

REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERFACE WITH REALITIES AND IDEAS: AN OVERVIEW OF IRANIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

Cinema has been playing one of the most significant influences in our modern life. A lot of countries are involved in filmmaking, so the Iranian has been actively involved in cinema which has become famous across the world. Iranian cinema offers a fascinating even astonishing masterwork; it gives an artistic sophistication, mesmerisation, and passionate significance to humanism. While Hollywood, dominated by flashy fantasies, has put up many national cinemas out of business, Iran's filmmakers have still continued to influence the world audience with their unique and notable formal ingenuity and adherence to real-life people and their problems. In the international arena, Iranian cinema inspired successive generations. There has never been a bit of a moment in the history of Iranian cinema when it remained restricted to its current domains or boundary. Iranian cinema is huge and heterogeneous in its character, as are the historical-cultural, political, and social aspects of Iran itself. 'Realism' in Iranian films can be elucidated through different models or patterns, which has been attempted to deal with in this paper.

Keywords: Cinema, Iranian cinema, Greek cinema, Indian cinema, Film-Farsi, New-Wave, Neo-Realism Iranian style

The cinema more often represents the true nature of human society, culture and, most importantly, depicts the transformation of times. Human beings and their problems are the most critical raw materials for any cinema around the globe.¹

The cinema reflects a sharp image of the political conflicts and explores social issues as well. The socio-political problems and cinema are closely tied, and the

camera is used as a tool that rotates around all three elements. The role of cinema in moulding modernity, ideas, and modern national identity has been directly proportional to the prosperity of cinema at large.

The cinema or films have experienced some changes in their manner and class. The socio-political conditions and cinema are interacting and exchanging their influences with each other. Under the banner of these new approaches, the study of special effects in the cinema of Iran and its socio-political representation of society will be the main thrust of this paper. In other words, I would intend to discuss how cinema represented the situation of Iranian society and have an enduring impact on it and also how the socio-political conditions impact the content of the cinema as it is a general assumption that cinema has always been at the mercy of political inclination, particularly in the East.

Iran has a long history of cinema and is quite unique in nature.² With time Iran has observed a striking innovation in the form of entertainment. Before the advent of the 20th century, a few traditional plays that were connected with seasons were performed. Like *Barnishastan-e-Kusa* (the Ride of a Beardless Man) used to take place on a cold day at the beginning of spring and *Mir-e-Naurozi* (the Prince of New Year). *Umarkushan*, a play performed on the streets from the 16th century onwards, is now unremembered.³ Another kind of entertainment was *Khaima-yi-Shab-Bazi* (puppet theatre) that has been adapted and used by some present-day dramatists. *Tamasha* (street plays), gymnast, monkey tamers, which had been leisure past-time, is now infrequently seen. *Pardadari* (story-chanting) was also an important form of entertainment in which huge illustrative paintings were depicted on a canvas. The paintings represent the tragedy of Karbala or different tales related to national legends.

Naqalli (story-telling) was also prevalent and played an important role in circulating literature, folktales etc. The old tradition of *Taziyas* and *Ruhauzi* can also be traced within the ambit of cinema and represents the sad story of Karbala. The *Qahvakhana* (coffee house) has also played a pivotal role in the evolution of entertainment as it served the passengers an opportunity to exchange information and gossips. These traditional means of entertainment have almost disappeared during the first phase of the 20th century. Although, few like *Taziyas*, *Ruhauzi* were continued in the subsequent period but with certain modifications.

The new kind of entertainment was brought to Iran from the middle of the 19th century onward. The Iranians had been introduced to the new phenomena of cinematography. The first film in Iran during this period was started within the ambit of documentary fashion.⁴ The Qajar ruler Muzaffar al-Din Shah was so amused with the moving picture that he immediately instructed Mirza Ibrahim Khan (the chief photographer of the Shah's court) to purchase the equipment used for filmmaking. During his journey to Europe in 1900, the Shah continued the tradition of a dynastic travelogue.⁵ And the entire incident which substantiates his eagerness for film making equipment has been accounted in Shah's travel journal:

Today (July 9, 1900), we ordered Akasbashi to be ready for the equipment for our viewing. They went and set up the equipment by dusk. We went to the place, which is close to the inn in which our servants eat lunch and dinner. We sat. They darkened the room. We viewed the equipment. It shows many things, which is extremely astonishing. We saw many landscapes and buildings and the falling of the rain and the Seine River and so on and so on in the city of Paris.⁶

