

SYNOPSIS

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

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 *The 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, *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."

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 like 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.