard e- maidan* (literally a man of the public arena but also referring to an active, pragmatic person) and *zan e-khaneh* (literally meaning woman of the house, but also referring to a woman who manages her house well) were used simultaneously. While masculinity was defined by mobility, femininity came to be defined by enclosure.⁴ In this

Syracuse University Press, 2011), 13.

¹ *ibid*

² Opposite of *birooni* which is a public sphere of the house. Old Iranian houses consisted of two different domains, *andarooni*, the private space for family, women, children, and servants, and *birooni*, the public space for meetings and friends.

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/47616/اندرونی>

³ Milani, *Words Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, 4

⁴ These limitations are mostly the consequences of development of urban areas. The necessity of women as a workforce is limited in cities with the formation of cities and urban spaces. In rural areas based on farming

context, it is interesting to note that most common traditional Iranian food preparations involve slow cooking of meat which requires women to be in the kitchen for hours at a stretch. While living in Tehran I was surprised at how long it took for the most common Iranian dish to be cooked. *Ghormeh sabzi*, for instance, a well-loved Iranian meal, commonly made in the urban areas, is cooked for over 4 to 6 hours. This required women to be in and around the kitchen, at most doing other activities like sewing or watching the television, but most definitely not stepping outside the house. Was then the house a liberating space for women?

By subjecting dissenting voices like Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof to house arrest, the purpose of the government seems less to bar them from filmmaking than remove them from the public arena (maidan) or the cultural social milieu of Iran. By seizing their passports, they are imprisoned within the country and watched by its agents. Doomed to be rendered immobile in a country that resembles a prison, and robbed of their only tools of expression, they are isolated from the rest of the world. In this chapter and the next, I attempt to show how the two exiled filmmakers relate to structural oppression in their cinema. While Panahi treads on the interface between his imprisonment and the other diverse layers of imprisonment and oppression in society, Rasoulof depicts the systematic structure of oppression itself which may or may not directly make itself visible but is embedded in the structure of governance.

In an interview with exiled filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof, I had asked him if he would classify his position as that of an exile. He replied,

and agriculture, like the northern parts of Iran with surplus rice plantations, women are essential parts of the economy. In these regions, *hijab* does not appear in the form of chador, but is integrated in a way that allows freedom of movement and agility to a larger extent.

It may seem I am not exiled from Iran geographically, but I am deleted from the media of Iran who ignores my identity and my cinema, deprives me of an exhibition space, restricts me by putting me in jail. I am isolated and exiled from my people and my culture. While other filmmakers can participate in festivals, present their films, and communicate with the world, I am left with no audience. An audience (west) who watches my films, but I cannot communicate with them; and moviegoers of Iran for whom I don't exist. They have exiled me most painfully. When you feel you are a stranger in your own country, it's better to go to another country and feel you are a stranger there. I mean, in the cultural zone of Iran, I am a stranger. I am exiled.¹

But like the home where ideally one should feel free, this free space for these filmmakers ironically exists elsewhere or outside, in the world without. An unreachable, paradisiacal territory that they strive to reach, like other citizens of Iran, a place they seem to have been locked out of. Starkly resembling the woman, imprisoned under the confines of her veil, stranded in the streets without a key to a house that promises liberty. Similar to the stranded woman burdened by the weight of her hijab who learns to adapt to the ways of the street, by compliance and gradual rebellion, first by pushing her headscarf an inch away from the top of her head, revealing tiny bits of brightly coloured hair with freshly painted scarlet nails peeping from her uniform, heels beneath her chador, tattooed brows, lasered eyes and operated noses, overcompensating for the years of being under the veil; the filmmaker begins pushing the boundaries of confinement imposed on him. He goes underground, making himself invisible, just as they intended him to, but only to make a film secretly. He first only films himself, in the lack of professional subjects, actors, or technicians but gradually steps out of his house into his car (an interim zone between the

¹ Online interview of Mohammad Rasoulof with the author conducted in Persian via Skype in November, 2019.

house and the world outside) and finally negotiates his way back into society, all in utter clandestine. The slow but relentless defiance of the women resulted in their sudden intrusion into the public arena with The Scarf Protests of 2018.¹ Some women raised white scarves as flags, atop telephone booths, busy maidans, amid crowded streets of Iran protesting against compulsory hijab laws. Several were pushed off, injured, and more than 40 were arrested by March 2018.

Rasoulof must serve a jail term for every film he makes since his ban in 2010, but he shrugs it off saying, ‘At least I’ll be back with a few good scripts’.² The struggle for expression is a daily negotiation in the lives of people rendered strangers in their homelands. There is nowhere else to be.

The Imprisoned Artist - Panahi, Rasoulof

One of the most important, globally acclaimed filmmakers of Iran, Jafar Panahi was sentenced to a twenty-year ban on filmmaking in 2010 while trying to film a gathering of around 3 million people in the streets, protesting the controversial election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A series of uprisings followed that eventually led to the Green Movement in Iran that year. Tehran was in a tumultuous condition in 2009 after the Iranian Principlists (اصول گرایان/ Osul Garayan) represented by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won in the presidential elections against the Reformists (اصلاح گرایان/ Eslah Garayan) represented by Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Only a few hours after the elections, the results were declared; Ahmadinejad had won by a landslide. The whole city erupted in protests, demanding their votes be counted again. Violence grew as many liberals, including artists, filmmakers, and actors were

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44040236>

² Online Interview of Mohammad Rasoulof with the author over Skype in November, 2019.

arrested. Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof, long-time acquaintances who had worked in each other's films earlier, were arrested while filming these protests. The common people's outcry against the disputed elections got a large part of the country together indicating to the whole world a generation that desired a change in the dictatorial politics of governance. At the same time, in sharp contrast with the large scale of protests, Mir Hossein Moussavi the leader of the opposition party, representing the Reformists, (also Prime



Figure 77: Protesters during the Green Movement. Tehran, 2009
Source: <https://www.theguardian.com>

Minister of Iran, 1981-1989) was sentenced to house arrest along with his wife Zahra Rahnavard, writer, journalist and an influential artist and a well-known figure in the cultural domain of Iran.¹ Without any trial or official court sentence they are strictly confined within their house to this day.

It has been ten years that Panahi has been confined in Iran having incurred an official ban on filmmaking. His limitations are mostly geographical as the ban has not prevented him from secretly making four films since then. Bypassing the requirements of getting a script approved or securing production and filming permits, Panahi desperately continues to go

¹ https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/11/131108_l45_mousavi_karoubi_1000_days_arrest
<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/31101469.html>

underground to make films, at times within his house in Tehran (*This is Not a Film*, 2011); by creating a fictional space of the mind within his villa overlooking the Caspian Sea (*Closed Curtain*, 2013); finally coming to terms with his verdict, filming with three cameras inside his car with a cast of his neighbours, friends, and relatives (*Taxi*, 2015). In his fourth film *Three Faces* (2018) he manages to break free from the style governed by his limitations and takes his encaged camera out of Tehran into the rural landscape of Azerbaijan with his actress (Behnaz Jafari), to investigate the rumoured death of a teenage girl.

That very year, another young filmmaker, Mohammad Rasoulof, relatively unknown then, having made only two feature films before, *Iron Island*, (2005), and *The White Meadows*, (2009), was arrested along with Panahi. Since then, Rasoulof has been serving a prison term for every film he has made. His passport has been seized by the government of Iran in 2017 and he like Panahi, is forbidden to ‘officially’ make any films. Mohammad Rasoulof won the Golden Bear at Berlinale for his film *There is no Evil* in 2020. His daughter received the award on his behalf.

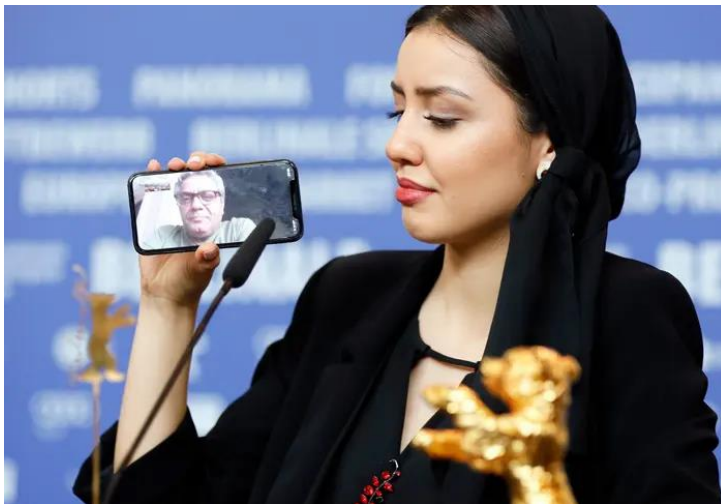


Figure 78: Baran Rasoulof receiving the Golden Bear on behalf of her father Mohammad Rasoulof at Berlinale, 2020

In the history of Iran, limiting political dissenters by pushing them into isolation and arresting them within their houses is not uncommon. Muhammad Mossadegh, the 35th prime minister of Iran (1951-1953) was sentenced to three years of solitary confinement in military prison and then to house arrest in his ancestral village, Ahmadabad near Mashhad for 14

years till his death after the coup in 1953 that overthrew his government.¹ Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri (1922-2009) successor to the revolution's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in house arrest in Qom² after he disagreed with Khomeini over the 1988 executions of Iranian political prisoners³. While political dissenters have been silenced in the history of Iran by marginalisation and isolation; as discussed in earlier chapters, after the revolution hundreds of artists including performers, writers, musicians, actresses, entertainers, and filmmakers were 'unofficially' banned from working in the entertainment industry for the rest of their lives. Fardin, the greatest star of the Film Farsi industry in the late 60s and 70s was not only banned from acting in any film or being associated with any cinematic activity after the revolution, but a lot of his property was also seized by the government. Naser Malekmoti had to give up a prolific acting career and ran a sweet shop for the rest of his life. In 2013 he was granted permission to act in a film, *Naghsh-e Negha*, directed by Ali Atshani. He died in 2018. Googoosh, one of the greatest pop icons of the 1960s and 1970s was silenced for twenty-one years after the revolution. She was not permitted to perform in Iran, or allowed to leave Iran. In the year 2000, she escaped Iran and made a comeback into the world of music with The Googoosh Comeback Tour, a series of concerts starting in Canada. Many other performers not as famous as her including hundreds of actresses, dancers, and entertainers led miserable lives and died in abject poverty. Limited by the Islamic state, musicians and violin players like Homaoun Khoram and Parviz Yahaghi could not compose or record their works as they did before. Severely limited from recording, publishing, or composing music for his whole

¹ tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/1178/مصنق-در-حصص-خانگی

https://www.bbc.com/persian/blogs/2014/03/140305_l44_nazeran_mosadeq_sfand

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfbIop5dM5k>

https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/12/141217_l47_vid_montazeri_exclusive_interview

³ Refer to chapter 5, pages 219, 220

life Yahaghi died in his house. The recordings he made in the isolation of his house were compiled into an album and released posthumously.¹

It is obvious that restricting and limiting artists in Iran does not happen with official arrest orders and banning alone. Even without an official warrant or a binding legal court sentence, a dissenting artist can be marginalised in society to a large extent. When Mohammad Reza Shajarian, the iconic classical Persian maestro, had publicly expressed his discontent against the disparaging remarks made by Ahmadinejad on the 14th of May, 2009, to the millions of protesters in the Green Movement, referring to them as trash, (خس و خاشاک) *Khas -o- Khashak*)² he was promptly deleted from the cultural media of Iran. No radio station, television channel, or internet site could stream his music henceforth. Furthermore, he was not allowed to organise any concerts within the country. When Ahmadinejad had abused protesting Iranians addressing them as trash, Shajarian had claimed that he was the voice of that trash.



Figure 79: Posters of the films made by Panahi since his house arrest in 2009

In the case of filmmakers Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasoulof though, the government was clear in its verdict. They were both arrested and officially sentenced by the Court of National Security Matters on grounds of an ‘attempt against national security. While both their prison terms were reduced due to global, international support, they are

¹ A compilation of his performances, published under the name of *Hamishe dar Yad* (in memory of) after his death.

<https://beeptunes.com/album/3423181/همیشه-در-یاد>, published by *Entesharat-e Shakheye Tuba*

²<https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/531399/خس-و-خاشاک>

both forbidden from making films, travelling out of Iran, giving interviews, or writing scripts.¹ While this chapter will chart the cinema of Jafar Panahi made after his verdict, the next chapter will take a close look at the cinema of Mohammad Rasoulof in internal exile.

Directness in the Cinema of Jafar Panahi

Iranian Cinema's re-birth after the New Wave brought with it a new language that was deeply inspired by the forms of modern poetry that infused within its structure an



Figure 80: Child actor Aida Mohammadkhani in a scene from Panahi's *White Balloon*, 1995

indirect language of rebellion. The most important filmmakers of this era, Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf were deeply inspired by the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad, Ahmad Shamlou, and Sohrab Sepehri and believed in voicing the inexpressible desires of their characters through the verses of poetry. An indirection in language was adopted to express not only sexuality and intimacy but also concepts of war and rebellion; themes that would surely be censored by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The films were poetic yet layered and would often use children as protagonists, making them a reflection of society. Following the footprints of the other directors working with the Institute² Panahi featured child actors in his earlier films (*White Balloon*, 1995 *Mirror*, 1997).

¹ Panahi and Rasoulof explained their legal sentences to me during the interviews I conducted with them. I interviewed Panahi in-person in Tehran in March 2016, and Rasoulof in 2019 and 2020 via Skype and Zoom.

² Institute of Intellectual Development of Young Adults also known in Persian as *Kanun-e-Parvaresh-e-Fekri-e-Koodakan va Nojavanan*, founded in 1965.

I realised it was easier to work with children as the censorship in Iran was easier with them as protagonists and also we didn't have big budgets to cast professional actors. The first films were really about children but I tried to tell the problems of adults through them. I started that way, I made *White Balloon* and it worked well. But after filming *Mirror* I grew out of this style. I wanted to make more direct films talking about the problems of our society, with real characters, real people. Hence I made *Circle*. Thereafter my problems began. They banned *Circle* and didn't allow me to show it in Iran. They treated it in a very harsh way. All my films faced similar problems after that.¹



Figure 81: (Left) Mina Mohammadkhani looking directly at the camera in *Mirror, Aynah*, 1997. (Right) Mina and Aida Mohammadkhani in conversation with the author in Tehran, July 2018.



Figure 82: Screenshot from *Toward Happy Alleys, Bekucheye Khoshbakht*, directed by the author, due to be released in 2021

¹ Video interview with Jafar Panahi taken in March, Tehran 2016. The interview was filmed and conducted in Persian by the author.

While these films were well received and were granted release within Iran, his later films like *Circle*, (2000) *Crimson Gold*, (2003), and *Offside*, (2006) were all banned in Iran as they directly dealt with controversial themes of women emancipation, prostitution, and abortion in post-revolution Iran. In its direct gaze into the camera which ruptured the simple world of the little girl, Mina, who loses her way home (enacted by Mina Mohammadkhani) *Mirror* pre-empted the last of the films made in the indirect language in Panahi's cinema. The wall of indirection and subtlety was thus shattered for a more direct cinema. Soon enough, the artist was banned himself. Thereafter Panahi's approach became more direct without entirely foregoing the *meaningful gestures* [my emphasis] of indirection and subtlety. The next four films emanated from the reality of his own entrapment.

During my first visit to Iran in December 2015, it took me three months to reach Panahi. I had met other filmmakers by then, and it was almost time for me to head back home. I desperately kept trying to find him; I had informed the office of the newspaper *Film*, and they told me that he was away in his villa by the Caspian Sea. I had requested them to let him know that someone had travelled from India to meet him. Just a week before my flight back to India, when I was on the brink of losing all hopes, I received a text message from him. He wanted to see me the next day itself. His house was a few blocks from the school I went to for Persian classes every day. After class, I walked to his house and instantly



Figure 83: Panahi shows the main entrance door in *Toward Happy Alleys*, Sreemoyee Singh, filmed between 2016-2018 in Tehran.

recognised it by its door- the same door that the film *This is Not a Film*, (2011) ended with. I reached his apartment to find Mr Panahi's iguana at the door, waiting to greet me.

I understood that to get his attention, I would first have to befriend his scaly best friend, Iggy, the iguana that had been his sole companion in his first film made after his ban, *This is Not a Film*. He handed me a few greens and directed me to feed it while taking the camera from my hands, ready to film my desperate attempts to pat his tail. Mr Panahi directed me to reach the head instead, saying, 'It won't eat you, stroke his head'. Reluctantly I reached for its head. The iguana shut its eyes and gave an approving nod. Panahi picked up the keys to his car, and our journey began.



Figure 85: Panahi in a screengrab from *This is Not a Film*, 2011



Figure 84: The author with Iggy. Screengrab from her documentary, *Toward Happy Alleys* (in-progress)

As we stepped into the lift to go downstairs, Mr Panahi was warmly greeted by two women in it already. He looked at me, and asked, "Do you recognise them?" I looked carefully and cried out, "The women from Ali's Spring!" They indeed were the ladies who

had acted in *Taxi*, playing the roles of two women en route to the Spring of Ali (*Chashm-e-Ali*). They ask their taxi driver (Panahi) to hurry up and take them to the spring before noon so they can release their goldfishes in it.

In a lighthearted conversation that follows in the lift between Panahi and the women who



Figure 86: The women in Panahi's *Taxi*, 2015, en-route to Chashm-e-Ali.

we now know are his neighbours, he says,

Panahi: They show it (his film, *Taxi*) around the world, but they don't show it here.

(To me) You can film us through the mirror. "

Lady 1: When does the CD come out?

Panahi: The CD's out already and they are selling it in the streets.

Lady 2: This is a forbidden film that they're selling, yes?

Panahi: Yes, of course.

Lady1: What's your next film?

Panahi: Why? Do you want to be in the next film too?

Lady 1: Of course, I'm serious; I want to act in the next film too!

Panahi: (To me) That's how we choose the actors, from common people, from the people I know because I don't want them (government) to find out about it. I cast people who are close to me as my neighbours and work with them.

Panahi: She's supposed to give me money so I can make my next film.

Lady 1: No, no absolutely not. He didn't give even me a cent!

They have a hearty laugh, and Mr Panahi directs me to his car.

‘This is the passage you see at the end of *‘This is not a Film’*

We came from the liftto ... this door. Remember?’

He refers to the last scene in *This is not a Film* where he exits the lift with the boy who picks up the trash in their building, through the passageway and walks up to the main door. The boy goes out of the door to drop the trash. It is the eve of the last Wednesday before *Nourooz* or *Shab-e Chahar Shanbe Suri*¹, and families are celebrating outside by bursting firecrackers. Panahi remains inside the door recording the celebrations from his encaged position. The film ends with blank end credits.

In the spring of 2016, a year after the worldwide release of *Taxi*, as we stepped out of the gates of the main door into the streets of Tehran we saw that the ladies from the elevator had not walked very far. At the steering wheel again, Mr Panahi cheerfully called out to them, “Don’t you want to take a taxi? I could be your taxi driver; you could pay me if you want.” The ladies replied fittingly, “Thank you but we don’t want to go to *Chashm e Ali* now.”