Eventually, the first and foremost Iranian documentary film was filmed in the year 1900, the first public theatre opened in 1904, and the first feature film was produced in 1930.⁷ The 20th century Iran has seen a spectacular transformation in the form of entertainment.⁸ Some changes were observed mainly as a result of rapid urbanisation, better modes of communication, and a shift in the socio-political and economic structure.⁹ As the cinema was first established in Iran, a complete change took place. In 1905, the first cinema was opened, and it met with immediate opposition from the clergy (this cinema was declared illicit by a famous Shia cleric Shaikh Fazl Allah Nuri).¹⁰ Anti-cinema feelings persist deep in Iran because the religiously minded people outrightly condemned it as they saw cinema as a threat to public morality and ethically corrupting.¹¹ It was believed that cinema would bring western influences (*Gharbzadegi*) on society as people were expected to imitate cinema in real life.

Cinema during the first phase of the 20th century in Iran was totally under the assistance of the ruling class. Khan Baba Motazed, a professional cinematographer, filmed Reza Shah Pahlavi coronation ceremony in 1926.¹² The first feature film was produced in 1929-1930 by Avanes Ohanian *Abi and Rabi*, a comedy movie impersonation of a Danish comedy called *Patte and Patechon*.¹³ This sixty-minute silent enjoyable comedy hit the screen amidst a great deal of publicity.¹⁴ This film is known as the first true product of Iranian cinema.¹⁵ Ohanian's second silent feature film,¹⁶ *Haji Agha*, another comedy, was made to attract the clergy class to the movie theatres. As a cornerstone of Iranian cinema, *Haji Agha* traces a transformation from one kind of Iran to another. This iconic movie was about a traditionally religious man who was utterly intolerant of the film industry. His daughter and son-in-law were cinema students, managed to

photograph him secretly, and finally, Haji Agha was enthralled to see himself in the movie and appreciated the true merits of cinema. This film was a representation of a clash between the two groups: the traditionalists and the modernists. In 1930, Ohanian established Iran's first film school.¹⁷ The religious-minded people have a deep faith that cinema is a reflection of corruption. And as a result, for these faithful people, cinema became unacceptable.

The first Iranian movie with a soundtrack was produced at the Imperial Film Company in Bombay, India, because, at that time, the sound recording facilities were not available in Iran. Abd-al-Husain Sipanta wrote the script called *Dukhtar-e-Lor* (The Lor Girl) in 1933. Rouhangiz Kermani was in the lead role, and this film was a great success in Iran with outstanding musical, artistic quality. *Dukhtar-e-Lor* was the first Persian speaking film of Iran to which all historians of Iranian cinema attach enormous importance.¹⁸ Abd-al-Husain Sipanta was the first Iranian filmmaker who was motivated by the Iranian national identity and revival of the glorious past of Iran.¹⁹ His second film was on the life of the greatest Iranian poet *Ferdowsi*, but unlike The Lor Girl, it was not a success. His next made was *Shireen va Farhad* (Shireen and Farhad) 1935, an adaption of a classical Persian love story. Soon the Iranian cinema became inactive, mainly because of insufficient private funding, and no films were produced in the decade 1936-1947, which ultimately resulted in the domination of the market by American, Indian, and Egyptian films for almost a decade.

In the year 1950, Iran had produced only 13 films with romantic adventures and action-packed productions. Poor set designs, technical selection, photography were some features of films back in those times. These films were completely inspired by Bollywood cinema movie plots and were termed as *Film-Farsi*

(1934-1978).²⁰ It was asserted that these films did not sincerely reflect the life of Persians but were linked to the country only in the sense that the artists spoke Farsi.²¹ Till 1950, the cinema gained considerable importance, and there were almost 80 theatres in Iran.