Figure 87: Panahi’s neighbour in *Toward Happy Alleys*, dir. Sreemoyee Singh, filmed in 2016

¹ Traditionally people light bonfires and jump over the flames on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year. They also burst firecrackers and sound bombs.
<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/113901/چهارشنبه-سوری>

This is Not a Film

In *This is Not a Film*, (2011), Panahi, awaiting the decision of his ban, calls his friend and documentary camera person, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb to his house and asks him to film him, as he narrates the script he has written based on the story of a girl, locked up in her house by her parents. He begins by narrating the screenplay of his film, deciding not to direct it as directing films is among the offences he is convicted for. The Court of National Security Matters had further barred him from writing any script, giving interviews, or travelling out

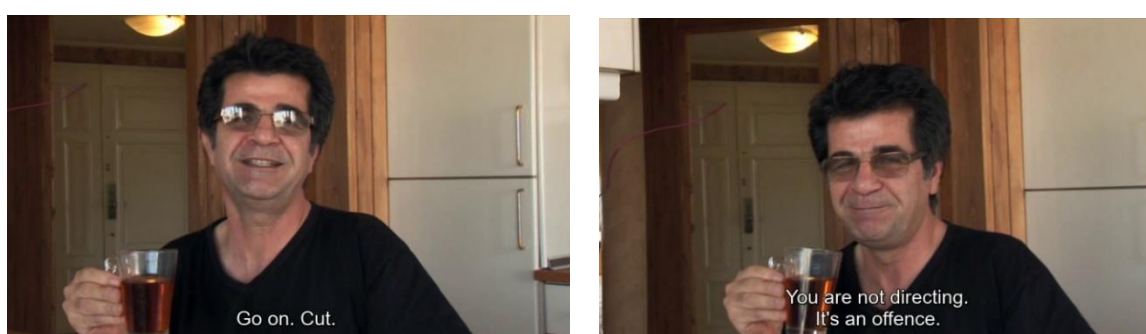


Figure 88: Screenshots from *This is Not a Film*, Jafar Panahi, 2011

of Iran for the next twenty years. In addition to that, he would have to go to jail for six years.¹ Despite his efforts in *This is Not a Film*, he intuitively keeps asking Mojtaba to cut, unable to effectively shed the role of a director. Finally, it is mutually decided that he should only act and narrate the screenplay, as Mojtaba tracks his movements in the style of a documentary. He says, “By the way, acting and reading a screenplay by me are not going to be counted as offences are they?”²

He tries to recreate the boundaries of the young girl’s house that now resembles a prison, much like Panahi’s own. As Mojtaba films him, he etches out her room over his carpet with scotch tape. Doors and windows become prominent elements in his description as they are the only means through which she can look at the world outside. Arrested within

¹ Due to a massive global outcry and international support Panahi’s prison sentence was reduced from six years to three months. Panahi informs the author in a video interview filmed in March 2016.

² Panahi speaks in *This is Not a Film*, 2011

her house, the girl is visited by her sister who is not allowed to step inside, just as she is not allowed to step out. Both the girls sit on either side of the door and discuss the problems plaguing their lives. In Panahi's life, while the camera functions as the window, allowing the world outside to get a peek into his life, the lift functions as the interim space between his apartment and the main door of his building (before being replaced by the car in *Taxi*) as the main door represents the boundary which must not be transgressed. Like his character, he stays inside with his camera, while celebrations go on beyond the door. He cannot step outside, just like the celebrations cannot reach him. The inability of the exile to step outside the walls erected around him and the impossibility of the outer reality to percolate inside becomes a recurrent motif that is developed further in the narrative of *Three Faces*, 2018. The lift boy becomes the mediator between the inner and outer worlds, continually opening and closing the doors of the lift, narrating the stories of the other families in his building. He brings the otherwise inaccessible stories to the restricted world of the filmmaker...but all the stories remain incomplete. Panahi seems to be more interested in the dreams of the spirited boy who is stuck inside a building collecting trash, instead of celebrating the arrival of the new year with the world outside. While picking up the trash of rich neighbours the young boy, a masters degree student at the University of Art in Tehran, shares his dreams of finding a secure place for himself far from the pollution, grime, noise, and trash of the city, an ideal place which brings the promise of peace. He desires only a few moments of escape. An escape (by travel) Panahi has been denied, and ironically the young boy, an otherwise free citizen will not reach. The escape to an 'idealised elsewhere'¹ remains a dream, or an unattainable, impossible desire for members of both worlds, situated on either side of the door. In doing so Panahi universalises the predicament of exile by looking outward from his imprisoned reality, to the one immediately outside his own.

¹ A concept that recurs in the works of all exiles. Refer to Chapter 3, pages 93

The lines demarcated by the scotch tape on the carpet signify more than walls the young girl is arrested within, or the walls entrapping Panahi. They signify the redlines demarcated by Iran's censor committee. Redlines which filmmakers often succeed in circumventing, through indirectness in their cinematic language to prevent their films from being censored or banned. In this case, it is not the film, but the filmmaker who has been



Figure 89: The main entrance door to the building in *This is Not a Film*, Jafar Panahi, 2011

banned. There remains not much use in circumventing the red lines anymore. Panahi now directly treads on these red lines. Henceforth he addresses these red lines directly in his cinema. The artist is censored, not just the work of art. Prohibited from working with actors or making films officially, henceforth his art becomes inseparable from his *self*. His cinema now emanates directly from the self. *This is Not a Film* and *Closed Curtain* are absorbed with the self. There is no other world he has access to but his own.

While driving around the city, in his conversation with me, he recounted the day he emerged out of court with his lawyer after they convicted him. His lawyer had told him that the government had imposed such an unreasonable punishment so he felt forced to leave Iran. He said, "I thought, why should I escape? This is my country. I like my country. I don't

want to lose my country and wander around the world. They thought I would either run away or stay here without being able to work and everything would be finished.”¹

In the film, as the city is immersed in celebrations, Panahi stands by his window, watching fireworks light up the sky. He often films them with his iPhone. From his position as a captive, vision is limited but the sounds of the outer world reach him. The sound of the celebrations of *Nourooz* resembles a panicked war zone. The sirens bellowing from the streets and the news of police hauling cars, searching the belongings of civilians, and confiscating cameras reach him. The television set at his house brings him even grimmer news from other parts of the world. Herein lies the claustrophobic world of the trapped artist, sans greetings, visitors, removed from human warmth and company.

Closed Curtain

His next film *Closed Curtain*, (2013) emerges from the frustration of entrapment and the inability of being able to make a film. Like his earlier film, Panahi filmed *Closed Curtain* secretly with the cast and crew of a handful of people in his villa by the Caspian Sea in the north of Iran. The film, lending visual language to his panicked state of mind and the characters it gives birth to; and the agony of his ban that draws a black curtain shrouding his thoughts, are a part of the filmmaker's struggles to keep afloat. Similar to the character he gives birth to, the unnamed writer, played by Kambuzia Partovi, struggling to keep himself and his dog alive while absconding from the watchful eyes of the state and its agents. He shaves his head and covers all the doors and windows of the villa with thick black cloth so he can remain anonymous and undiscoverable. The black chador not only blocks light and hence conceals visibility, but it also conceals words and feelings, and veils thoughts, it is the very symbol of censorship. But censorship is not necessarily external. In the film, the cloth

¹ Video Interview of Jafar Panahi conducted by the author in Persian in Tehran, March, 2016.

is planted by the writer/filmmaker himself. Thus it symbolises the struggle of the Iranian artist to fight self-censorship that has become a part of the language itself. It has grown to be a habit an artist constantly tries to rid himself of. The filmmaker is only revealed every time the curtains are torn off and all veils are lifted. The filmmaker resurfaces like cracks when the unconscious slips out, like the body of the filmstrip that unexpectedly reveals itself with its scratches, shoddy lines over the intended seemingly smooth image or the film narrative. Ironically here, it is the conscious that slips out in the fictitious play of characters in the filmmaker's mind. The filmmaker is as disturbed as his characters; at times inspired by the will of the good-natured writer to live and create and keep living, or possessed by the dark young girl, Melika, and her desire to kill herself by escaping into the sea. Lured by her, he contemplates suicide. He walks right into the sea but emerges out only with renewed zeal to continue making more films. In the penultimate scene, ending on a note of hope, he locks up the dark, negative character of the young girl in the villa, and pauses to give a lift to the writer and his dog in his car.

For a year I sank into depression. The situation pushed me on the verge of suicide.

I thought if I can't work what's the meaning of my life? One night I remember I went to the sea to kill myself...the same sea you see in *Closed Curtain*. I went deep in, but the huge waves kept rejecting me. I emerged crying the whole way back home. That night I told myself that I had to find a way to make films...¹

¹ Panahi in conversation with the author, in Tehran 2016.



Figure 91: Screengrab from *Closed Curtain* when Panahi goes into the sea



Figure 90: Panahi in conversation with the author in her documentary *Toward Happy Alleys*, filmed in 2016, Tehran, Iran.

Taxi

By the time Panahi started filming *Taxi*, (2015), he had overcome the fear and paranoia that the ban implanted on him. With *Taxi*, he seems to have found *the way out* he was seeking while filming *Closed Curtain*. While the earlier two films emanated from the world absorbed with the self, he never seemed quite content with this emerging self-reflexive, self-absorbent language that arose as a symptom of his limitations. His film form while eliminating the need for professional actors, sets, or high-end equipment was now a result of the limitations that constituted his language in itself. Roughly till about the year

2000, it would have been impossible to shoot in the manner in which Panahi shoots now, as the easiest way to control film production was to control equipment. Institutes like Farabi Cinema Foundation possessed all the cameras required for filming, and nothing could be filmed bypassing it. In adopting this language, Panahi had allowed his prohibition to directly become a part of his content or his narrative.¹

But despite arriving at this language, Panahi was not at ease. After all, he identified himself as a social filmmaker above all else. Self-introspection and reflection, while being important aspects of his language could not be all-pervasive in his cinema.

I am not a political person...or a political filmmaker. I make films about society. I would rather call myself a social filmmaker...but in the situation, we are living in everything that we do, even the clothes that I'm wearing now could be interpreted with a political view.²

Circle, (2000), *Crimson Gold*, (2003), *Offside*, (2006), were films about social ills that plagued him. These films, while being harsh critiques of patriarchy, masculinity, fundamentalism, the ill-treatment, and marginalisation of women and the poor, came as a result of observation and the desire to narrate the stories of those robbed of their voices and silenced into repression. His cinema voiced the problems of society as his camera took a

¹ Mohsen Makhmalbaf was forced to do the opposite in his film *Nights of Zayandehrood*, 1990, by allowing censorship to be visible in the form of his film. The film had been banned for years with its footage cut from its original length of 100 minutes to 63 minutes without the permission of the filmmaker. A couple of screenings after the film was mutilated, the government decided to ban the film altogether. They seized the film and locked it in a vault. Many years later the film was smuggled out of the vault, retouched and finally screened in the Venice Film Festival in 2016.

“When after twenty-six years I watched the film again, I was surprised to notice that in spite of all the mutilations (nearly one-third of the film), the story and the main structure of the film still remained rather unharmed. The film looked like a living thing with no limbs but it was still breathing, and its story and meaning were not lost.”

<http://www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=film/nights-zayandeh-rood>

² Jafar Panahi in conversation with the author in Tehran, March 2016

stand for the oppressed. He was the filmmaker, narrating the stories of the oppressed, those without a voice. His stories were inspired by society. He never was a part of them. In fact, his position clearly remained outside his stories. Despite empathising, he could not equate his position with the group of oppressed women forbidden to enter a football stadium (*Offside*), everyday women being imprisoned for prostitution or desiring an abortion (*Circle*), a poor pizza seller desiring respect in society (*Crimson Gold*), or the lonely Afghan child left alone on the first day of *Nourooz* (*White Balloon*). He was the storyteller, always positioned outside his stories, visibly affected by the regimentation and inequalities of the society he lived in, despite his privileged position.



Figure 92: Aida Mohammadkhani and Jafar Panahi re-enact a crying sequence from *White Balloon* in the documentary *Toward Happy Alleys*, dir. Sreemoyee Singh.



Figure 93: Aida shows the place where the crying scene originally took place from the stills of *White Balloon* in her album.

Quite ironically, even before that, in his earliest films like *White Balloon*, (1995) and *Mirror*, (1997) Panahi had taken on the role of the oppressive director to tell the stories of children, a world he stood entirely outside of. In my meeting with Panahi in 2016, when he introduced me to Aida Mohammadkhani, the child actor in *White Balloon*, I learned how he made her cry. Aida, all of five then, was instructed to sit facing him and look straight into his eyes while he held her by her shoulders. She recounted she would break into tears each time he did that. Panahi asked Aida to re-enact that scene after twenty-one years, this time for my camera. In an intimate, spontaneous, and intense sequence, Aida broke into tears. Panahi spontaneously took the camera from my hands and filmed Aida himself. Memories of a glorious era of cinema, where he could work as a free filmmaker directing his actors, resurfaced.

Two years later, in 2018, when I met Aida and her sister Mina (who had acted in *Mirror* when she was seven years old) together in Tehran she too recounted how Panahi tricked her to cry. Aida, taken by surprise asked her sister, “He did it to you too?” Mina recounted that it was very difficult to get her to cry. After trying out different tricks and failing, Panahi had devised a very cruel plan. “A wallet had suddenly gone missing from the sets one afternoon. The whole crew had started searching everybody’s belongings. It was all set up of course. Mr Panahi had put the wallet in my bag. This made me look like a thief. When they discovered the wallet from my schoolbag, I remember crying uncontrollably. By the time I had stopped, the shot was taken.”¹ The sisters laughed reminiscing old memories by turning the pages of an old album with posters and production stills from the films they acted in as children.

From taking on the role of the oppressor directing child actors to act to telling the stories of the oppressed, he, like his characters, became the oppressed after his ban. From

¹ In-person video interview of Aida and Mina Mohammadkhani with the author in Tehran, July, 2018.

filming the wrongs of society, he became the one who was wronged. With this change in position, he physically stepped into his stories. He no longer was an observer of society, a director directing his subjects. He now became his own subject. He became the primary character or the protagonist of his own story.

Like Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Moment of Innocence*, (1996) where cinema became a tool for confession and redemption, Panahi confessed his fears and vulnerabilities before his camera. In most spiritual practices and religious beliefs, redemption follows confession. In the world of these filmmakers where cinema replaces religion, the camera replaces the confession box (or the witness box and the missing judiciary); bread and a flower vase replace guns and violence, and the only way the artist can redeem himself and therefore keep alive, is by narrating his story. In Iran, the idea of seeking redemption in storytelling has roots in Sufism. Sufis believe that by telling and retelling their love stories they would one day transform into their stories (that would instead be narrated by others). In his story of Mahmoud and Ayyaz¹ Rumi feels so connected to the character of Ayyaz that the demarcation between the writer/creator and the character/creation fades. In the end, he asks his character to narrate him as a love story. He says that by narrating the story of lovers he has experienced such deep love that now he deserves to be narrated. He asks his character to narrate his story henceforth.

Oh Ayyaz, I have become a thin hair out of your love

ای ایاز از عشق تو گشتم چو موی

¹ In the fifth volume of his magnum opus, *Masnavi*, Rumi narrates the story of faith and love between Mahmud and Ayyaz.

Malik Ayyaz was one of the Turkish slaves (later acted as a military commander as well) of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. It is believed that he was from Georgia. Despite the homosexual nature of their love, their love story has been elevated to the highest levels in Sufi and Persian literature. Ayyaz symbolises the epitome of a perfect human being, consumed in his love for his master Mahmud. Mahmud represents God, who despite not being in need of a lover (because he is perfect) cherishes the love of Ayyaz. Sirius Shamisa, *Dictionary of Allusions*, (Tehran: Majid publishing house, 1996), 536

I cannot continue the story, you tell my story

ماندم از قصه تو قصه من بگویی

Faithfully I have told your love story numerous times

بس فسانه عشق تو خواندم به جان

Now it is your turn to narrate me....¹

ماندم از قصه تو قصه من بگویی

He expresses the same concept in a *ghazal* in the *Divan Shams-e Tabrizi*,

Nights and days, I read the tales of lovers.

فسانه عاشقان خواندم شب و روز

Now by your love, I am a love tale myself²

کنون در عشق تو افسانه گشتم

While *Closed Curtain* and *Taxi* are loosely woven around this idea, Panahi weaves his narrative technique in *Three Faces* based on this concept. With *Taxi*, the vehicle of the car, a local yellow taxi becomes the window that puts him in touch with society, without necessarily directly placing him outdoors in the streets, within the radar of being watched. The lift, a rudimentary vehicle that navigated him within the premises of his building in *This is Not a Film*, now is fully realised in the car. Panahi keeps a disguise donning the acting cap, playing the role of a taxi driver with three cameras covered with black parchments on three sides of his car. Unlike the earlier films, here he seems composed doing what comes most naturally to him: directing and interacting with members of a forbidden world outside his own, albeit illegally.

¹ Jalal al-Din Rumi, and Karim Zamani Jafari. *Sharḥ-i Jami-i Maṣnavi-i Manavi*, volume 5 (Tehran: Ettelaat Publications, 2013) 517-521

² Mowlana Jalaleddin Muhammad Balkhi, *Ghazaliyat Shams-e Tabriz*, volume 2 (Tehran: Sokhan Publications, 2008), 554

But in the film *Taxi*, I was at ease, I put all those thoughts away. I put a small camera here, one there at the back and I started to make the film and no one realised I was making a film. Even now when you're filming me with that camera if someone notices you he'll think you're taking photos. I thought this is the best way, why should I not use it?¹

When I first met Panahi almost a year after the release of *Taxi*, I had expected to see the portrait of a broken man. Instead, the person standing before me was brimming with life, wit, and humour. While he spoke with calmness, his mind remained attentive to the world outside his car and he constantly found ways of directing the outer reality within my frame. I found him obsessively looking for expression in others, be it the neighbours he bumped into or the street musicians that organically entered the frame with their songs, through Aida, or me. He exploited each of these characters of the external world to express what he officially couldn't - and in doing so he once again assumed the role of a director, indulging in the forbidden act of making a film. Quite like the sequence in *This is Not a Film*, where half inadvertently, half out of habit, he asks Mojtaba to keep cutting, despite knowing that directing is an offence he needs to steer clear of, in his conversations with me before my camera, he kept similarly directing me to cut. At other times, he would brighten the lights inside his car as it got darker outside asking, 'Do you have enough light, or is your image grainy? Very often he would take the camera from my hands and indulge in the pleasures of filmmaking himself. I found the director in him always at work, leaving little or no room for any distinction between cinema and life.

Taxi, a harsh critique on contemporary Iranian society begins with a debate on capital punishment between two passengers who discuss whether cutting the limbs of petty thieves

¹ Video interview of Jafar Panahi with the author conducted in Persian in Tehran, March 2016

or executing them is justified as punishment in a society that fails to accommodate its youth in its economy. The theme of theft runs throughout the film with passengers narrating stories of being mugged. Ironically, the film ends with Panahi's own car being vandalised, its parts robbed along with the cameras. The instrument or the only tool that has the power record reality is vandalised and stolen. Reality cannot be directly encountered in a society that propagates veiling the truth and considers indirection to be a virtue. Hence it is only fitting that in the end, the instrument of recording reality must be stolen and the vehicle of liberation, (the car) vandalised. Reality is veiled and enshrouded with a black cape (chador) just as cameras (in Panahi's car) must be concealed with black cloth from the world outside. The camera eye is blindfolded as the artist is robbed of vision. Visibility and directness are not considered to be virtues in this society.

In a scene from *Taxi*, Panahi (playing himself) picks up his young niece from school. She takes out a camera and recites a set of rules that she has been taught in school. She has been told that these rules are to guide students on how to make a film so it is easily "distributable" (not censored). The young girl narrates the codes innocently, "Respect the headscarf, No contact between men and women, avoid sordid realism, avoid violence... avoid discussing political and economic issues..."¹



Figure 94: Panahi's niece Hana narrating the codes taught in school in the film *Taxi*, 2015

¹ Jafar Panahi, *Taxi*, 2015

The teacher further informs the students to self-censor themselves with their knowledge of the rules if they find themselves in doubt while filming. The little girl does not fully understand what sordid realism is but she does understand that the teacher has asked her to avoid showing the truth. Seemingly affected by the propaganda instilled in the minds of young students in the garb of education, Panahi stops the car and asks his niece if she can hear a ringing sound. The car stops, he steps out to find the source of the sound only to realise that it has come from the walls of memory; of an encounter with his interrogator in prison who blindfolded him, pinning him against the prison walls during the process of interrogation.¹ As I filmed him in Tehran, he explained to me how the language of his cinema had thus become intertwined with the memory of his past which often accidentally found ways to step into his scenarios.

This brings us to the issue of indirection in cinema or self-censorship

Self-censorship

***Tarrouf* in Language**

Self-censorship in Iran is embedded in language itself. Farsi, deeply inspired by the traditions of classical poetry of great poets such as Ferdousi, Saadi, and Hafez has vagueness and indirection at its heart. Under despotism, indirection and subtlety are the only ways to express and survive. The concept of *tarrouf*² following the codes of courtesy (meaning to greet, but also refraining from the truth to appear polite or discreet, or offering something that one truly does not wish to) in Farsi transforms self-censorship into a value or an attribute like modesty “In a veiled society, women are not the only ones veiled. The concrete, the

¹ Video interview of Jafar Panahi with the author, March 2016

² <https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/89295/تعارف>

specific, and the personal also are veiled. Communication is veiled. Words and feelings are veiled.”¹

Accounts of Filmmakers: Manijeh Hekmat

In the course of my fieldwork and stay in Iran between 2016-2018, I met quite a few other filmmakers, actors, and technicians working in diverse fields in the cinema industry. While each of them narrated their struggles of negotiating with the government and its censor committee, The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance; hatred, for one thing, unified them all: the condition of self-censorship where one began censoring his/ her thoughts due to constant pressure from the censor committee, culture and the system itself. Manijeh Hekmat, filmmaker, producer, actively working in the industry since the 80s expressed her disdain for the censor and how it conditioned them to curb their artistic expression, just like Panahi’s niece is taught in school in *Taxi*.

Censor, what a horrifying word in the world! I hate the word. It is the most dangerous part of our lives...I hate the way the censor board functions...and everybody associated with it. Contrary to what people in the free world think, I do not support the idea that censorship brings creativity...it only brings humiliation. Surviving the censor and saving even a shot of your film makes you feel like a champion. I don’t make films in a free world. A part of the neck, a strand of hair, a line, a scene, when chopped off, could make our films stammer. We are smart and have belief in our thoughts and knowledge and if we were living in a free world, we would have a lot more to say globally.²

¹ Farzaneh Milani, *Words Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, 20

² Video interview of Manijeh Hekmat with the author in Tehran, July 2018.

She continues by saying that contrary to what audiences in the global world believe, censorship brings humiliation, not creativity. She explains that awaiting the decision of the censor body is stressful but it is most dangerous when at the edit table, while watching the rushes the editor points out that certain scenes ought to be removed as they would surely be censored. “...It is a betrayal of humanity when one reaches a point where he habitually begins self-censoring himself. It is a betrayal to the artist herself...to her thoughts. It is better not to make such a film.”

I had the opportunity to be present for the screening of Manijeh Hekmat’s *Jaddeye Qadim, The Old Road* at the Fajr Film Festival of 2018. Hekmat sitting next to me in the last row of the hall was anxious, as the Fajr committee was notorious for chopping scenes without consultation with the directors. A particular scene with a mid-close shot of the lead actress Mahtab Keramati had her entire neck in a blur. She had followed the protocols of dressing prescribed by the Islamic State, but apparently, her long neck took up a major part of the frame. Hekmat whispered, “See what they did? They were not supposed to do this. We take our chances, but they find the most natural things and censor them most unnaturally.”

In her negotiation with the Ministry, Hekmat’s works require permits from the industry and despite her anger and frustrations with the government (which had also arrested her daughter Pegah Ahangerani twice) each of her films have both been screened in public theatres in Iran, and globally in film festivals. The system tolerates her as long as she succumbs to the limits assigned by them.

Mohammad Shirvani

Mohammad Shirvani, an actor and an alternative filmmaker, works independently, not requiring much support or public screening space from the government. Having made two feature films, notable shorts, and documentaries, he often stages protests against the

regime in different parts of Iran. In 2017, I followed him to Orumiyeh, in the province of West Azerbaijan, where he had driven with a small crew to stage a protest in the dying salt lake of Orumiyeh. Frustrated and depressed with the dying state of cinema in his country he burns his only possession, his car. He says,

“Instead of burning myself, I burnt my car...

Thank god I had a car to burn...”¹

He had been escaping in the islands of Hormoz, in the Persian Gulf region where I found him after two years. He made an analogy of Iran with the cave he was seated in. The walls of the cave were not high enough to allow one to stand upright. He compared Iran to be similar to the cave where a citizen is taught to bend until he forgets what it is like to stand

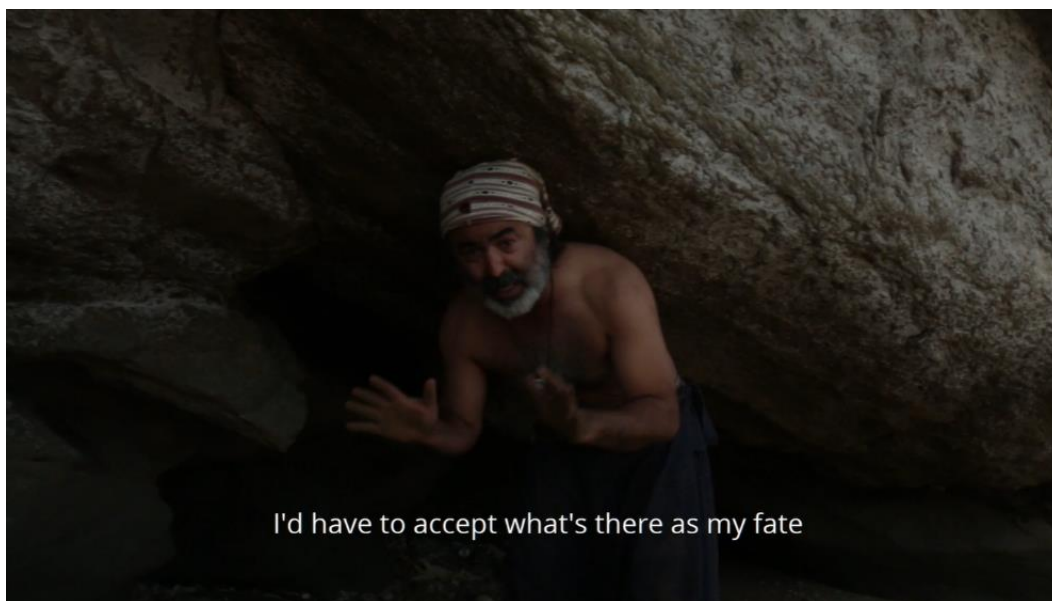


Figure 95: Mohammad Shirvani from a screen grab of *Toward Happy Alleys*, dir. Sreemoyee Singh, Tehran 2017

upright. While explaining, he suddenly gets up and tries to stand upright himself. He cannot, he is forced to bend. He shows how not only Iranian citizens have been taught how to lead bent lives, but also accept this abnormality and be content with it. The state not only renders an individual cripple but normalises disability itself till people forget what it is like to lead normal lives.

¹ Conversation of Mohammad Shirvani with the author filmed in Hormoz Islands, December, 2017

In my opinion, self-censoring in robbing us of our creative ability cripples us. For example, they'll ask you to live here. As a tiny kid, I'd crawl and play with the sand. As I grow taller, I'd have to bend this way...meaning I'd have to adapt according to the limitations they've deemed fit for me. I would be taught that bending is a normal way of life. But if you just move out a little bit, (he walks out of the cave toward the sea) you'd reach the sea.¹

He emerges out of the cave and walks toward the sea. A few moments before reaching the sea, he takes off the microphone attached to his body and drops it on the sand. The sound goes off. He touches the water and washes his face.

Kianoush Ayari

Kianoush Ayari has been making films for the last thirty-five years, but none of the eleven films he made could easily get a release inside the country. Save a few earlier films, all his films had been barred. When I met him in the winter of 2015, he took me to a room full of rejected screenplays and ancient film cameras. When I started filming, he could not speak much. There were long silences... perhaps much safer than brutally pent out anger. His latest film *Paternal House*, 2012, which dealt with the subject of honour killing, finally got a screening permit in Iran after three years in 2015 but was taken off the cinemas within a few hours, being deemed too violent for screening. In his own words,

Never can a filmmaker give his entire attention to filmmaking. He must always think about the limitations imposed by the censor board...perhaps a particular part

¹ ibid

could make one group uncomfortable, and another part could make another group uncomfortable...in this process, we filmmakers have started censoring ourselves all the time. We have become self-censors”¹

On October 28th, 2019, they showed the film again but took it down after five days.

Finally, on the 13th of November, it was given its long-due screening space.

Nasrin and Nourizad: The Implications of Directness/being *Bi-tarrof* ²

Nasrin Sotoudeh, well known human rights lawyer and activist from Iran won the Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament on 26th October 2013 along with Jafar Panahi. Her memorable role in Jafar Panahi’s *Taxi* evokes her own life and struggles. I met her in her office in January of 2016 soon after her release from prison. She recounted the memories of filming in *Taxi* and told me that the award got her acquainted with Panahi in real life, and after they were both released from their prison terms their relationship grew deeper.³



Figure 96: (Left) Nasrin Sotoudeh plays herself in *Taxi*; (Right) Nasrin interviewed by the author in Tehran, 2016

I was aware that he was writing a film script for his film with the name *Taxi*, where he himself played the role of a taxi driver who drives around the city. You know initially Mr. Nourizad⁴ who is a political activist, was supposed to play the part where

¹ Video interview of Kianoush Ayari with the author conducted in Persian in Tehran, February, 2016

² The one without *tarrouf*.

³ Panahi spent three months in the Evin prison, and Nasrin was arrested for 3 years for defending minors against death sentences, source: video interviews with Jafar Panahi, March 2016 and Nasrin Sotoudeh in January 2016

⁴ Mohammad Nourizad is an Iranian filmmaker, scriptwriter, and journalist. He made eight feature films and

I appear. But it turned out that Mr Nourizad was arrested around the same time Mr. Panahi started filming. One day, early in the morning Mr. Panahi came to our house and told me, “Today is the day we were supposed to film with Mr. Nourizad; would you come and act in his place?” I agreed instantly as Mr. Nourizad’s arrest worried us all at that time.¹

In conversation with Nasrin, I got to know about her struggles, her life in prison where she fought against (and encouraged other women captives to do the same) the mandatory wearing of the *chador*. Her work license was seized from her and she was not permitted to travel outside of Iran following her arrest. She continued...

There were two scenes with me. We shot for three hours or so over two days. In the film, you see a yellow car, which is the colour of taxis in Tehran. But the car we were filming inside was not a real taxi. He (Panahi) did some cinematic tricks...and put all the cameras inside the car and covered them with a piece of cloth so they could not be seen. Therefore, from the outside nothing was visible and it could as well appear as if we were just returning after visiting a victim’s family. Essentially there was no visible camera that could arouse suspicion and deter the process of filming.²

nine TV series (fiction and documentary) after the revolution till 2009. His works as filmmaker and as a journalist are considered faithful to the cause of the system. But after 2009, he changed his idea about the system and began criticising the system in various ways. He wrote thirty-nine open letters to the leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He faced several arrests, long prison terms and torture. He attempted to commit suicide in prison to put an end to the torture. In 2018, he was sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment, three years of banishment to Izeh (a remote place in the southwest of Iran) under the offence of insulting the leader, advocating against the system, attending a protest demonstration and condemning the shoot down of the Ukrainian flight 752, by Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. He could not professionally make a film after 2009.

<https://ir.voanews.com/latestnews/iran-human-rights-441>

<http://nameha.nurizad.info/>

¹ Video interview of Nasrin Sotoudeh with the author conducted in Persian in Tehran, January, 2016.

² *ibid*

As mentioned earlier, the early months of 2018 had seen scarf protests against the mandatory veiling of women erupt in different regions of Iran. Several women had demonstrated by waving their headscarves in the form of flags in busy streets and public squares. Most were arrested, forcefully removed by agents from their positions of protest; imprisoned, and charged heavy fines. I could not meet Nasrin again when I went back to Iran in 2018. She was implicated for contempt against national security (like Panahi) for defending the rights of the protesting women. In March 2019, Nasrin Sotoudeh was charged with thirty-eight years of prison term and one hundred and forty-eight lashes. She is currently in prison.

Three Faces

Introduction

When I went back to Iran in November of 2017, I came to know Mr. Panahi had secretly made his fourth film, *Three Faces* after his ban. No one knew about it yet, and I came to know only because I had left Mr. Panahi a message on arriving. A week later he invited me for a private screening of his film, to take place in his house, only with very few people. A friend agreed to drop me to his house. I was a bit lost and we decided to pull back and ask for directions. We stopped the first car moving that way. The person driving the car, an amiable-looking man in his sixties looked oddly familiar. Very politely he pointed forward and said he was going the same way. My friend, a fan of cinema and football had instantly recognised him, and asked me, ‘Do you know who he is? He’s Hamid Reza Sadr, a famous Iranian cinema critic and a very popular football commentator.’ I had first read Sadr’s very popular book, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* ten years ago while writing my M.A dissertation. We both understood he too was on his way to Mr. Panahi’s house. We

followed him. Quite rightly, he stopped outside the familiar gates. As I stepped out of the car, my friend said, ‘Do tell him, we love the witty remarks he makes about football on TV’. We exchanged smiles and took the lift to the ninth floor. Panahi greeted and introduced us to each other and a room of about fifteen people. The screening began shortly in a huge screen spread across one of his walls. It was a delightful experience. The film did not have English subtitles, which meant I would only understand about 80% of the dialogues, but nevertheless, I was thrilled to watch Panahi’s latest film with him, in his house, at least a year before the rest of the world could. I realised much later that about half the film had Turkish dialogues, and just when I began looking around for some help, Mr Panahi came out of the blue, sat next to me, and began translating the Turkish dialogues to me in Persian. Soon he was summoned by his wife, but like a true gentleman, he assigned the job of translation to Mr Sadr. Sadr sat next to me and translated the Turkish lines to me in English. I was a bit relieved as I could now get back to enjoying the experience of watching the very layered film without investing all my attention in deciphering a language I was only learning then. The film was quite verbose, unlike the other films of Mr Panahi, and even though the dialogues in Turkish were being translated for me live, I knew I was missing out on quite a lot of the actual conversation. Surely a lot was lost in translation. Two years later when I watched the film at the Kolkata Film Festival with my friends and colleagues I realised that it would have been impossible to translate the dialogues in English or Farsi to me and Sadr, despite his efforts, being a true Iranian gentleman that he was, could not have crossed the formal boundaries of *tarrouf* (politeness here) to talk about such personal things with a woman he had just met. The conversations were deeply layered, just as the film was. Suddenly it seemed to me the filmmaker had finally begun talking seven years after his ban...but ironically not in the official language of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Shot in a

remote village of Azerbaijan on the border of Turkey, more than half the film was in Turkish, the mother tongue of the filmmaker.

An Analysis of the Film

Three Faces is not just the story of representation of three women, Merziyeh, Behnaz Jaffari, and Shahrzad, but is the story of three faces of the filmmaker (Panahi) himself. The English translation of *Se Rokh* is Three Faces, but in Persian, it also refers to the three-quarter profile of an individual, as used in cinematic or photographic terms. According to Webster's dictionary, it is a representation of a head or figure posed about halfway between front and profile views. In this regard, the three women represent different facets of the filmmaker's character: Merziyeh, the character of the young teenager he had given birth to in *This is Not a Film*, 2011 imprisoned in her house because of her desire to go to drama school in Tehran; Behnaz Jaffari, the city-bred, popular television actress representing the industry and social scenario he was actively a part of in the 90s; and Shahrzad, the forgotten entertainer of Film Farsi industry, erased after the purification program of the Islamic revolution, marginalised and isolated by society that entraps her in her hut and secludes her from the rest of the village. Her hut is situated atop a hill no villager is allowed to frequent. Forced to give up her career, she is removed from her community and arrested within her house. Shahrzad is a metaphor of the artist arrested within his own country, she is that face of the filmmaker that will never be seen in the film, the face of the artist exiled internally, hidden from society. In the three-quarter profile, while one profile is visible, the other is partially hidden. These comprise the two visible faces, the third face, that of Shahrzad is hidden completely.

The film begins with a young girl, Merziyeh, staging a suicide video to be sent to the famous actress Behnaz Jaffary through her phone camera. The video reaches Mr Panahi instead who picks up Jaffary from the film set of Manijeh Hekmat's ongoing feature and

together they drive toward the remote ancient village in Azerbaijan that Merziyeh hails from. The village they drive to is protected by ancient mountains, old customs, traditions, superstition, and religion. In a way, it is sealed from city life and the modernity it offers, and it is essential for anyone entering to heed the rules of entry which are based upon signals made by blowing horns of their vehicles. The roads are precariously narrow and steep, and one must await his turn to pass through. Much like the setting of Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*, 1999, this village has a school, a cafe, winding roads where telephone connectivity does not reach, and a landlocked primitive society where the pride of men arises from protecting and safeguarding their women (or their *namus*¹) from threats of (modernisation) the external world. But here two rebellious women have threatened the virility of the village. Underlying themes of emasculation are conveyed through the ideas of circumcision and the metaphor of the 'dying bull with the golden balls'. The masculine aggression of the village is further threatened by the presence of Shahrzad- the resisting entertainer, a bad influence on the young women of the village especially Merziyeh, who wishes to follow in her footsteps and become an actor. Merziyeh's brother representing unchecked masculine aggression needs to be locked instead. Afraid of her abusive brother Marziyeh has taken refuge in Shahrzad's house.

In *The Wind Will Carry Us* the visitor Behzad, curious to see the face of the woman who milks a cow, recites the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad to fill the awkward silence and the undercurrent of sexuality. Here the voice of Shahrzad reciting poetry breaks the silence of the night Panahi spends in his car. The real Shahrzad and the filmmaker never meet, but poetry is exchanged between them. It connects the two exiles. This mockery of virility, although present in subtler degrees is seen in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1999, in the *Qahvekhoone*/cafe sequence, where ironically the only active woman of the

¹a female member of a family who is supposed to be controlled and supervised by a male member in order to retain the honour of the family. It also means virtue, chastity, honour and respect.

village, who runs a cafe, must serve tea to all the men of the village. She is ill-tempered but a customer (in all probabilities her husband) finds a way to make her lips curl into an embarrassing smile when he talks about the third profession which a man and a woman must together do. She tells him that all women have three jobs, they work by the daytime, by sunset they are all *Qahvechis* (the one who serves tea/coffee) serving their husbands, and by night they give sexual service to them. The customer defends himself by saying that the third job requires their contribution too, if the man did not do his part well in the third profession, he would be dishonoured. The pressure on them to perform he says is heavier than that of Mount Alborz. The woman smiles as the other customers look away. The locals do not speak Farsi, she speaks in a Kurdish dialect with him.

In *Three Faces* the two rebelling women refuse to be the *namus* or that which needs protection by a male patriarch. Joined by Behnaz Jaffary, they weave a safe world around themselves. Together they visit the hut of Shahrzad. In this harem and its inner quarters, they dance dream of freedom, and celebrate. Panahi tells a shaky Merziyeh as she is taken back to her house by Behnaz Jaffary, to rest assured, as a woman knows best how to handle the problems in the world of women herself. She does not need a man. He remains outside their house, respecting the boundaries of privacy, just as Kiarostami's camera in *Close Up* (1990), remains outside the scene where Sabzian is handed over to the police. The filmmaker chooses to remain on the fringes of the narrative, only telling stories, careful not to take charge and direct the women in their journey toward liberation. The characters are only his metaphors, extensions of himself, but it is they who drive the narrative by their choices and actions. Panahi here supervises the narrative, he is the guide, but like every filmmaker who does this from outside his film, he does it from within the film. He has physically stepped into his film, but unlike the first two films made after his ban and *Taxi* to some extent, he does not place himself at the centre, but only initiates, observes, and reflects from the

margins. While his position had moved from outside to the inside of the narrative after his ban, it now shifts from the centre to the periphery.