In 1955, a film based on a novel called *Amir Arsalan Namadar* was produced, and it was regarded as the most successful film of the half-century. It is a matter of great interest to see Iran's cinema from the time of the mid-1950s as social themes became more prevalent within the movies. Another archetype for many films in the later period was *Ganj-i-Qarun* (The Treasure of Qarun), produced by Siyamak Yasimi, which proved sedative for audiences because of its melodramatic theme and it became one of Iran's biggest box office successes in 1965.²²

Aftermath World War II, the dubbing techniques proved as a blessing before the audiences. One of the most salient things about many Iranian films is how good their endings are. Good in the unusual sense that they align formal expressiveness with a thematic summation.²³ Unlike Greek cinema, which was always parochial, inward-looking, isolated, lonesome and enclosed into a series of uncertainties and dilemmas.²⁴ Significantly Iranian cinema also incorporated the paradigms of the rural environment and the poor, and it became a very common theme in Iranian films. And the tales that tackle life among the well-off metropolitans were rare.

Likewise, every cinema, the Iranian cinema also underwent criticism that appeared in the press. In 1930 newspaper, *Ayanda-yi-Iran* wrote: 'Cinema is primarily the best form of entertainment and the most notable invention, but

unfortunately in Iran; it has not achieved the desired result because it has fallen into the hands of cheaters whose aim is to fulfil their purses.²⁵ Iranian films were influenced by French cinema and incorporated the feelings of great sexual desire, lovemaking, and intimacy. It was suggested that all the films should be censored not solely for political reasons but also for moral purposes as the Iranian cinema was developing hand in hand with politics. The representation of women who were addressed as *dukhtar*, which mean daughter or a girl, also went under criticism gradually. When a veil began to lose its importance in the films, the women were believed to be represented as only a sex symbol. This representation of women was perceived as a source of moral corruption, social filth and vulgarity that filled the streets.²⁶ Later in Iranian cinema, emphasis was laid to preserve the conventional values of women, and the theme depicting women as a sex symbol changed to self-sacrifice, motherhood, honour, and pureness. The popular Indian film *Mother India* 1957, directed by Mehboob Khan, portrayed the self-sacrificing Indian mother, who struggled to raise her children amidst the shackle of poverty and great sufferings.²⁷

Most Greek films raised some consequential questions about the socio-cultural aspects (like class, identity, gender, and history) that would captivate the minds of audiences outside the country. These films investigated the structure of Greek society and the power arrangements of the government within the nation-state against tyrannical political censorship, burdensome taxation, and controlled distribution. The films were mainly political in their nature, and they portrayed an oppositional way of looking at established concepts of reality and of portraying prevailing conditions of the Greek society at particular moments in history. The regime saw cinema as an antagonist of the state and enacted strict

censorship laws to restrict the ideas that the filmmakers strove to construct a cinematic representation of Greek realities. Likewise, Indian cinema also addressed diverse social themes via the medium of cinema. The Indian cinema originated in 1913, and it is fascinating to note that whether it is the films that are shaping society or vice-versa. The Indian cinema experimented with a variety of themes from mythology to love-story to laughable comedy to thriller and intense horror. The parallel concept can be drawn here as the Iranian, Greek and Indian cinema raised many important social issues through the medium of the screenplay. In the case of Indian cinema, issues such as caste system, dowry, gender disparity, female foeticide have been exquisitely conveyed via cinema.

All the films made in Iran until 1932 could be categorised as documentaries. They depicted various aspects of life in Iran, though not every walk of life was represented in them.²⁸ Pars Film Studios produced the first colour film in Iran in 1956; *The Runaway Bride* was a musical comedy. Another significant event of Iranian cinema was set in 1957 when a major film studio was established by producer Mehdi Masuqih. The studio undertook one of the vital and most expensive production projects in the Iranian cinema, *Evening Party in Hell (Shabneshini dar Jahannam)* 1956.²⁹

Melodrama was one of the principal and important genres of *Film-Farsi* that was started in 1948 with the film *The Storm of Life (Toufan-e-Zindagi)* by Ismael Koshan.³⁰ A poor guy and rich girl fall in love; at first, it seems that they are ill-fated, but in the end, everything is fixed, and both are united. Koshan's second film *Sharmsar* (Disgraced) 1950, held an important place in Iranian cinema. The commercial elements of this movie were songs, dance, violence and sex. The filmmakers soon adopted these subjects to ensure success. Revenge also

constituted a traditional Iranian theme, as this concept was being much applied by Iranian filmmakers. Besides, stress was also laid upon the representation of masculine strength and dominance. The use of physical force in the service of the poor, wronged and oppressed also became a relevant theme in Iranian culture.³¹