There is only one story in the film: the story of the narrator who needs to continue telling stories to stay alive; the story of Shahrzad, the ultimate entertainer in *A Thousand and One Nights*, or *Arabian Nights*, who tells one thousand and one stories to her husband, a Sasanian King, Sharbaz¹ in order to keep herself and the other virgins of the village alive. Sharbaz is on a mission to kill virgins of the region after the infidelity of his wife. He marries all the virgins of his kingdom only to execute them the following morning. When all the virgins of the town have been executed the vizier's daughter Shahrzad volunteers to be the king's next bait. She devises a plan to postpone her death a night at a time. Each night she tells stories to the king but keeps them incomplete leaving the king curious to know the ending. The thousand and one stories she narrates emanate from her and merge into her. The act of narrating itself becomes a story of survival. Hence there is only one story, that of being Shahrzad. Every allegory and every tale stems from her and must become her. Like every river that enters the sea and becomes the sea, only one story exists that of the necessity of telling stories itself. Shahrzad saves lives. Her ultimate act as a protagonist is in narrating. The ultimate desire of the characters is in being narrated. Who is Sharzad here? Shahrzad is not only a metaphor for the filmmaker but in being the original narrator she is inseparable from him. Panahi is Shehrzad, but so is Merziyeh and Behnaz Jaffary. They are three faces of Shahrzad or the one who is never seen. All characters emanate from her. In narrating their stories, they emancipate themselves and each other. Thus, like Rumi, pained by the agony of love, invokes his character Ayaz to narrate his love story, Panahi in *Three Faces*, devices a narrative where boundaries between the self and the characters merge as his tale is narrated by three of his characters. It is not important who tells the story, so long as the story is told.

¹Abdul-Latif Tasuji, *Hezar o Yek Shab*, volume 1, 3 (Tehran: Darande Kolale Khavar Publications, 1936)

The film begins with Marziyeh as the first storyteller. Ironically the only way she can be alive is by staging a suicide video of hanging herself, but before the final act, she records her story for Behnaz Jaffary, her role model. She tells her how she fell in love with cinema as a child and studied all her life so one day she could become an actress like Jaffary herself. She was accepted at the drama school in Tehran but betrayed by her family, she is imprisoned in her village, far from pursuing her dreams. She had thought that the only way to convince her parents was to reach out to Jaffary for help. Only Jaffary could have convinced her family as they loved her and watched her on television every night. She was popular among the village folk. She entertained them every night. Despite her efforts, Jaffary never responded to her calls. Helpless, she says in the video, there remains no other way but to take her life. She hangs herself, as the telephone falls to the ground.

Consumed by guilt and fearing Jaffary reluctantly agrees to visit the village with Mr Panahi to know the truth behind the events. In her empathy for Marziyeh, Behnaz Jaffary, the popular television entertainer, who tells stories through performances that make people forget their troubles, enters the story as the one who saves. After discovering that the video was only a tool to get her to the village, she feels cheated but soon understands the plight of the young girl who needs her help. With nowhere to go, they visit the house of the village outcast, and the original performer, Shahrzad, castigated for choosing a profession unfit for women. Three generations of rebelling women performers, entertainers, and storytellers unite. They dance and celebrate as the filmmaker waits outside in his car.

Shahrzad, apart from being the princess from *Arabian Nights*, is also the elusive face, a real-life representation of the entertainer and the cabaret dancer Shahrzad, a star from the Film Farsis of the 60s and '70s who was banished after the revolution. As Behnaz Jaffary emerges from Shahrzad's house, she hands over a DVD of Shahrzad's poetry to Panahi. The

next morning, a shot reveals the cover of the DVD. The cover is the poster of the documentary,

The real Shahrzad, banned from a career in acting, lives in the outskirts of town, paints, writes poetry, and occasionally makes documentaries.

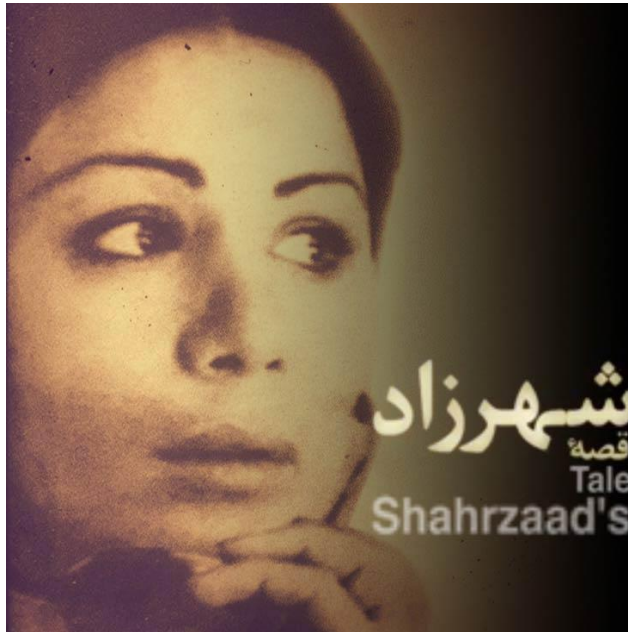


Figure 97: (Left) Poster of *Shahrzaad's Tale*, by Shahin Parhami and (Top) the real life Shahrzaad.
Source: <http://www.payvand.com>

Themes of Emasculation

In this village that clutches on to traditional ideas of honour, Behnaz Jaffary is invited to the house of an elderly man. He has an odd request for her. Handing her something wrapped in a parchment along with a letter, he requests her to give it to Mr Panahi who must

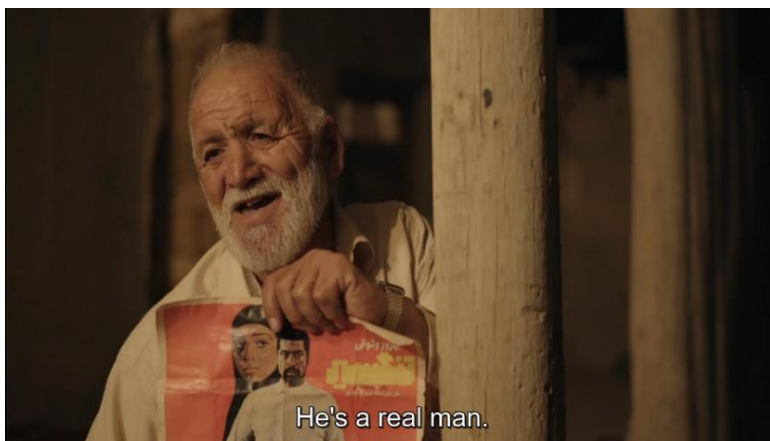


Figure 98: (Left) A character from Panahi's *Three Faces*, 2019, shows the poster of *Tangsir* (Right) Poster of *Tangsir*, Amir Naderi, 1973

instead give it to Shir Mahmmad or the iconic character played by the legendary actor Behrouz Vossoughi. When she asks her what it is that he has given her, he says that it is the foreskin of his son that he has sterilised and saved after his circumcision ceremony thirty-eight years ago. He believes that it is sacred, and must be handed over to an honourable, virile man, like Shir Mahmmad from *Tangsir*, (Amir Naderi, 1973) who he considers a role model for his son. The discomfort of the scene brings with it the impossibility of the request, as Vossoughi, living in exile in the US¹ can never return to Iran while Mr Panahi, exiled within his country, cannot leave Iran. It is a harsh critique of virility itself, as the epitome of the most virile man, *ba gheyra*² whose masculinity, as he proclaims is visible in his eyes, is in reality, banned from Iranian cinema and communication with the people of the country who treat him like a God.

Conclusion

Many storytellers, court poets like Ferdousi, Nizami, Saadi, Amir Khosrow who wrote their stories under the patronage of a king, have followed the example of Shahrzad, the fictional character who showed them how to resist the cruelty and the injustices of the King, by the non-violent, at times indirect but powerful method of telling stories. The metaphor of Shahrzad and the King stretches beyond the film, representing all dissenting artists who believe that the only function of art is, to tell the truth. Truth, which the State and the political system symbolised by the unjust king censors and hides. In risking her life, she gradually transforms the cruel king through the one thousand and one stories she narrates

¹ Vosoughi like lot of other actors and musicians left Iran close to the revolution afraid of the consequences the new regime would bring for him. He now lives exile in the US.

In an interview with Chelcheragh Magazine in 2006, he said: "I wish to return to Iran and if I have enough days to live, I will first go to my mother's grave. I long to return to my homeland. Even if it would at the penultimate moment of my life. This is my biggest wish. After that I would die in peace.

On 14th of March 2021, he asked the government of Iran to give him a chance to return.

<https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/اقتضایی-بحثیرانگیز-برای-بازگشت-بهروز-وٹوقی-به-ایران/a-56871032>

² a man with honour and pride; usually refers to a man who is diligent in protecting female members of his family.

thereby redeeming the kingdom and her own life. Since *The Arabian Nights*, writers and poets have followed her example, even though she stems from fiction, only a character from a story. Despite her fictional identity, she suggests the potential that fiction offers and storytelling as a method of rebellion against an authoritarian regime. Panahi, following suit to all the other poets and storytellers before him, adopts the way prescribed by Shahrzad in his fourth feature after his ban.

In his masterclass on Storytelling and Writing available on the website of *Masterclass*, Salman Rushdie, master storyteller and author of *Midnight's Children*, 1981, *The Satanic Verses*, 1988, and many other award-winning novels¹ demonstrates how Shahrzad is by far the most powerful female character in the history of literature. As the one who sacrificed her life by marrying the vengeful king to save the lives of other women by the power of storytelling, she becomes emblematic of the narrator who must tell stories to remain alive.

The film ends with the last long take, as an ultimate tribute to the master Kiarostami, assisting in whose films Panahi began his career as a filmmaker. The city folks journey back but must patiently wait at the bend of the road, following the rules of entry and exit. While Panahi waits in the car, Behnaz walks up to the bend. A melancholic musical strain of the very well-known Turkish- Armenian Ballad, *Sari Gelin* starts playing. The music stops as she reaches the bend and now waits for Panahi. The cries and rushing footsteps of Marziyeh are heard, she rushes into the frame, runs past Panahi's car, her white chador blowing with the wind caught inside it. The music picks a beat, changing to a joyful note. As she runs toward Jaffary, her chador falls off. She joins her. They walk forward together. The trucks

¹ <https://www.masterclass.com/classes/salman-rushdie-teaches-storytelling-and-writing>
https://www.masterclass.com/guest-pass/0abe6Mnw1NzA5MjE3fDF8fA==?utm_source=Organic-Social-PR&utm_medium=web&utm_content=Share_Copy accessed on 16.02.2021.

holding up the road pass by. They have been brought to pick up the dying bull with the golden balls that is stranded on the way.

Chapter 7:

Internal Exile: The Cinema of Mohammad Rasoulof

“When you feel you are a stranger in your own country, it’s better to go to another country and feel you are a stranger there.”

-Mohammad Rasoulof, *Be Omide Didar, Goodbye* (2011)

Unveiling in Cinema

By the time he was arrested in 2010, Mohammad Rasoulof had made his first two feature-length films, *Iron Island*, (2005) and *White Meadows*, (2009). These two films made in Iran, for Iranian audiences, were rich in allegories and steeped with the indirect language of metonymy, association and inclusive references native to the culture of Iran. Despite their indirect language, both films spoke of the pungent power relations in a dictatorship, between the agents of state and the people, not only superficially attacking the system, but addressing the root of all problems: religion and political ideology. Yet despite their indirection, both the films were banned within the country, and a year later he himself was imprisoned for participating in the Green Movement and barred from making films and screening them within Iran. With no hope of being able to make films for local audiences anymore, Rasoulof was quick to shed the veiled language which for him was only a compromise to circumvent the red lines of censorship, thereby getting the chance to screen his films within Iran. Films made after his ban like *Goodbye*, (2011) *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, (2013) *A Man of Integrity*, (2017), *There is No Evil*, (2020) vehemently reject this language of metaphors becoming direct, universal, global critiques of authoritarian governments, easily understandable by foreign audiences.

Rasoulof associates *tarrouf*¹ in language and this indirect way of expressing directly with oppression, believing it is the only rationale behind it. According to him, indirect language or veiled expression embedded in cinema and other arts is but a form of self-censorship and a direct outcome of tyranny. He believes that in an ideal, free society this language will cease to exist. In an interview with Iran wire, he explains this by saying,

¹The concept of *tarrouf* following the codes of courtesy (meaning to greet, but also refraining from the truth in order to appear polite or discreet, or offering something that one truly doesn't wish to) in Farsi transforms self-censorship into a value or an attribute like modesty. In Dehkhoda it is suggested that it could mean an offer that is expected not to be accepted.

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/89295/> تعارف

Explained in chapter 5, page: 29

The dominance of a certain kind of aesthetic value in our general culture has historical roots. For hundreds of years, the relation between power and the people in Iran has followed the pattern of “the shepherd and the flock” and still does. I believe that a tyranny that has its roots in history creates its own aesthetic rules. One of the strange rules of this kind of aesthetics is the praise for veiled words and taking shelter in metaphors. In our classic literature, veiled words are considered a kind of powerful eloquence and poetry. Wasn’t the culture of *rendi* [“roguishness” and “slyness”] a product of fear of a tyrannical and vengeful ruling power?¹

This rejection of the indirect language prescribed by culture that was originally born as a symptom of/and a tendency to circumvent oppression has been synthesised, amalgamated and normalised into modern Iranian speech, expression and language over hundreds of years. Now interpolated into speech, it is the way Iranians talk. This critique is not unique to Rasoulouf but has been prevalent since the 1940s in the works of modernist poets and writers like Sadeq Hedayat and Ahmad Kasravi. Hedayat, a staunch critic of religion, in his short stories and novels often used his characters as mouthpieces to condemn the clergy’s attempts to design grandiose, lofty, multilayered speech as a coercive tool to further subjugate people, making them feel unintelligent and deficient. In satires like *Haji Agha*² and *The Caravan of Islam* or *The Islamic Mission to European Lands*³ this sarcasm is also conveyed through its dual title. The novel has a simple title for regular readers and a formal, lofty Arabic title (in semblance with the rhetoric of the clerics of the Islamic State)

¹ <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6779>

² Sadeq Hedayat, *Haji Agha* (Tehran: Amirkabir Publications, 1952)

³ Sadeq Hedayat, *Karevaan-e Islam ya Al-be’sa tl-Islamiah Ela Belad el-Afranjiah* (Online publication: Avaye Boof Publications, 1994)
<https://avayebuf.com/2016/06/24/karvaneslam/>

disharmoniously unmatched for a tale of licentious Muslim priests conversing about petty topics in a grandiloquent, indirect manner.

Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946), Iranian linguist, historian, jurist and religious reformer, in some of his many books such as *Sufism*¹ (*Sufigari* صوفی گری), *What does Hafez Say?*² (*Hafez che miguyad?* حافظ چه میگوید) criticised this veiled, allegorical language that Sufis mystics spoke in, or Hafez wrote in. A vehement critic of Sufism, he firmly believed this figurative manner of speech could hinder cultural, scientific progress and modernism. According to him the indirect mode of expression was pacifist and intended to numb the masses into asceticism, making them negligent of politics and technology, thus preventing them from rising in rebellion.

This brings to mind an age-old debate on the role of art in Iran that resurfaced in Bahman Ghobadi's open letter to Abbas Kiarostami written in 2009, in the crest of the Green Movement in Iran. When Kiarostami had expressed his disappointment with his latest film *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, (2009), made without a permit inside Iran that resulted in the banning of the film, and Ghobadi's exodus from Iran, Ghobadi reprimanded him publicly for making apolitical and poetic films at a time when the country's youth was living in 'constant agony and fear of a dark future'³ "Depicting the ills of Iran's society is more important for me than the art of cinema. I am even ready to leave cinema and do my duty for them."

Kiarostami had replied to a journalist, "Political films have an expiry date. I avoid

¹Muhammad Amini, *Sufism, a Critical and Historical Review of Irano-Islamic Mysticism*. (Online Publication: Sherkat Ketab Publications, 2015)

https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Mohammad_Amini_صوفی_گری_و_ویرایش_صوفی_گری?id=SqiiDAAAQBAJ

In Persian, making a noun with the suffix *Gari* (گری) has a condescending tone. When referring to Sufism without a bias a Farsi speaker uses the word *Tasavvuf* (تصوف). *Sufi-Gari* comes with a derogatory bias, which in this case is the point Kasravi makes.

² Ahmad Kasravi. *Hafiz Chi Miguyad* (Iran: Publisher not identified, 1960.)

<https://www.routledge.com/Sufi-Castigator-Ahmad-Kasravi-and-the-Iranian-Mystical-Tradition/Ridgeon/p/book/9780415665131>

³<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/1884776.html>

making films according to the political trends of the time. I consider the position of art higher than getting smeared in the muck of politics. In my belief, poetic films last longer, because they talk about [eternal] human issues.”¹

In his reply to Ghobadi’s public message, Kiarostami denounced not so much Ghobadi’s film, but the entire notion of direct political address in cinema. The world of cinema and art for Kiarostami is pure from the grime of politics but closer to poetry. In contrast to the rejection of indirect articulation and the tradition of Hafezian expression condemned by Rasoulof, Ghobadi, and Kasravi; his cinema, like poetic utterances, often quotes Hafez, Rumi, Sapehri, Farrokhzad and extends the lyricism of poetry to the formal aspects of cinema. While Panahi’s cinema became more direct since *Circle*, (2000), Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s most political films were also his most poetic, like *A Moment of Innocence*, (1996), whereas explained in Chapter 4, the bread and the flower pot transform into metaphors of rejection of violence (signified by the gun) with poetry and cinema. In one of his most political films in the Kish Island, *Test of Democracy*, (2000), a memorable scene sees him standing at the brink of the sea, directing a flock of birds to keep up their flight by reciting lines from Ahmad Shamlou to them.

“I lead you not to the merry dance of blue smoke. I lead you not to a plush rainbow, to petty dreams, anyone who came here lied to you to get one extra act to play, they’ve told you how well you fly...”²

Here the birds represent people listening to the incoherent speech of a political leader. Through the poetic image, and the lines of Ahmad Shamlou, he makes a critique of the language of tarrouf that politicians and civilians talk in, a language that hinders the possibility of any meaningful exchange.

¹https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f35_Kiarostami_Ghobadi/1884766.html translated to English by Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani.

²Mohsen Makhmalbaf recites the poetry of Ahmad Shamlou in *Test of Democracy*, 2000



Figure 99: Scene from *Test of Democracy*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2000, source:makhmalbaf.com

“There is a mutual *tarrouf* between the politicians/ rulers and civilians. The leader says you are a race of resilient people and the people answer by saying you are a mighty king. This mutual lie has become an obstacle in democracy. The conversation is as absurd as the conversation between me and the birds. The leader lies to his countrymen.”¹ The filmmaker intervenes desiring to break the unending chain of lies,

“I hope you won’t mind if I tell you the truth...you fly no better than roosters...”

And then he recites Shamlou again,

“...and shall one live so low and ignoble, how flagrant would I be were I not to hang my lantern of life in shame on the height of a pine tree in the dead-end alley...”

His cinematographer interrupts his incoherent monologue,

“Can’t you say one sentence that makes sense, Mohsen?”

Makhmalbaf says,

“Hold on, I am testing the sound of this microphone...

one...two... three, testing the freedom of this era.”²

¹BBC Persian interview with Hasan Soljhoo, *Apparat*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6NqoMRJlb8>

²Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Test of Democracy*, 2000

Here Makhmalbaf problematises the leader-follower relationship in a democracy. Leaders or great ‘*tarrouf* makers’¹ with their veiled words pacify people who can fly higher like the birds in this shore which have forgotten to soar in the skies. They fly like roosters complacent in their positions. He wishes to make them aware of their role in the chain of democracy. He uses the metaphor of the digital camera as a tool of liberation that his friend Shahabod in Faroukhyar brings to him in the middle of a frustrating shoot (*The Door*)² in which he had been shooting with a 35mm film camera, using old worn-out techniques and actors who, so consumed in their traditions and beliefs, refused to change a piece of clothing according to the requirement of the shoot. The digital camera brings Makhmalbaf priced moments of freedom as he leaves his film set and escapes to Tehran to film the Presidential election with his friend.

The digital camera on its own is a democratic entity. The easiest way for the government to censor film production is through its control over film equipment. The digital camera takes the camera away from the elite, the experts of censor and capitalists and gives it to the youth who feel pain and have dreams, but who never before possessed the instruments to record them...now you may use the camera as a pen and cry out your common pain and have the world watch it.³

In a sequence from the film, Makhmalbaf holds the handy cam over his shoulder and writes the letters of the word liberty over the sand.

¹ He uses the term ‘*tarrouf* makers’ in his interview. BBC Persian interview with Hasan Solhjoo in the TV program *Apparat*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6NqoMRJlb8>

² An episode in the collaborative project *Tales of Kish*, 1999.

³ BBC Persian interview with Hasan Solhjoo in the TV program *Apparat*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6NqoMRJlb8>

Being a seeker of freedom, I don't want power so I can say the truth to people. The digital camera gives me this opportunity. Don't think that someone who has power will bestow you freedom with his hands. Democracy is sharing power with people, allowing them to take flight. Democracy is based on the flying of all the birds that are living in a nation.”¹

Rasoulof confesses that while in films like *Iron Island* (2005) or *The White Meadows* (2009), he used the language of metaphors to express his thoughts, he later realised that this kind of artistic expression was a result of fearing tyranny. “I know that Iranian culture has become used to this kind of artistic expression. Some people still tell me that they think *The White Meadows* is my best film. But I believe that time will do away with this kind of veiled expression.”² With the verdict after his ban, which like Panahi prohibits him from officially making films, or leaving the country, he too finds himself exiled internally.

It may seem I am not exiled from Iran geographically, but I am deleted from the media of Iran who ignores my identity and my cinema, deprives me of exhibition space, restricts me by putting me in jail. I am isolated and exiled from my people and my culture. While other filmmakers can participate in festivals, present their films and communicate with the world, I am left with no audience. An audience (west) who watches my films, but I cannot communicate with them; and moviegoers of Iran for whom I don't exist. They have exiled me most painfully [...].³

¹ ibid.

² Mohammad Rasoulof interviewed by the author via Skype in November 2019.

³ ibid

Irony of Internal Exile

For Rasoulof, one's language is directly born out of (and changes with) his/her political situation. With his ban and forceful removal from the cultural milieu of Iran, he becomes a person who ceases to exist in Iran anymore. His verdict limits him geographically but also liberates him from the compulsion to talk in the culturally acceptable language of his country, *tarrouf*. The films made during his internal exile, ironically have the language of a filmmaker living outside Iran. The irony of his exile is that while it confines him geographically, in freeing him of the shackles of indirect language, it liberates him. In shedding veiled words and the refuge of metaphors he transforms into a global citizen of the world. In losing hopes of being accepted among other artists in his country; pleasing the censors, or Iranian audiences, he is set free from the constant tussle with the censors.

The way in which he associates indirection to oppression suggesting that the end of oppression would make this veiled language obsolete reminds us of Plato's ideal city of Kallipolis that decried to banish all poets as poetry stems from imitation, indirection and trauma. Similar to the perfect city that would not need (dissident) poets, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and its ideal city banishes poets and artists who use allegories to expose them. Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran is but an unmistakable, realised mirror of Plato's Kallipolis. His official website¹ testifies the connection of his ideas with Plato and Aristotle as various doctoral research projects analyse the similarities between the proposed platonic ideal city and the realised Islamic Republic. Only here the Philosopher-king is replaced by The Guardianship of the Juror² or a *faqih*, the Sharia law expert, also known in political

¹<http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/> accessed on 1.2.2021

²Guardianship or *Velayat* is a Sufi terminology which literally means kingdom or reign. *Vali* (ولی) is the adjective form of *Velayat*. It has roots in the Quran. In Quran, Allah is the *Vali* of the Faithful. (Chapter 2 The Cow, verse 257) Sufis philosophers extended these concepts to their mentor (Vicar of God). Khomeini took this idea from Sufism and replaced the Juror or Sharia law expert as the Vicar of God or in platonic language, the king philosopher.

terms as the Supreme Leader of Iran.¹ As Kallipolis is realised into an Islamic City, it is only deemed fit that it is ruled by a Grand Ayatollah. The propaganda machine of the newly formed Islamic Republic projected this Ayatollah or Khomeini as a polymath, and one of the very few jurors well versed not only in Sharia law but also in Philosophy. The prevalence of the ideas of Greek philosophy over Judeo Christian holy texts is well known. Many Muslim philosophers based their understanding of their holy texts on the ideas proposed by Greek philosophers that were taught in madrasas. That Khomeini was deeply inspired by old Greek philosophy² is evident in his ideas of running the country. The idea of an ‘ideal city’ would be administered by pure epochs of Islam. The Platonic utopia on earth would be led by the head of clergy.

Since the people love the clergy, have faith in the clergy, want to be guided by the clergy, it is right that the supreme religious authority should oversee the work of the Prime Minister or the President of the republic, to make sure that they don't make mistakes or go against the law: that is, against the Quran. It can be either the supreme religious authority or a representative group of the clergy.³

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/330210/> ولی
<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/330036/> ولایت

¹From the Preamble of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

The Wilāyah of the Just Faqīh : In keeping with [the Islamic principle of] governance (wilāyat al-amr) and the perpetual necessity of leadership (imāmah), the Constitution provides for the establishment of leadership by a qualified faqīh, recognized as Leader by the people.

Article 5: During the occultation of the Waī al- ‘Asr (i.e. the Twelfth Imam), may God expedite his appearance, the wilāyat al-amr and leadership of the Ummah devolve upon the just and pious jurist, fully aware of the times, courageous, possessing administrative and problem-solving abilities, who will assume the responsibilities of this office in accordance with Article 107.

Article 57: The powers of the State in the Islamic Republic are vested in the Legislature, the Judiciary, and the Executive, functioning under the supervision of the absolute wilī al-amr and Leader of the Ummah, in accordance with the forthcoming articles of this law. These powers are independent of each other.

<https://en.parliran.ir/eng/en/Constitution#chapter1>

²www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n142094/ امام خمینی و فلسفه

³ibid

In his interview with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci only six months after the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, he gave an image of the functioning of this republic headed by the clergy, unified against its enemies or the communists that he believed were propelled by the ideas of the West. The ideal city or the Islamic Republic would not need art unless it could be used for its benefits.

Liberation from the Censor Board

In Mohammad Shirvani's comparison of censorship to a disease earlier in Chapter 6¹, it can be said that the mind of the one in charge of censoring works like that of a paranoid person who obsessively seeks hidden messages under the skin of metaphors. His skill lies not only in following the rules of censor or codes of modesty prescribed by the Islamic Republic and its censor body, The Ministry of Culture and Guidance but in deciphering the message of the film shrouded under clouds of allegorical utterances. In rejecting this indirect language, Rasoulof stops feeding to the paranoid mechanism of the censor body. In his unwillingness to be a part of this sick cycle of coding and decoding symbols Rasoulof finds himself ironically liberated from it. With his cinema now banned in Iran, he is liberated from the scrutiny of the censors that finds every Iranian filmmaker in its grips. The struggle to make films is the never-ending struggle to dodge the censors.

The Islamic Republic of Iran silences its poets (filmmakers like Rasoulof- talking in veiled language- like poetry), by depriving them of sharing their films with their country folk, but still allows them to go underground and clandestinely make their films, screening them in alternative spaces like Berlinale, Cannes, Locarno and other global platforms. The poet, silenced of poetry, begins talking in prose, as veiled language is not required for global audiences.

¹ Refer to Chapter 6, page, 304-306.

Equilibrium

In doing so, equilibrium is achieved. The tense filmmaker finds himself in a more relaxed position knowing that he is not rendered mute; that he still has an audience outside, if not his country folk. Liberated of the tussle with the censors, Rasoulof does not find himself in a compromising position as he arrives at the language he wants to talk in, in exile. In fact, he is a filmmaker who finds his language of art and rebellion through internal exile. He is an artist who radically discovers a new mode of talking, breaking free from the codes of *tarrouf* that had been naturalised into speech, literature and cinema. Unlike Makhmalbaf, Panahi, or Ghobadi all of Rasoulof's films were deprived of domestic screening even before his verdict. With his verdict now, ironically and miraculously, he gradually loses the pungency of his dark acidic metaphors, embracing milder tones in direct language. He seemingly arrives at mental ease.

On the other hand, in denying him of screening his cinema or voicing his thoughts inside the country the Islamic Republic succeeds in displaying its mechanism of coercion and setting an example for other artists not to follow suit, thereby upholding the image of fear and tyranny, a prerequisite of a smoothly functioning dictatorship. Rasoulof notes,

I was always curious to know why the government made such a mistake. It was obvious that the more pressure they put on us, the bigger it made our films. Later I realized that they don't care about what people think outside. They only care about terrorising the common people within so they don't rise in revolt. They victimise us to instil fear in the people of Iran.”¹

¹ Video interview with Mohammad Rasoulof conducted by the author via Skype in November 2019

In this form of compromise, both the system and the dissenting artist achieve a state of equilibrium. Yet, does the shedding of the veil in language correspond to shedding the physical veil in cinema? Does the liberation from the tussle with the censors result in deliverance from the codes of modesty it imposes on cinema? Can the filmmaker exiled internally, address forbidden subjects as Mohsen Makhmalbaf addressed dance, a forbidden form of expression in Iran¹, in *Sex and Philosophy* (2005), nudity in *Scream of the Ants*, (2006), or have a dialogue on the Bahai Faith as in *The Gardener*, (2012) Ghobadi's first film made in exile, *Rhino Season*, (2012), filmed in Turkey addressed nudity in a way a global filmmaker would. The anomaly of internal exile is such that even though the internally exiled filmmaker feels liberated from the scrutiny of the censors, and is stripped of his existence in the cultural milieu of Iran, he still cannot shed the marks of oppression from his cinema.² The radical nature of his content and what he truly wishes to say cannot be formally expressed in his cinema even with the knowledge that the films will never be screened in Iran. The paradoxical nature of internal exile lies in its contradictions and anomalies. Much like the contradictory term itself, (oxymoron, internal exile, *ex-* out/away, *al-* to wander, stray or roam about, or the one who is taken out, or driven out, later this would be associated with the one banished away. Internal exile signifies the one exiled within³) the reality of the internal exile is paradoxical and incoherent. There is freedom without emancipation, unveiled language with a veiled world (of women), and elections without democracy.

¹<https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/a-5516042>

<https://www.zeitoons.com/52662> (a story of a girl who was arrested because she posted videos of dancing on Instagram)

<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/676378> توضیح-مجدار-ادریار-ممنوعیت-زومبا-رقص-جایی-در-ایران-اسلامی (a sport official says that sports (like Zumba) that appears as a form of dancing has no place in Islamic Iran)

² Which is largely due to the limitations imposed by society and the people living in Iran. Monica Bellucci, eminent Italian actress acted in Ghobadi's *Rhino Season*. Mohsen Makhmalbaf worked with a cast of Tajik and non-resident Iranian actors in *Sex and Philosophy*. There would be dire consequences for Iranian actors and technicians living and working in Iran to be a part of these films.

³<https://www.etymonline.com/word/exile>

In this regard, it is interesting to note that Rasoulof's daughter Baran, a German citizen by birth, not only had her veil on, in his latest film *There is No Evil*, (2020), she also had it on while receiving the Golden Bear on behalf of her father in Berlinale, or the Berlin International Film Festival, that took place in Germany in March 2020.

In his first two feature films, *Iron Island*, (2005) and *The White Meadows*, (2009), both made in Iran, for Iranian audiences, Rasoulof uses metonymic and allegorical devices to create a fictitious world with an array of characters (often significantly named according to their behavioural traits) governed by the iron hand of an all-pervasive, encompassing, omniscient dictator. Both films, despite using the culturally prescribed indirect language of



Figure 100: Chador clad women enter a western apparel shop that reads 20% Off!
Tehran, 2016. Photo taken by author.

expression, with their use of hard-hitting, scathingly pungent metaphors recreate the political, mental and social claustrophobia that emerges from existing power relations and structures of dominance and subjugation in a dictatorship that uses ideology (religion and culture) as a tool for its propaganda mechanism and coercion as a stabilising function to restore order. While *Iron Island* exposes the organisation, functioning and meticulous administration of a repressive state apparatus in a discarded oil tanker in the middle of the sea, run by a Captain, who uses poor people to serve his purposes, *The White Meadows* takes a grim look at what happens to the individuals living in such a state.

Iron Island

Iron Island (2005), uses the language of delicately layered, intricately woven metaphors to make a harsh critique of Iran, by comparing it to an immobile, sinking oil tanker or a *naftkesh* controlled by a dictator, who much like dictators around the world¹ has named himself *Nakhoda*, philologically, *Nav*, meaning ship, *khoda*, meaning God, or God of the ship, a title given to captains. A captain is traditionally in charge of navigating a ship, but ironically this ship does not move. It is anchored in the middle of the sea like an island. It stands like a rock. Logically it does not need a captain. Nakhoda has populated this immobile leaden ship by bringing in the poor and homeless and compartmentalised spaces for them. The rusted ship, like many barren old oil tankers, still loaded with oil that lay abandoned in the Persian Gulf region is a metonymy for the oil-rich Iran, two-thirds of which is a barren, uninhabitable desert. Nakhoda, presents himself as a demigod, a saviour of the people who builds an absurd city in the middle of the ocean, gives them a roof to stay in, supplies medicines for the ailing; but is, in reality, an exploitative dictator who needs people to extract oil out of the ship for him. He prepares to sell the oil to foreigners and plans to get rid of the ship that sinks a little every day. Beneath the exterior cover of philanthropy, he is a dictator ruling with an iron hand and a fowl mouth. The atmosphere in the ship is absurd, surrealistic and unnatural. Cloths replace walls and women are supposed to have proper *hijab*, even when privacy has no meaning. The leader emphasises the importance of education, comparing it to be as essential as bread. A teacher is given a classful of students, a blackboard and chalks. He is ordered to dictate to them how beautiful life is within the ship or in other words the rhetoric of the dictator. Much like Freire's criticism of propaganda that

¹Hitler (Führer), Kim Jong-Il (Great Leader), Francisco Franco (Caudillo), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Khalif), Muammar Gaddafi (Brother Leader), and Khomeini (The Guardian of all the Muslims in the World)

is taught in the garb of education, explained in detail in chapter 4¹, the teacher's school is closely watched by Nakhoda. Education coupled with religion is used to disseminate the dominant ideology of the state. The school as an institution plays an essential role in maintaining the hegemony in the society. It is used to disseminate ideas of morality, ethics, religion and law. The ideology indoctrinated in the minds of young students is aimed to create a web of delusion embedding in them a false feeling of duty. It is intended to give social cohesion making them believe in their roles in the development of society.² This is also the reason why none of the characters in the films of Rasoulof are relatable. His characters are not so much individuals but subjects moulded according to the ideology of the state. The teacher, genuinely driven in his task of imparting education to the children, wishes to teach the truth to the children. He casually drops in the truth, about the sinking of the ship in his dictation, but quickly corrects himself on realising that he is being watched.

The sea is vast

The sea is spectacular

The ship is in the sea

The ship sinks more and more each day

Life in the ship is beautiful³

By talking of the beauty of the sea, the teacher tries to delude the minds of the young children from the reality of life on the ship. By this metaphor, Rasoulof brings attention to how the censorship apparatus functions in a dictatorship, and the language it forces its people to engage in, far removed from reality. The teacher, even though well-meaning, is not a revolutionary. Unable to tear himself out of the all-consuming ideology of the state, he

¹ Refer to Chapter 4, page 223-225

² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127-186

³ Dialogue from film, Mohammad Rasoulof, *Iron Island*, 2005

believes that engaging in a dialogue with Navkhoda will bring a solution. Nakhoda brings tainted, old newspapers for the teacher to read out to his students. He creates an island for people, who are taught that the world exists right where they are. A student asks, “Where is the world?” The teacher says, “The world is right here, we are in the world.” Another student replies innocently, “but this is only an oil tanker”. The teacher says, “Pay attention, students, we are in a ship, the ship is in the sea, and the sea is in the world. So, we are in the world.”

Propaganda is necessary for establishing the hegemony in favour of the dictatorship and smooth functioning of the governance. The young students of the first and second grade are given lessons in *dushman shenasi* or knowing the enemy, the most prevalent rhetoric in the speeches of the leader of Iran.¹ This is a direct political reference to the speeches of the leader of Iran, where he even pronounces the word *dushman* (enemy) with a slight stammer saying *duzhman* like the leader himself does. Education quite like propaganda must be by-hearted and narrated out loud till it is embedded in the minds, similar to the banking methods explained by Freire earlier. No growing child in this ship can escape the clutches of this propaganda.

The teacher makes chalks out of used bullets. He believes that violence and war could be replaced by the pen or knowledge. His efforts are futile. The students are only supposed to be in class till they are summoned for extraction of oil from the ship and transporting the heavy oil cans across the sea to an island. In a sequence inspired by the iconic race in the last sequence of Amir Naderi’s *The Runner*, (1984), where local boys run to reach a fast-melting block of ice in which signifies the finish line; the dropping of the oil cans from the ship to the sea in slow motion and the diving of the young boys to transport them to the shore

¹enemy/ *dushman*: the leader of Iran obsessively uses this word. *dushman shenasi*/ *shenasi* means logy philologically. Social media is full of mocking critiques of this paranoid rhetoric of the leader of Iran in the form of hashtags and YouTube comic videos.
https://twitter.com/hashtag/نژمن?src=hashtag_click

is designed like a competition. A referee blows a whistle as the boys dive in one by one. The task too tedious for teenage boys is conducted in the garb of a competition. The students meant to be in class are made to slog like donkeys while the donkeys brought to the ship to extract oil are sent to the empty classroom. The teacher continues teaching.

Amidst the chaotic absurdity, the only thing working quite normally is the relations of hierarchy, patriarchy and commerce. Nothing Nakhoda does is for free. Every account is maintained, every person is made to labour for the getting space to live in the ship. They are imprisoned and locked in the middle of the sea but are made to believe they are privileged as they are given bread and a roof to live in. The people give their id cards (green cards) to him, a compromise they make to get bread. Nakhoda owns a mobile phone (he controls the only means of communication with the exterior world) that he allows people to use in return for the money that he deducts from their accounts. Everyone must work, women make burqas and sell bread, but instead of paying them in cash, he promises to send the money to their accounts. People do not have any money of their own but believe that money is deposited in their accounts. An illusory world has been created for them that will last till the dictator will extract the oil, sell the ship and flee.

The love between two adolescents is the only natural occurrence in this absurd city in the ship, but since it does not play a role in the ruling ideology/ rhetoric of the dictator, he tries to take sense out of it, making the teenage boy believe that his feelings are only an illusion. Burning in the fire of love the boy sees through the rhetoric of the dictator who has built his reality for him up till now. Navkhoda tries to delude the lover, who now consumed by love has begun devising ways to disobey the dictator and secretly continue the love affair. Love makes him rebel and now he understands that it is not love that is an illusion, but everything else is. His reality is fabricated, forged, absurd, invented, and unnatural. The girl makes *burqas*. The lovers are forbidden to meet, but they devise ways to secretly give each

other gifts. He gives her his radio (his prized, secret connection with the real world) and she gives him her *burqa*. He smells the *burqa*. The tool of oppression or the veil is not only lifted for the first time (it is not required in the only natural relationship that is budding in this inhospitable environment) it is used radically as a tool of liberation. The *burqa* transforms into a gift that quite ironically delivers the smell of the lover, and ignites the feeling of sexual passion. Nakhoda, or the omniscient god of the ship, is the only one who knows who the lovers are. Love makes them rebel, and any form of rebellion in the ship must be crushed by violence to restore the social order. The girl is married off against her wishes and the boy must watch her get married. When he tries to escape, he is punished severely.