The sex scenes in the movies were shown in the form of rapes. *Lezat-e-Ghonah* (The pleasure of the Sin) 1964 by Siamak Yasami was the first Iranian film in which the actress appeared nude on-screen.³² The rural drama is the essential film genre in Iranian cinema in which a clash between tradition and modernity is observed through the differences between the town and village. The movie *Bolhavas* (Fickle), made in 1934 by Moradi, depicted the difference between rural and urban life, while the city is portrayed as dirty; the village has been given a lovely and pure picture. The urban melodrama was another prominent subject, and the film *Vagabond* is a typical example of Iranian urban drama. Thriller is also one of the essential genres of Iranian cinema.³³ The more we learn about how films work upon an audience and the audience upon the movie, the study of Iranian cinema becomes worthy.³⁴

The Iranian film researchers made attempts to find a connection between the French nouvelle vague and the Iranian new wave. There was a firm ground that indicates the influence of French new wave filmmakers ideas and work had on the Iranian movement. The first signal of the development of the new wave in Iran can be found in Iranian film magazines of the 1950s. The term new wave cinema in Iran is used to describe a body of distinctive Iranian films made during the period 1960s, which continued until the Islamic Revolution. It was in this period that we could observe a process by which cinematic and literary

discourses crossed each other. By the 1970s, new wave Iranian cinema had reached a level of professional and financial respectability, which recognised filmmakers and writers to live off their artwork.³⁵ Surprisingly in the 1960s, Iranians entered theatres for the first time to watch *Khaneh-ye-Khoda* (The House of God), a documentary on the Muslim pilgrim's journey to Mecca.³⁶ Films like Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (*Gav*) 1969; Ebrahim Golestan's *Brick and Mirror* 1964; Bahram Bayzai's *Downpour* (*Ragbar*) 1970; *The Crow* (*Kalagh*) 1977; Abbas Kiarostami's *The Traveller* (*Mosafer*) 1973; Sohrab Shahid Saless's *Still Life* (*Tabi'ate Bijan*) 1975; Bahman Farmanara's *Prince Ehtejab* (*Shaideh Ehtejab*), Forough Farrokhzad's *The House is Black* (*Khanah Siah Ast*) 1962 are some of the essential films under the Pahlavi regime (Iranian pre-revolution period).³⁷

Though there were many pivotal evolutions in Iranian cinema during the 1970s, the world's attention was captured by the event of the Iranian revolution 1977-1979. The year 1979 was a historical point for Iranian culture to go beyond the geopolitical boundaries and find a global response.³⁸ Iranian cinema now made its way into the world with simplicity marked by the works of filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami.³⁹ Abbas Kiarostami, a well-known filmmaker, is recognised by the Iranian drama film '*Where is my friend's home?*' (*Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast*) 1987, Godfrey Cheshire recognised Kiarostami's works and argued that: 'There is the only relation between films and within them; and between them and us.'⁴⁰ Other incredible works of Kiarostami such as *And Life Goes On* (1992) and *Under the Olive Tree* (1994), are some examples that specialise in ethical cinema that genuinely represents the nature of cinema which emerged post-revolution, created by a director who has been vigorous in cinema before the revolution. He

has produced a self-reflexive style that merges documentary and fictional techniques. His realistic films attracted viewers to the Iranian cinema and demonstrated him as the producer of the most substantial art which emerged in subsequent decades.⁴¹

The revolution began in Iran in January 1978 and transformed the country from a monarchy into the Islamic Republic that had far-reaching consequences for the country's cinema. During the last years of the Pahlavi regime, Islamic authorities rejected movie theatres, targeting them for demoralising society.⁴² Shortly after the revolution, when Iran was admitted to the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the institutions that countered Islamic beliefs, values and were seen to encourage westernisation.⁴³ Cinema also bears the brunt of revolution as Khomeini aimed to build a modified Shi'ite Iran by cleansing the national sensorial body employing film technologies.⁴⁴ He argued that "Through the eyes, they (the Shah's government) defiled our youths. They showed such and such women on television and thereby corrupted our youth. Their whole objective was to make sure that no active force would remain in the country that could withstand the enemies of Islam so they could do with impunity whatever they wanted."⁴⁵ Thus the cinemas of all kinds were banned at the start of the Islamic Republic.⁴⁶ It created havoc and led to the destruction and burning down of 180 movie theatres and cinemas throughout the country. The Islamic government now framed a set of regulations on the cinema prohibiting the portrayal of illicit relationships, sexual gestures and blasphemous behaviour.⁴⁷