To break him, Nakhoda tortures him by tying his limbs and submerging him under water multiple times till he breaks down and apologises in front of all the members of the ship. The captain talks in a vulgar manner. He asks the boy to confess, not by saying he is sorry, but proclaiming that he ate shit. When the teacher pleads Nakhoda to pardon the young boy, he says, “if I let him go a stone would not stand on a stone in this ship” or *Sang ruiye sang band nemishe*, which figuratively means there will be chaos until the dissident is punished publicly. To maintain the power relations of dominance and subjugation the dictator needs to break the character and the human dignity of any individual that threatens the prevalent order. Only one dissident could make dictatorship tumble down. His spirit must be crushed by force. Thus, the coercive face of dictatorship, benign up until now, becomes visible. All internal or external threats are violently crushed.

In the scheme of the power structures that govern all aspects of life in the ship, there has been a slight error on the part of Nakhoda. A little boy, not grown enough to be a part of the propaganda mechanism of the dictatorship, hence not a visitor at the school of propaganda, remains undiscovered, hidden from the eyes of all. He remains in the understructure/ basement of the ship, obsessively trying to free the little fish that get stuck

into the waters between the ship and the sea. The ship sinks each day trapping a part of the ocean in its confines. The little boy, dedicated in his search to find the little fish entrapped in the ship, liberates them by throwing them back into the ocean. The poetic metaphor of the boy is that of the filmmaker himself. The artist, in the scheme of power domination, is the only one untainted in his conscious rejection of the propaganda apparatus of the state. The captain does not know of his existence until the end. The Captain includes everyone in his dictation, he fools everyone, he tortures all dissidents but overlooks the existence of the kid. The little boy has not exposed himself to any of the controlling mechanisms of the captain. At the very end of the film, after the captain has evicted the ship, having lured its people with the dream of a 'promised land', for the first time the little boy emerges up to the deck with the fish he has rescued. He overhears the conversation of the captain selling the ship for big money. He knows it is all a sham. The captain throws his rescued fish back in the ship and hurls him along in his boat toward the shore. As the boat reaches the shore, in a moment of liberation, the kid breaks free and runs away from the captain back toward the sea. He alone knows the value of freedom. This is one of the rare films of Rasoulouf that ends celebrating the ideas of emancipation. While the little boy steals his moment of freedom rushing toward the sea tinted with the colours of the setting sun, the young lovers meet in the shrine.

The White Meadows

The White Meadows, (2009), a stifling critique once again on religion, culture and media (or the ideological state apparatuses of a dictatorship) brings five grim tales from isolated islands that, without the deciphering of niche symbols, political references to contemporary Iran, and allegorical connections with mysticism, can only seem like dismantled, incoherent occurrences placed aside one another with an epilogue at the end; or

a puzzle that works as individual episodes but disjointed in its complete arrangement. Yet, once decoded it makes one of the sharpest critiques of the current political scenario in Iran and the fundamental aspects of Iranian culture. Even though Rasoulof attacks culture and religion in general, not Islam in particular, the film will not be entirely understandable by global audiences, as it refers to recent political events and debates in media and television in Iran and uses naming (of characters) to convey sarcasm and irony. Instead of making the stories bearable, the web of interconnected, multilayered metaphors in the backdrop of the dying salt lake in Orumiyeh, brings an asphyxiating quality to the images that reach unnerving heights in his fourth feature, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, (2013).

Let us take a look at the individual episodes and make an attempt at decoding the allegorical connections that give deeper meaning to the film. The episodes have been named according to their themes for a clearer understanding.

The Death of Beauty

The film shows that the 'most beautiful' woman on the island dies. Her beauty captivated both men and women alike, making them go weak in their knees. After her death, the village folk decide to keep her corpse, so they can attain her after death. They wrap the body of a live adolescent boy in her place and send him off with Rahmat, (Mercy) the tear collector of the island. The boy is made to put on the shoes of the dead woman. Consumed by curiosity and lust Rahmat takes off the covers from the corpse, only to discover the boy, who he learns is on a quest to find his missing father, a shepherd, who left the infertile salty island in search of green meadows and a farm. He agrees to take him along so long as he pretends to be his deaf and mute son.

Mercy and Tears

Rahmat collects tears of the grieving village folk in his tear jar. He meticulously washes the tiny tear collector designed specifically to collect tears, wipes it clean and transfers the tears through a funnel into a bigger jar. People give their tears to Rahmat



Figure 101: Rahmat in *The White Meadows* directed by Mohammad Rasoulof, collecting tears of mourners(top). The meticulous process of collecting and storing the tears in a tear collector, funnel and a glass jar.

believing he turns them into pearls by releasing them into the sea.¹ The people of the island believe this is the only way toward the path of atonement. In Persian *rahmat* means mercy.

¹ In the old days, it was believed that if a raindrop found its way into a shell, it became a pearl. There are poems by Classical poets like Saadi and Hafez who wrote about this image in their poetry. Sadi writes,
A raindrop fell from a cloud

It felt ashamed on seeing the enormity of the sea

Who am I where there is sea?

If it exists, surely, I don't.

When it saw itself with humiliation

A shell took it on its side with love and care

The fate of heaven made it so elegant

That it became a kingly pearl.

Baha'oddin Khorramshah, Saadi of Shiraz, *Compilation of Complete Works of Saadi*, (Tehran : Doostan publishing house, 2001), 264. trans. Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani.

Or, Hafez writes,

Thank God the crying of night and dawn was not in vain

Our rain drops eventually transformed into elegant pearls

Hafez, *Divan of Khwaje Shams-od-Din Mohamad* ed. Ali Mohammad Rafie, (Tehran: Setaregan Publishing House 1994), 302. trans. Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani and the author.

In Persian literature and culture, there is a deep connection between tears and mercy. It is believed that God's mercy is provoked only when tears are shed.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi, in the second volume of his book of *Masnavi*, narrates the story of a dying Sufi Sheikh, Ahmad Khozruye, who was in debt of four hundred gold coins. When money lenders gathered around his deathbed, he asked them to have faith that God would pay their money back. Meanwhile, a child selling *halva* was passing by. The Sheikh asked his servant to tell the boy to serve halva to all the money lenders. After serving *halva*, when the little boy asked for money, the Sheikh said that he had none. The boy broke down in tears. Almost immediately a man arrived and announced that someone had sent him exactly four hundred golden coins, or the money that was due.¹

He [the Sufi Sheikh, Ahmad Khozruye] said even though the money was a modest sum,

گفت آن دینار اگر چه اندکست

It depended on the tears of the child.

لیک موقوف غریو کودکست

Till the Halva selling kid does not cry

تا نگرید کودک حلوا فروش

The sea of [God's] mercy was not moved.

بحر رحمت در نمی‌آید به جوش

O brother, that child in the story is your (innocent) eye

ای برادر طفل طفل چشم تست

Your desires depend on true tears²

کام خود موقوف زاری دان درست

¹The word Rumi used is Dinar (دینار) which usually refers to a golden coin equal to ten silver coins or Derham (درهم).

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/155808/دینار>

²Karim Zamani, *Sharh e Jame Mathnai e Ma'navi*, (Tehran: Ettelaat, 2002), 129-142. trans. Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani.

Kemal Tabrizi, director of successful comedies like *Leili ba Man ast*, or *Leila is with me*, (1996), *Marmoulak*, Lizard, (2004), in his film *Farsh-e Baad*, Wind Carpet, (2002), made the character of a Mulla mouth the lines, “We Iranians have a doctorate in funerals, but when it comes to happiness, we haven't reached high school”. The culture of shedding tears comes from ritualistically mourning the martyrdom of Imam Hossein who was called *Ghatil-ol-Abarat*, or the Martyr of Tears.¹ Every Iranian politician has videos of breaking into tears for Imam Hossein. The religious leaders Khomeini and Khamenei have cried in their public addresses innumerable times believing the famous saying that one tear for Imam Hossein can quench the fire of hell. *Tabaki*, meaning faking tears or forcing oneself to cry in the ritualistic mourning rituals of Imam Hossein is highly recommended and prescribed in the Shia religion.² Shedding tears for Imam Hossein, the exemplar of martyrdom is celebrated, just as the culture of martyrdom, war, and loss are. The walls of Tehran and other big cities like Shiraz and Esfahan in Iran are filled with life-sized iconic images of soldiers going to war as the mother weeps, larger than life paintings of young men martyred in war with halos around their heads, and the image of the holy mother who has lost not only her husband but all her sons to war sits covered in her black cape, with tears flowing from her eyes, tulips in her hands. The painting below depicts the family of Asrabi brothers, all of whom, including their father, were martyred in war.

¹*Ghatil-ol-Abarat* (قتیل العبرات) or the Martyr of Tears is one of the titles of Imam Hossein. Imam Hossein was martyred in Karbala. Remembering and re-narrating the stories of his passions make people cry. Shedding tears for him is encouraged because it keeps his name alive. Imam Hossein is believed to have said, “I am killed of tears; no man of faith would remember me unless tears comes to his eyes”
https://fa.wikishia.net/view/قتیل_العبرات

²<https://fa.wikishia.net/view/تباکی>



Figure 102: : The Afrasiabi Brothers (برادران افراسیابی) painted by artist Mozhgan Habibi, completed in July 2020
Source: <https://www.farsnews.ir>



Figure 103: Sheikh Fazl ul-Allah Highway. A mother grieves for her martyred son
Tehran, 2018, photograph taken by author during fieldwork.



Figure 105: A martyr's face adorns the walls of Tehran, 2018. Photograph by author
Tehran, 2018. Photograph by author



Figure 104: Sheikh Fazl ul-Allah Highway. A painting by Sayyid Morteza Avini, a famous documentary filmmaker and writer

Ali Shariati in his book, *Hossein the Heir of Adam* (Hossein Vares-e Adam حسین وارث آدم) published in 1970, vehemently criticised the culture and ritualistic tradition of grieving for Imam Hossein or *roze khani*¹ and flagellating the body as a process of collective

¹Rozekhan, or the one who narrates the Passions of Imam Hossain in Karbala during Ashura
روضه-خوان/168032/dictionary/roze-khaneh/

repentance suggesting it was not enough to grieve, the culture of tears should instead steer change and stir up a revolution.

The tear collector turns heartaches into an industry. Empty glass jars are sold to grievors who are supposed to vent their sorrows into them and weep, as he watches them. As they weep, he touches his tear jar to their cheeks thus collecting their tears. This represents a world of ultimate alienation where one can empty his/her sorrows only in an empty jar. The grievors take off the lid and whisper into the jar till they begin crying. Even this moment of utter vulnerability is watched over. Crying becomes an obligation in the absence of any human communication. A man named *Khojaste*, is selected by the village folk to go down into a well to give these sealed jars to a fairy¹ who is believed to live there. It is a superstitious belief that the one bearing the jars must climb up before sunrise. Khojaste, contrary to what his name signifies in Persian (auspicious) ironically is an ill-fated, unathletic person, stunted in physical growth, who would by no means succeed in his feat. He is pawned to the fairy of the well. As the sun rises, his rope is prompt cut. He crashes with all the glass jars.

Rasoulof's well of grief starkly resembles the actual 'well of requests' in The Mosque of Jamkaran, near Qom that was built by a Sheikh by the same name when he had a vision of the much-awaited twelfth imam Muhammad al-Mahdi at that very place. "In the rear of the mosque, there is a "well of requests" where it is believed the Twelfth Imam once "became miraculously unhidden for a brief shining moment of loving communion with his Creator."² Pilgrims tie small strings in a knot around the grids covering the holy well, which they hope will be received by Imam Mahdi. Every morning custodians cut off the strings from the previous day. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who served presidential term in Iran from 2005-2013

¹*Gin/pari*- interchangeable as demon in Persian culture and mythology.

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/74924/> پری

²Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, (New York : W.W. Norton, 2016), 220

donated 10 million pounds to turn "the normal-sized Jamkaran mosque into a massive complex of prayer halls, minarets, car parks and ablutions"¹ after his appointment.

Here Rasoulof makes a suggestive critique of religion, superstition and absurd practices that a modern state apparatus needs and makes full use of.

The scene of the well in *The White Meadows* directly questions myth in religious thought. Or in *Iron Island* I want to say, I indeed try to work freely, but I also am not free from all boundaries. I don't want to be killed for crossing red-lines."²

The villagers believe that their sufferings have been inflicted by the wrathful sea that turns the islands inhospitable and salty. Its waters can no longer be consumed. There is no life in the sea or vegetation in the land. They dream of lush meadows but their lives are bleached white in this meadow which promises nothing more than an abundance of salt. The islands in *The White Meadows*, like the rusted iron ship in *Iron Island* bear metonymic connections with the *shurezaar*³ that Iran is. The sea in Orumiyeh, where *The White Meadows* has been filmed is dry now. The island is guarded only by tall cliffs of salt, that erode and diminish with every passing day. The superstitious island folk believe it is their sins that have turned the sea antagonistic and do everything they can to please it. While they sacrifice their men and women, give their tears to the sea and perform different rituals to calm her wrath, it is only their salty tears that make the sea saltier.

¹Majd, Hooman. *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran*, (London : Penguin, 2013), 84-5 https://nls.ldls.org.uk/welcome.html?ark:/81055/vdc_100048492931.0x000001.

²Online interview with Mohammad Rasoulof, conducted over skype in November, 2019

³*Shurezaar* in Persian means saline field. Like Rasoulof's films, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's short story *Hoze Soltun* discussed in chapter five is named after a *shurezaar* in Qom.



Figure 106: *The White Meadows*, filmed in Orurmiyeh, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2009



Figure 107: Snapshot of lake of Orurmiyeh taken by the author, during the shoot of a video project by Mohammad Shirvani, June 2017



Figure 108: One of the islands in the dying lake of Orurmiyeh. Photograph taken by the author, June 2017

The Virgin and the Sea

A virgin is married off to the sea. Wedding bells ring, and a marriage celebration engulfs the island. Rahmat reaches the island to collect the tears of the young bride. She is distraught. As her tears are collected, she is taken to the sea in a bed decorated with lamps



Figure 109: The virgin is given to the sea in *The White Meadows*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2009

and cushions. The village folk sing with tears in their eyes. Witnesses vouch for the purity of the virgin, shouting out to the sea, “The most beautiful virgin of the village, loved the sea and has submitted herself to the sea. “After the event villagers drop by her house, and congratulate her parents. They say, “Congratulations, the sea is a good groom”.

The Artist and the Sea

An artist (enacted by Mohammad Shirvani) is tortured by the repressive state agents of the island. He is chained, buried under the sand, washed in the salt water forcibly and made to climb up a ladder in the middle of the sea and look into the sun directly and revoke what he believes in. The artist is being punished because, in his painting, he has coloured the sky red. He is forced by agents to believe he is blind. He is made to look into the sun and his eyes are washed with the urine of a monkey. After punishing him the guards ask again what the colour of the sky is. This time they coax him to say it is blue. The artist, tortured, and broken refuses to believe he is blind or say that the sky is blue. He censors himself and

says instead, ‘the sky is beautiful. It is a different colour today’. He is to be taken to a different island now for greater punishment. The island is watched over from a tower-like position by a keeper. The artist is tortured even more severely here as the keeper, much like a military disciplinarian repeatedly shouts the words, THE SKY IS BLUE, repeating it in the rhythm of a march, so he inculcates the propaganda and repeats after him. In the manner of a rigorous military drill, the artist is ordered to climb up and down a cliff. Considered blind, he is given orders to move right or left so he can reach the ladder and the hill. The artist begins believing he is blind.



Figure 110: Mohammad Shirvani as the tortured artist in *The White Meadows*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2009

Meanwhile, a monkey trainer (*looti*)¹ makes his pet monkey (*antar*) dance as a bride in a local tea house. Here Rasoulof makes a reference to the comedy TV show *The Man with a Thousand Faces* (the official English name is *Man of Many Faces*) hosted by Mehran

¹ (*loot*: Dehkhoda defines the word *looti* in multiple contexts. In this context it refers to a man who trains an animal, a monkey, a goat or a bear to dance. *Lutigari* refers to a now obsolete folk form of entertainment in traditional eastern cultures where a man performed with a monkey trained to dance and entertain people for money. Still prevalent in parts of India, in Bengal this entertainment was colloquially called *Bandor Naach*, or *Bandar aur Madari ka Kartaab* in parts of central India.

It also refers to a gentleman of honour. The word *nalooti* refers to the one without honour.

<https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/280182/لوطی>

Modiri, a popular comedian in Iran.¹ The *looti* in *The White Meadows* introduces his pet monkey by the name A Man with a Thousand Faces (making a close parallel with the show that occupied major slots in mainstream Iranian media and television.) This reminds us of Sadek Chubak's novel, *The Monkey whose Looti has Died* which tells the tale of a monkey whose trainer has died, but it does not know how to use its new found freedom.² Rasoulof directs his attack to all artists of mainstream media who, for him, are no better than the monkey dancing for its master. According to him, slapstick comedians like Modiri were promoters of ignorance and enemies of thought. The censorship apparatus of the state wants to get rid of any thought that makes the audience aware of their plight. Rasoulof believes such comedians who are no less than agents of the system, fool people into believing they are critical of the system. They propose ideas that propagate the values of free speech and freedom of expression but in reality, their critiques are superficial, and their jokes are directed at the people themselves. Quite like religious clerics who also criticise politicians, their jokes and insults are directed toward parliament members or the President of Iran. The parliament is the only democratically elected part of the system. By insulting them, these state-sponsored comedians insult the choice of the people. They could never muster the courage to criticise the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps³ that acts directly under him. All their jokes are directed towards mocking democratically elected leaders or the idea of democracy itself.

¹<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2658222/>

²<http://www.chouk.ir/maghaleh-naghd-gotogoo/11898-2015-07-27-08-28-10.html>

³ Or, *Sepah e Pasdaran e Enghelab e Eslami*, is a branch of the Iranian Armed Forces formed after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 by the order of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Whereas the army defends Iran and is responsible for maintaining internal order, the Iranian constitution vested the Pasdaran with the duty of protecting the political order of the Islamic Republic.

The *Bozorgtar*

The tear collector for the first time gets off his boat, takes a bike and travels by road to the city to reach a two-storied bungalow tucked in the middle of a lush green garden - a sort of paradise that one would not imagine existed in the world of the white meadows, or the idealised green meadows the shepherd wished to escape to. The *looti's* monkey is chained in the garden. As Rahmat is ushered in, he sits on a floor, waiting. A painting hangs on the wall before him. A painting with the sky-coloured red. A woman enters the room and gives him a wash basin. As she walks away, he notices she wears the slippers of the beautiful



Figure 111: The Bozorgtar in *The White Meadows*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2009

girl who was declared dead in the first episode. Soon after that, a senile, old man is brought in a wheel chair. He is ushered in by the bride who was given to the sea. The tear collector rolls up the hems of his trousers. A scar is revealed. He takes the valuable tears of the agony ridden village folk and washes his wound. He is *Bozorgtar* or the Elder. He controls the islands. He has what the others do not. After washing his feet, the tears are collected back into the jar and given off to the ocean.

The name *Bozorgtar* or elder than, bigger than, or greater than, is a comparative adjective coined in the form of a name by Rasoulof by combining the word *Bozorg*¹(elder)

¹The coinage of this word as a name is a direct invitation for Iranian audiences to interpret it and find its hidden allusion.

and the suffix *tar* (than). This is done keeping in mind the belief among Muslims that God is greater...(Allah ho Akbar). It is an unfinished sentence without an object, which could be completed in a way that means God is greater than can be described, or something in these lines. In this regard, *Bozorgtar* could be representative of all forms of absolute authority, a dictator, the figure of the superego or God himself as it is common for dictators to make connections between themselves and divinity. The portrayal of a crippling old man as the dictator is intended to make Iranian audiences immediately associate him with the Supreme Leader of Iran or Ayatollah Khomeini who was seventy-nine years of age when he came back (from fifteen years of exile in Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait and the last few months in France¹) to consolidate the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In his letters to his daughter in law, he referred to himself by the Quranic phrase, *Arvazel -el-omr*²- or the one who is beyond old. (older than the old, referring to the time of life past old age where one begins losing control of their mind). It is important to note that Rasoulof's condemnation is not directed to the Khomeini alone, but to all age-old, crumbling, outdated, rusted, primitive beliefs associated with religion, superstitions, culture or everything a dictator uses to build his capitalist empire while cursing people with a lifetime of agony. It is the final, darkest and most pungent of all his metaphors.

Indirect language, with its play of puns and at times obscure and esoteric references

¹www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c202_97959/س_امام_خمینی_حضرت_تبعید_شمار_۲_روز_حضور/ج_۲

²Wrote a letter to his Daughter in law: now I am old, and even beyond old, using this phrase.

[www.imam-](http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c207_44531/اصطلاحا_در_استغراق_از_پرهیز_طباطبایی_پرهیز_از_استغراق_در_اصطلاحا)

khomeini.ir/fa/c207_44531/اصطلاحا_در_استغراق_از_پرهیز_طباطبایی_پرهیز_از_استغراق_در_اصطلاحا

This is a reference to this in the Quran, Chapter 22, verse 5:

O mankind! if ye are in doubt concerning the Resurrection, then lo! We have created you from dust, then from a drop of seed, then from a clot, then from a little lump of flesh shapely and shapeless, that We may make (it) clear for you. And We cause what We will to remain in the wombs for an appointed time, and afterward We bring you forth as infants, then (give you growth) that ye attain your full strength. And among you, there is he who dieth (young), and among you, there is he who is brought back to the most abject time of life, so that, after knowledge, he knoweth naught. And thou (Muhammad) seest the earth barren, but when We send down water thereon, it doth thrill and swell and put forth every lovely kind (of growth).

are intended to work on the human mind associatively. Nothing is told directly, with absolute certainty but is left open-ended and ambiguous. It is expected to be understood by Iranian audiences who have become experts in decoding and unravelling the web of cues given via indirect language. The mind of the audiences, always boggled by the pressures of deciphering symbols and allusions, works like the minds of the agents of the system in charge of censoring the films. A culture of paranoid viewership emerges. The subjects of the authoritarian regime become a mirror image of their oppressors.

And the other, bigger fight is to live in a country where censorship teaches you how to deny yourself, how to forget yourself, break the mirrors and believe an image of yourself which is not real...an Iranian narcissism where one is taught to think that art is only in the hand of Iranians, an art blended with ideas of Islam and Shi'ism, turned itself to a monster of narcissism, that will soon turn into fascism.¹

Goodbye and Manuscripts Don't Burn

Between *The White Meadows*, (2009), and his next Film, *Be Omide Didar*, or *Goodbye*, (2011), something significant took place in Mohammad Rasoulof's life. He was arrested for supporting the Green Movement, and subsequently banned from making films officially in Iran.

I was arrested for the first time in 2010 along with Jafar Panahi. We were making a film about the protests during the Green Movement in Iran and they had us arrested based on a presumption that a foreign country invested in us to make a film against the political system in Iran. There are two charges in Iran's law.

¹ Interview of Mohammad Rasoulof conducted by the author via Skype in November 2019.

First, action against national security, and second, propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran. All journalists, artists and activists wishing to influence their surroundings, will be charged with these two charges. This is because the proof of these two charges lies largely in the hands of the intelligence service. The punishment for the first charge is one year of imprisonment while the second one is five. When we were arrested for the first time Jafar and I were both sentenced to six years. But the second court reduced my charge to one year while not budging on Jafar's sentence. Their goal was to create a strife between us...they weren't successful...¹

He continues,

Later for my film *A Man of Integrity*, (2017), I was charged for six years in the first court, but in the second court I was exonerated from the charge of action against national security but I was once again given one year of prison term for "propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran. I am forbidden to leave the country. For every film I make, they sentence me to one year of imprisonment. I have to surrender myself soon in two or three weeks...but even if they take me in, I won't come out empty-handed, I'll come out with a few good scripts."²

This marked a transition in his career and henceforth he shed the veil in the language of his next films. *Goodbye* and *Manuscripts* made in the second phase of his career, both depict the claustrophobia, panic and anxiety stemming from his own life, and his inability to come to terms with his verdict, his journeys in and out of prison, meetings with interrogators,

¹ Panahi's sentence was later reduced to three months of prison term after Abbas Kiarostami, Juliette Binoche made global news out of this.

²Interview of Mohammad Rasoulof with the author was conducted over Skype in November, 2019.

and his own (initial) indecision of staying back or leaving the country forever.

Goodbye depicted his own dilemma after his verdict, of illegally escaping Iran, bringing to attention a mammoth underground, illegal industry that finds absurd but elaborately planned ways to illegally get visas for Iranians in exchange for a huge sum of money, and sometimes their own lives. Rasoulof's *Goodbye* in this sense picks on the themes addressed by Bahman Ghobadi in *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, as explained in



Figure 112: Noora in *Goodbye*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2011

chapter two. Noora, an attorney whose license has been revoked, wishes to escape from Iran, unable to bear the stifling environment in Tehran. She is driven by her only goal, to escape Iran even if it involves her taking advantage of her pregnancy to get a permanent residency in Europe. The head of the agency, a man named Lotfi devises an elaborate plan for her escape. He arranges for her to be invited to a conference in a law university. The clause is she must give birth to her child in Europe, so it is non-Iranian by birth. Everything goes as per plans till a terrible turn of events brings unforeseen catastrophe. Noora comes to know that the fetus growing in her womb is diagnosed with down syndrome. Ridden with agony, she must decide whether to abort the fetus or give life to a deformed, mentally damaged baby that could ironically be the ticket to her liberation.

Noora's world is grey, blue and desaturated of any warmth. She lives alone in an apartment, her only companion being a turtle she keeps in a square aquarium. She feeds it

every day before venturing out to the harsh, unforgiving city, making efforts in vain to get back her work license, or bribing Lotfi's secretary to expedite the process of getting the visa. Syringes, nose bleeds, agony, trauma, blood and claustrophobia fill her life. Her husband (enacted by Shahab Hosseini) is a political journalist in hiding. Government agents pay unwanted visits, at first seizing her satellite disk, but later pinning her down in her elevator and raiding her house to get information about her husband. There is nowhere she can be in peace and safety. Everything in the city is watched. Even her house is not private.

Like her turtle, she is trapped. Her world resembles that of an internal exiles', except



Figure 113: Agents of the system corner Noora in the lift, *Goodbye*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2011

the walls here are invisible. She pushes her face down in her pillow, and sobs uncontrollably. There is a leak in the aquarium, and Noora must relocate the pet turtle in a tray. As the turtle tries to get out of the tray, she builds walls made of newspapers to replicate the aquarium or a makeshift prison. She does to the turtle what the system does to her. The turtle soon goes missing. She moves her furniture and looks for it everywhere in her flat. Rasoulof continues the shepherd-flock metaphor (that he mentions in his speech earlier) and develops it further through the image of the *looti* and *antar* as seen in *The White Meadows*.

The only colour present in her life is the one she adds herself. She rebels in her ways by painting her nails red and rejecting the Islamic uniform that all women must wear to work or formal spaces. She wears jeans and a jacket and gold trinkets in her ears. In a sequence



Figure 115: Noora paints her nails red in *Goodbye*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2011

shot in the ladies' compartment in a metro during work hours, we see Noora remove her nail paint, and put on the Islamic black scarf (*Magna'eh*) on her head. She looks indistinguishable among other women surrounding her, all dressed in black. She is on her way to meet a colleague from her work place. She asks for her help to get her license revoked. As the film

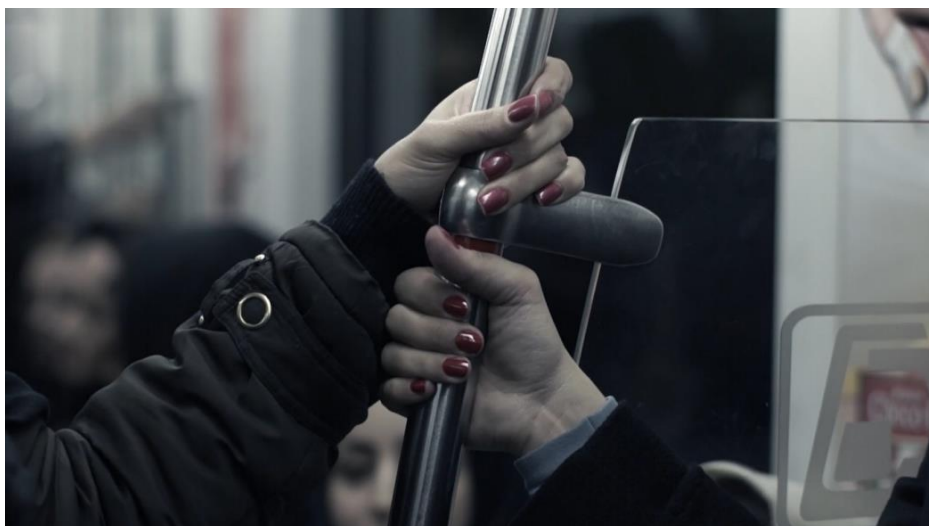


Figure 114: At the ladies' compartment inside the metro, *Goodbye*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2011

progresses toward a grim turn of events, the red nail paint is replaced by blood, as the gold trinkets are sold off in return for money to be given as a bribe.

Like the terrace in Ghobadi's film, *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, Noora gets a few moments of respite in her roof which she frequents for a smoke. Each time the skies are cut across by aeroplanes. Shot in a telephoto lens that flattens distance, and brings subjects closer, the anxiety of the trapped subject increases manifold, as the (unattainable, unreachable) vehicle of liberation passes her by at regular intervals, and yet she finds herself in the same position, watching them go past her. The planes go by leaving behind the bitter, trailing sound, ringing of the agnush of her imprisonment.



Figure 116: The terrace in *Goodbye*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2011

The abject pain and gloom in the film are designed for a devastatingly obvious ending, the ruin of Noora's only dream. Her husband refuses to leave the country with her even though his visa arrives along with hers. She sells her apartment, packs her bags and stays the last few moments in a hotel. She books a taxi to take her to the airport and waits in her room. Her nose starts to bleed as she sees an image of the unborn mentally damaged child flash before her eyes. The product of the system cannot be a healthy child- it is doomed to be a hundred times worse than the present generation. A loud banging is heard. The agents have tracked her down. As the camera remains fixed on the bed, the sharp turn of the metallic door knob, the firm voice of a woman agent pinning Noora to the wall heightens the violence of the closing sequence. An agent rummages through her suitcase checking her wallet. It has the photo of the desired healthy baby, an orange muffler knit by her mother, packets of Bahman cigarettes and bread stacked in polythene packs for the journey. They find the laptops she has been hiding in her ceiling. The violence in image achieved through sound

intensifies manifold in his next film *Manuscripts don't Burn* that shows a violent event in the history of Iran where the government of Iran falsely invited a group of dissident writers for a conference in Armenia to be executed on the way in 1996. Ahmad Shamlou, Hushang Golshiri and Reza Barahani among the artists invited refused to go but twenty-one other writers did. The driver who was hired by the secret police of Iran tried to drive the bus into a deep valley, but the novelist Shahriar Mandanipour made the bus stop at the last moment.¹ Miraculously they survived, but the film shows how the system tracked each of them and killed them most ruthlessly. Filled with references to actual violence from the



Figure 117: Violence in image. *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, Mohammad Rasoulof, 2013

Shah's time to the present, the film shows violence in a way that has never before been shown in Post Revolution Iranian Cinema. The sound asphyxiates but here the visuals do too, violence is depicted in its harshest and coldest form in which it is inflicted by the agents of the system. The muted horror on the faces of the artists as they succumb to their deaths is further intensified by the cold visual tone, the sharp cuts and minimal dialogues. The state hires two agents to ruthlessly murder the surviving poets and writers. When only two of the dissident poets remain, heinous methods are used to do away with them. One is done away with an air injection, that uses potassium to stimulate a heart attack; the other is tied with his mouth sealed with tape. An agent casually clips his nose with laundry clips.

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJqbm1UcqtS>
<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/313765.html>

When I asked him about how he filmed *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, Rasoulouf said, We decided not to put the names of the cast and crew in the end credit due to the perilous tone of the film. We were constantly afraid of the same fate happening to us. More frightening was that nothing was written on papers (script) because I didn't want to get arrested with some evidence in my hand. So, I kept it all in my head.¹

Rasoulouf recounts how exceptionally difficult the shooting experience was for him, as he had to design the story and the locations in a way that it could be filmed despite his ban. "We filmed with a 5D photo shooting DSLR camera, with a group of five people. It was really difficult. Exterior scenes were filmed in Iran and interior scenes were filmed in Germany in a studio, and I coupled these scenes with very simple cinematic techniques."² He simulated locations in two different countries, masked people, by using props like mouth bandages and head bags for torture, used body doubles to replace two actors from Iran unavailable in Germany and dubbed their voices.



Figure 118: A screengrab from *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, Mohammad Rasoulouf, 2013

This bitterness in language that reaches its peak in *Manuscripts don't Burn* dates back to the cultural milieu of the 1950s and 1960s following the CIA imposed coup that

¹ Online Interview of Mohammad Rasoulouf with the author, November 2019

² *ibid*

deposed the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 and increased the powers of the monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Realising that he had lost the popular support of the people, the Shah imposed a ruthless campaign of censorship on all forms of art, especially poetry and cinema. The bitter atmosphere after losing hopes of a nearly achieved democratic government reflected in the dejected verses of poets like Ahmad Shamlou, Akhavan Sales, and the cinema of filmmakers like Ebrahim Golestan, *Brick and the Mirror*, (1964), Forough Farrokhzad, *The House is Black*, (1962), Farrokh Gaffary, *Shab e Quzi*, (1965), Dariush Mehjui, *Gav*, (1969) Amir Naderi, *Tangna*, (1973), Masoud Kimiai, *Qeysar*, (1969), *Reza Motori*, (1970), *Gavaznha*, (1974). Shahriar Ghanbari's lyrics were was sung by Farhad for Naderi's film, *Goodbye Friend*, (1971)¹

It is raining blood from the black clouds

داره از ابر سیاه خون می چکه

On Fridays, the skies drop blood instead of rain

جمعه ها خون جای بارون می چکه

Tar and kamanchehs² are rendered mute

از صدا افتاده تار و کمنجه

As the dead are being transported from alley to alley.³

مرده می‌برن کوچه به کوچه

Akhavan Sales wrote⁴,

All those who came enriched themselves and left

هر که آمد بار خود را بست و رفت

¹ tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/7756/چکه-می-بارون-جای-خون-جمعه-ها-خون-جای-بارون-می-چکه

² Persian stringed musical instruments

³ Trans. with Majdeddin Mahmoodi Arsanjani- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3q5qV_DVzU

⁴shereno.com as accessed on 4.01.2021. Trans. Majdeddin M. Arsanjani and the author.

We are the same, unfortunate, despicable and deprived

ما همان بدبخت و خوار و بي نصيب

What was the result of that except for lies?

ز آن چه حاصل, جز دروغ و جز دروغ

What is the result of this except for deception?

زين چه حاصل, جز فريب و جز فريب

They say again: wait another day

باز مي گویند: فرداي دگر

Till another one (saviour) comes

صبر كن تا ديگري پيدا شود

Oh, Omid! There will be no Kaveh¹

كاوه اي پيدا نخواهد شد, اميد

Let us hope for an Alexander.²

كاشكي اسکندري پيدا شود

With Kaveh, the blacksmith, who vanquished Zahhak, deposed in present-day Iran (referring to the overthrow of Mosaddegh), Akhavan Sales, loses all hopes in Iranian society to produce an emancipator. Even though undesired, forlorn, he desperately wishes for a change to come from external forces, despite knowing that it can only bring destruction as Alexander did to Persepolis. In the face of inconsolable hopelessness, he wishes for complete annihilation.

¹Kave is a character in *Shahnameh*, a blacksmith, who led the uprising against the cruel Zahhak, the illegitimate non-Iranian king (Assyrian or Arab) with serpents over his shoulder that ate the brains of men. He helped Freydun, the one chosen by God to ascend the throne. Kave symbolises the inner, native and national agent of hope and change.

²Alexander of Macedonia invaded the Persian empire and by defeating Darius III, ended 200 years of the reign of Achaemenid Empire. He symbolises the agent of foreign change, or the one who has no mercy or affection for native values. For Iranians he is the symbol of ultimate destruction as he burnt down the Persian capital of Persepolis (330B.C.)

Rasoulof's *Goodbye* continues this tone of disappointment, shattering any hope or possibility of escape from the occupied Iran of today. Like Akhavan Sales, he feels abject disappointment with the Islamic government that came to power by making false promises to its people, thereby forming the Islamic Republic, run on the tenets of Islam by its clergy and headed by the Supreme Leader. Far from being emancipators, Rasoulof refers to them as invaders, who have colonised his country removing everything that could be an obstacle in the path of religious identity. Clerics took over all major institutions (educational, economic, medical, industrial) with new positions invented for them. Non-religious studies faced a huge challenge, and performative art, especially music and dance were forbidden from this new republic. Hijab became mandatory and the idea of woman as mother and wife took precedence over everything else. The Judicial system entirely came under the control of the clergy and governed by Sharia law. Referring to the people who run his country as 'them', he says "this is my country. Why should I leave? They must leave."¹ He cites the example of the prevalence of flags in the city as markers of oppression, tyranny and invasion, which hardly makes Iranians free citizens. Fellow Iranian citizens and he, just like Noora, feel like colonised subjects captured by foreign agents who have no mercy for the values of the common people.² That in itself is the condition of the internal exile. Even though he/she is in his own country, he feels colonised by other external forces. He is exiled in his own reality.

¹Video interview of Mohammad Rsoulof conducted by the author in Persian over Skype in November 2019.

²A lot of limitations were imposed on pre-Islamic rituals. Most were disparaged. *Chahar-shanbe* Suri has always been disparaged by the Islamic government. Festivities like Mehregan and Sade are lost. Nouruz has been given a religious tint and leaders of Iran refuse to have photos taken beside the *Haft-Seen* table (as a national Iranian sign of Nouruz). Celebrating Nouruz is forbidden in Persepolis and Pasargad (the grave of Cyrus II).

<https://www.rfi.fr/fa/iran/20170315-چهارشنبه-سوری-برای-چیست-؟>

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1394/12/25/1028350/دیگاه-استاد-شهید-مطهری-در-بار-چهارشنبه-سوری>

<https://kayhan.london/fa/1397/01/05/از-برگزاری-نوروز-در-تخ>

When you walk in the streets of Tehran you see flags everywhere and you think it seems that this country is occupied by another country, if not, what is the meaning of putting flags everywhere? An Iranian human sees all these images everywhere and absorbs them. In the middle of all these, it is very difficult for a filmmaker to talk about something serious and universal. But it is only independent cinema that can do this. I am not very hopeless, but working in the middle of this situation is hard. It is becoming very hard for me as an independent filmmaker.”¹



Figure 119: The banner on Azaadi Street reads “Every wish can come true with diligence” Tehran, February 2017. Photograph taken by author



Figure 120: Yadeghar-e Emam Highway, Tehran 2018. Photograph taken by author

¹Online interview of Mohammad Rasoulof with the author via Skype, November 2019.

The intellectuals of Iranian society initially believed that the victory of the revolution redeemed the country from the dark and gloom of the cultural milieu in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Although it may not be the only cause, this hopeless, asphyxiating atmosphere in the cultural, artistic scene in Iran propelled the way for a revolution. The collective abjection of the time was an invitation for a change and a new day that could bring the promise of hope and emancipation. Instead, the new day brought the new republic, which, far from keeping the promises of the revolution, took a cue from history, and quite like the Shah strengthened its control on censorship in the arts. One of the first things the Islamic Republic did was reject the dark portrayal of society, which it considered to be a contagious disease that engulfed everyone in its clutches. It introduced the code *Siah namai* (*siah* - black, *namai*- rendition) in censorship against it. *siah namai* or painting a dark face of Iran (or sordid realism) was what Panahi and Rasoulof were both accused of. The present government knows well that *siah namai* could effectively stir another radical revolution leading to their doom.

The leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, has expressed his views on *siah namai* evident in his public speeches and addresses to filmmakers and other artists. On 26th January 2018, in a letter to young documentary filmmakers, he mentioned, “Dark rendition is not art.”¹

A month later on the 11th of February 2018, he addressed young documentary filmmakers with a clearer message,

“A documentary that criticises and questions is useful and necessary. In critique, the aggressive and anarchic tone makes even the good part of it detrimental. Humour would help reach the message instead”² or,

“It is important to render bitterness in television, in a way that does not make the audience

¹<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=38751>

²<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=38751>

cry and make them depressed.”¹

In 2010, the leader of Iran in a meeting with the crew of the religious TV series Prophet Joseph (created by Farajollah Salahshoor), said:

“I say you should criticize, but criticizing in the real meaning of the word. It means you should show the challenge between good and evil so it would be known that if there is an ugly and heinous part in society, there is also an intention to remove it... If you show poverty, it should not mean that there is no intention to resist it. In that case, the film would be despairing, and show a dark environment, which is far from the truth.”²

There is No Evil, an Analysis of Internal Exile

In his latest film, *There is No Evil, Sheytan Vojud Nadarad*, (2020), Rasoulof proposes how three different individual subjects of a totalitarian society respond to oppression: an obedient citizen who internalises tyranny and loses all faculty to think, one who reflects on his position in tyrannical order and sheds off individual responsibility of his actions, and the third, one who disobeys the orders of the state and rebels. Irrespective of their actions, there is no escape and all three individuals are doomed to be captives of the dictatorship, in their obedience or disobedience. In an episodic form of narration that does not allow audiences to get too close to any of his characters, Rasoulof brings attention to the role of totalitarian governments in removing personal responsibility from the actions of individuals, making them incapable of the ability of thought, thus rendering them agents of the system; or obedient subjects of the regime who would go to any extent to fulfil the job vested on them, in this regard, execution. By placing responsibility in the system people are emptied of moral values and thus dehumanised. This is similar to the behavioural

¹tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/7756/تحليل-تطبیقی-دو-ترانه-فرهاد-مهرداد-جمعه-ها-خون-جای-بارون-می-چکه

²<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/Iran-supreme-leader-and-Iranian-filmmakers/31025024.html>

expectations from a devout follower of Sharia Law. He is supposed to follow the law even if it contradicts the codes of ethics. He is taught that the responsibility of his actions is not on his shoulder but on the shoulders of the Holy Law (which includes codes of morality in it). By following Sharia Law, automatically the moral responsibilities of a follower are fulfilled. This automatization of morality by separating it from personal responsibility is similar to how a totalitarian system functions. Although this view on Sharia Law has been challenged by many theologians and even jurors of Islamic culture, it is still largely accepted, propagated and advised. For example, in Khomeini's view,¹ the most important responsibility of an Iranian citizen is to preserve the Islamic system. While the first subject in the first episode is a dutiful citizen who makes all possible efforts to assimilate into his society, neighbourhood and family, picks up his allotted bags of rice, rescues a cat stuck in his building, is a loving father, diligent husband and a kind son; a very calm person, having a tender connection with reality, but in his reality, he is hired by the system as an executioner. Rasoulof inspired by Hannah Arendt's theory on the Banality of Evil² and how the system designs the most ordinary citizens (terribly and terrifyingly normal)³ as its agents to commit heinous, horrific crimes, proposes that evil is a function of thoughtlessness, a propensity in ordinary people to obey orders of the state in their desire to conform and assimilate.

If you know Hannah Arendt well when she talks about the theory of the banality of evil, she says that Adolf Eichmann was not a monster, not Satan, he was not evil. In human disasters, the agent is not a monster. These things are happening

¹ "Preserving the system is among the most obligatory obligations".

www.imam-

khomeini.ir/fa/c76_15369/می_«حفظ_نظام_اوجب_واجبات_است»_پرسش_و_پاسخ/انقلاب_اسلامی/چه_اوجبی_واجب_تر_از_«حفظ_نظام_اوجب_واجبات_است»_می_توان_تصور_نمود

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. (New York: Viking Press, 1964)

³Ibid, 276

mostly by people who place importance on being very good, they are very normal. They only cannot think. Therefore, evil becomes banal. This is the beginning of the theory of the banality of evil by Hannah Arendt. The main point of the first episode is when a person has a great ability to adapt himself to society's norm or values, he pushes the button due to his responsible nature. He wants to perform his responsibility, but he's not thinking about his responsibilities as a human. He's acting as a citizen, as a person who wants to take his identity from society. He wants to become "us", become the "we" and join the mass. He wants to have approval or confirmation from society.¹

On his way to work, for a moment the protagonist seems lost as he waits by the steering wheel as the traffic lights change to red. He looks at the traffic lights through the splicing windscreen wipers that brings and takes focus away from them. He stares at the lights with a blank expression. The lights turn green, and the cars behind him move past. His car remains in the now-empty street. He is evidently disturbed, but he does not have the faculty to analyse his thoughts. He reaches his tiny cubicle and sits still for a while. The cubicle has a wash basin, an induction to heat tea, and some fruits and a board of red and green light buttons similar to the traffic lights that had paralysed him momentarily. As the red light starts beeping, he gets up, prepares tea and washes the fruits. He eats as classical music plays in the background. The beeping increases as the lights turn green. He looks into a mirror and pushes a button. A jarring metallic thud takes over the next image as slippers fall off the hanging, trembling feet of men seated on chairs.

"The apparatus of censorship in Iran wants to get rid of any thought that makes the audience aware of their situation. They are the promoters of ignorance and the enemies of thinking."

¹Online Interview of Mohammad Rasoulof with the author conducted via Zoom, 5.04.2020 at 9.30pm

The second episode traces the story of a young soldier undergoing mandatory military service¹. He is devastated when he finds out that it is his turn to push the button (execute) in the next hour. It must be noted that smaller cities with fewer cases of executions do not have an official executioner hired by the government. In such cities, soldiers completing their compulsory military service are required to execute convicted criminals from time to time. It is also interesting to note that soldiers who participate in executions get a raise, earn more money and are given days off from work.² The troubled youth tries his best to reason with the other boys in his cubicle who have themselves agreed to do this heinous deed for various reasons. They coax him to get it over with, as it is the duty of men serving in the army to blindly follow ‘top orders’, even if it means to kill. Some say they agreed to do it as it was the only way to get off work and visit home. Unable to find a solution, he speaks to his girlfriend on the phone. She designs an elaborate escape plan for him, suggesting he should rebel. He follows her plan and uses his gun to frighten anyone who may raise an alarm, thereby finding his way out of the walls of the prison. A car waits for him at the end of the tunnel. His girlfriend emerges, and they speed away as the global anti-fascist anthem of Italian origin resistance *Bella ciao* plays loudly, celebrating this moment of emancipation, no longer local, but universal and global, stirring the sentiments of everyone desiring freedom in the world. A space for human emancipation is celebrated, and here Rasoulof’s critique is no longer confined to Islam or Iran but addresses State as the universal parameter of oppressive machinery that uses religion as its ideology to oppress its citizens.

This episode connected to the fourth and final story is a commentary and contrast with the earlier episode as it depicts a subject who dares to say NO to the orders imposed on

¹ Without completion of mandatory military service Iranians do not get a passport, or a driving license

² Mohammad Rasoulof explains in an online interview with the author via Zoom on 5.04.2020, 9.30pm

him. He dares to disobey in declining to perform his duty. Thus, the second story signifies the desire of the exile to be free from the bondage of internal exile. The freedom is only momentary and Rasoulof shows the consequences of personal individual rebellion in a totalitarian system, and how it rejects any dissenters or who refuse to conform to the call of collective duty imposed on them, or in other words disobey the state.



Figure 121: Screenshot from *There is No Evil*, Mohammad Rasoulof, episode 2, soldiers in a cubicle

I'll share something with you I have never shared with anyone before. It may be interesting for your research. We did a lot of rehearsals for the second episode, like a theatrical play. For me, it was really interesting to see the reactions of real people. We rehearsed with three different groups of actors. To achieve better dialogue delivery, I explained the theme of the film and asked them to improvise the way they wanted to for the cubicle scene in the second episode. All six actors in all three groups with no exception said, "We would do the execution if we were in that place because we were obligated to do so. Because we were on a mission, we had an excuse." There's a saying in Farsi where you say - I am on a mission, I have a message, I am an agent, so I am excused. It means that I am not responsible and that people higher than me are. It's a very famous saying in Farsi.¹

¹It is an Arabic phrase: *al-ma'muro ma'dzur*.

The fourth episode shows the consequences of rebellion. It picks up on the life of the young soldier who had disobeyed the orders of the system and had escaped. A trained doctor, who despite acquiring a degree is not permitted to practice medicine,¹ now lives on the fringes of society, amid barren brown stretches of land, far from human civilisation: the price he has to pay for the choice he made many years ago when he refused to execute a prisoner. He, like Rasoulof himself, is marginalised, removed from his society and must henceforth live in internal exile. He is imprisoned, not within the concrete walls of the prison, but banished to a parched desert, severed from family members and doomed to live as a captive within his homeland. Since he did not finish compulsory military service, he does not have rights as other citizens. His passport has been seized, and he is not allowed to have a driving license. Rasoulof plays with metaphors and verbal puns in his shots. The one refusing to be a part of the mechanism of the system is forbidden to drive a *machine* (car in Persian). The episode begins with the protagonist's twenty-year-old daughter Darya (enacted by his daughter Baran Rasoulof) visiting him from Germany. Darya does not know he is her father. It is informed that after she was born, her parents, both deprived of their rights to leave Iran, mutually agreed to send the baby to Germany with her uncle. Her mother, also the agent of rebellion, or the motivator, who encouraged the protagonist to escape the prison, dies while trying to illegally cross the borders to meet her daughter. On the brink of death, visibly fighting an unknown illness, the protagonist calls for Darya. Having lost all his dreams of starting a family with his beloved, and being ostracised from society, all he wishes is to die a hero, *qahremaan*, in the eyes of his daughter. A conflict ensues when he tells her the truth. She condemns him for irresponsibility towards her and her mother. His moral sense of

المأمور معذور

It means: the agent (or the one on the mission) is excused.

<https://www.noorlib.ir/view/fa/book/bookview/text/7361/2/270>

¹A person who finishes medical school needs a permit of practice in order to work as a doctor. The permit is given to male students only after they complete mandatory military service

superiority and pride, the only things that are still his own, those that have not been snatched by the system are heavily challenged by his daughter. She reminds him of a life he could have had, had he been a dutiful citizen. He coughs blood, his soul bleeds, and his pride shatters. This is the darkest point of the film. Here the film becomes a classic tale of the plight of internal exile, where the one who says NO is kept captive within an occupied homeland invaded by outsiders who impose military rule over them. There is no escape from the eyes of the state, that either makes one conform or rebel, but nothing he/she does can set him/her free of its clutches. Even in obedience, the subject remains sorrowful, despite having lost his faculty to think. His dutiful self-bleeds. There is no freedom from the wrath of tyranny. In his disobedience, he loses everything that he owns and becomes the (broken) subject the state creates. Herein lies the inexplicable sorrow of an exile trapped within his country.

The actress in the fourth episode as you know is my daughter. She and I had this conflict with each other where she told me that my country was more important to me than my child. This episode stems (to some extent) from my personal experience. It's not that, what I wanted was never to conform to totalitarianism. They seized my passport and kept me away from my daughter for long years of my life...all because of the choice I had made. I didn't want this. I didn't even ask her about the choice I had made. But now she pays the price of a choice she didn't even make. What I'm doing to my own daughter is the same thing that I'm fighting with... it is complicated and very philosophical. I don't know, I don't know how to express this.¹

¹Online interview of Mohammad Rasoulof conducted by the author on 5th April, 2020, 9.30pm via Zoom.

What Rasoulof could not express explicitly in words to me, was a sense of burdensome loss. While his choice to hold face against a totalitarian regime allowed him to make films about human expression and work for hand in hand with human rights activists and lawyers to fight for everything he believed in, it all came at the cost of not being a father to his daughter¹. In acknowledgement of this personal and individual loss in his film, *There is No Evil*, his language now becomes personal and confessional, thus bringing him closer to Panahi. Panahi from the beginning was aware that the ban on his filmmaking was not an attempt to destroy the cinema of Iran but directly designed to destroy him as a filmmaker. It was intended to portray him as an example of a beaten-down artist to the rest of Iran. Rasoulof, whose films till now were general attacks on exposing the oppressive mechanism of dictatorships and totalitarian governments, now recognises on camera, the atrocity of the personal blow it has brought to his own life.

In Mohsen Makhmalbaf's short story, *Soul Surgery*,² the anonymous protagonist narrating story of his torture (that is referred to as 'soul surgery' by his torturer) promises his interrogator and torturer that he will write a book about his experiences. The torturer says, "The benefit of your book would be that I would no longer be required to perform surgery on individual souls to turn them into good citizens. After being set free, you will never do any wrong (any more). It would suffice for people to read your book and reach the same conclusion. Write it, make it as real as possible..."

The agent of evil, Satan (*Sheytan*) or Devil could be benign as suggested by Mohammad Rasoulof, but evil exists.³ The evil of a totalitarian system works in a way that

¹Rasoulof's daughter Baran, like the character Darya, in his film *There is No Evil*, lives in Germany with her mother.

²Makhmalbaf Mohsen, *Soul Surgery, Jarrahi ye Ruh*, (Tehran: Soroush Magazin, 1988) www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=fa/article/جراحی-روح as accessed on 18.3.2020

The story was originally written in 1988 and published in that year in Soroush Magazine.

³ The Persian title of the film is *Sheytan Vujud Nadarad*, which literally translates as There is no Devil, Sheytan being Satan in Persian.

attacks and destroys a dissenting individual's personal and normal life. It is him/her, its agents intend to break, as Rasoulof shows in all his films. The attack is always direct and personal.

Conclusion

On banning artists and restraining them internally within the country, the system, as discussed earlier does not necessarily wish to silence them entirely but achieve an equilibrium in art, where they control artistic expression by limiting them to tell stories only of their suffering, violence, agony, restlessness and the angst of internal exile thereby forbidding them from working in the industry with professional actors, restricting budget and accessibility of studios. While Panahi's first two films made after his ban depicted the entrapped language of the artist in exile confined within the boundaries of his home, a metaphor for Iran, gradually with *Taxi*, (2015) and completely with *Three Faces*, (2018), he breaks free from the equilibrium desired by the system. He steps out of his home and films *Taxi* in his car, still a safe, interim space between the house and the world outside. It is true, characters in *Taxi* are not professional actors, but even in his earlier films, he had worked with a cast of nonprofessional actors. Here he takes the first steps toward emerging out of the walls of his house and interacting with members of the society. In *Three Faces*, (2018), Panahi gradually moves toward his original style of storytelling, by depicting creativity in content and the formal aspects of cinema. Not only does he collaborate with Behnaz Jaffary, a professional actress with a prolific television career, but he also moves out of all binding structures, like the home, the elevator, the car and sets out on the road. The film is a commentary on social ills, patriarchy, and the desire for emancipation of women, but uses poeticism to address all of these to resemble earlier films like *Mirror*, (1997) and *Offside*, (2006), made before his verdict. He gradually sheds the initial panic and fear of losing his

voice to the system, thereby restoring normalcy in his mind and the language of his cinema.

The panic of exile and entrapment that surges in Rasoulof's *Goodbye and Manuscripts Don't Burn* recedes in *There is No Evil* to depict a looming sense of despair and sadness of the artist himself. The inexplicable sorrow of *There is No Evil* can be comparable to the angst that Panahi undergoes in *This is Not a Film*, (2011). These films in their portrayal of sorrow, gloom and darkness in the lives of doomed characters do not charge the heart with the spirit and desire for rebellion but contradictorily defines the power of tyranny that silences all rebels. Rasoulof's sadness and Panahi's suicidal tendencies are the stories their torturers wish them to tell. Yet through a process of making grim films, Panahi achieves normalcy in his film language, thereby giving a fit reply to the interrogator who had blindfolded him in Evin prison and accused him of sordid realism, or *siah namai*.

"When he (interrogator) blindfolded and pinned me against the wall, I told him that I did not consciously plan to depict a dark face of Iran in all my films. A lot of accidents take place while filming, often what we see in society finds a way to percolate into our scenarios...like...him (pointing at the *Haji Firouz*¹ who walked into my frame at that moment, asking for money) ...you could accidentally come into my films, interrogating me in this manner..."²

He, like Makhmalbaf's unnamed protagonist in *Soul Surgery*, brings back his interrogator in his film, *Taxi* but only as a flash from a buried past that disturbs him momentarily as he begins hearing a ringing sound that he associates with prison. He steps out of his car, composes himself and succeeds in suppressing that voice and continues filming. This is in contrast with the scenes in *The Closed Curtain*, (2013) when he emerges

¹*Haji Firouz* (حاجی فیروز) is a fictional character in Iranian folklore. His face is covered in soot, and he is clad in bright red clothes and a felt hat. Men dressed as Haji Firouz appear in the streets by the beginning of Nourouz. They dance through the alleys while singing and playing a tambourine reminding people of the arrival of Nourouz and taking money. -Moin Farsi Dictionary
<https://www.vajehyab.com/moein/حاجی+فیروز>

²Video interview of Jafar Panahi conducted by the author in March 2016, Tehran.

from the dark black curtains, also a metaphor for the black cloth used by the interrogator to blindfold him. In *The Closed Curtain* the artist under the tyranny of his story, emerges from the blindfolds in flashes, but in *Taxi*, the filmmaker actively steers the story forward, and the interrogator surfaces only as a flash. The unbroken spirit of the filmmaker is quick to resurface despite a brief moment of panic. Herein lies his resistance and rebellion.

Rasoulof until now negligent of acknowledging personal loss in his cinema confronts the audiences and tells his own story in his latest film. He has not physically stepped into his stories yet, as Panahi does, but treads close by casting his daughter to play herself in *There is No Evil*. *There is No Evil* in this regard is an anomaly in the corpus of his work. While Panahi gradually finds a way to reach his original language of filmmaking having come to peace with his verdict, Rasoulof, on shedding violence, and panic; prevalent emotional forces that drove his earlier narratives, reaches a step closer to his emancipation, despite the bars surrounding him.

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An article about lyrics of two famous songs
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An article about the relationship of filmmakers and Ayatollah Khamenei
<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/Iran-supreme-leader-and-Iranian-filmmakers/31025024.html>

A report of meeting of filmmaker with Ayatollah Khamenei
khomeini.ir/fa/c76_15369/پرسش_و_پاسخ_انقلاب_اسلامی_چه_اوجبی_و_اجب_تر_از_«حفظ_نظام_اوجب_واجبات_است»_می_توان_تصور_نمود

An Arabic phrase: *al-ma'muro ma'dzur*.
المأمور معذور
It means: the agent (or the one on the mission) is excused.
<https://www.noorlib.ir/view/fa/book/bookview/text/7361/2/270>

The dictionary definition of a word
<https://www.vajehyab.com/moein/حاجی+فیروز>