However, Iranian cinema post-revolution 1979 continued to represent itself in a global discourse by making use of its social factors. Ayatollah Khomeini stated the role of cinema should be an instrument for 'educating the masses.'⁴⁸

Therefore, cinema that was earlier rejected by the religious-minded people on the grounds of promoting westernisation was now legitimised but with some reservations.⁴⁹ It was understood as the adaptation of the principles of a democratic society and to honour western intellectualism.⁵⁰ Gradually the new regime adjusted its viewpoint towards cinema. The regime restored cinema as a tool for the education of people and a mean for the promotion of Islamic values following the government's ideological framework.⁵¹ Thus, real art cinema should be identified as a post-revolutionary movement.⁵² From 1982, the leading authority controlling the censorship, film production, and distribution was the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), and Farabi Cinema Institute was formed.⁵³

Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been applauded for its emotional immediacy and simplicity.⁵⁴ The emergence of the war genre in Iranian cinema demonstrated how movies were efficient at presenting the mood of a country.⁵⁵ During the Iran-Iraq war, when Iraq invaded Iran on September 22 1980, following a long-standing history of their border disputes. Iraq anticipated creating chaos in Iran and attacked without any warning. There was a significant impact of war on Iran, and it was reflected in every aspect of life, with the representation of air, ground, sea battles, the bombing of the cities, and the use of chemical weapons. Documentaries related to this war were produced and dealt with new stories. The post-war films became more and more cynical about the effects of war. By this time, action movies became popular among audiences.⁵⁶ *Bashu, Paygah-e Jahanami, Oghabha, Gozargah* in this context were particularly successful in the box office.

The humanist genre became a dominating theme in Iranian films and reached worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁷ The humanist genre often incorporated a so-called 'messianic message,' which focused on providing a perspective or a more productive outlook for better times to come.⁵⁸ Hamid Naficy uses the term "Iranian Art House Cinema" in his article 'Neo-realism Iranian style.' With this term, he presents a new perspective on Iranian cinema, especially on those parts that are acclaimed by western critics and film festivals.⁵⁹ The representation of women has been one of the robust elements of Iranian cinema; this trend was female-centric movies. These films started to include the themes like the depiction of women's inner power and work strength.⁶⁰

Iranian cinema has a long history and has evolved gradually in its form, structure, theme and content by adapting itself to the prevalent conditions. Before the 19th century, traditional forms of entertainment and depiction of several incidents occupied the theme of what we call cinema in modern times. However, there was a significant change with the advent of the 20th century with few influences from the past. Almost every form of traditional cinema disappeared, with only a few continuing that too with some certain modifications. However, the changes were limited, as, during 1916, the cinema hall had not more than eight rows of seats, with a maximum capacity of eighty people. The small screen (approximately 3.5 by 2 meters) was made up of white cotton. Only fifteen minutes of silent films were shown each day, and as electricity was not available, a kerosene lantern was used to provide the source of light for the projector.

Prior to the revolution, the clerics condemned cinema and considered it forbidden (*Haram*). The social structure of the society also did not allow women to go to the theatre or cinema. But gradually, the cinema allowed the presence

of women in its realm, which can be witnessed with the appearance of Rouhangiz Kermani in the movie *Dukhtar-e-Lor*. Indeed it was a pivotal point in the history of Iranian cinema because the first-ever Iranian woman was filmed without the *Hijab*. The leading role in the movie *Fickle* in 1935, played by Ghodsi Partovi, who was the first Iranian Muslim woman to do such, was also significant in this context. Her appearance in the film was a contribution to the women's movement.

During the period of *Film-Farsi*, Iranian movies only aimed to imitate Indian commercial movies. These films were made for entertaining Iranians, but truly they lacked tastes and were low-quality movies. Two factors that contributed towards the growth of *Film-Farsi* was the rapid westernisation in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s and the globalisation of the cinema. The social conditions which were prevalent in Iran were presented in this period of cinema. It had connections with the day-to-day realities of life. Also, new elements like violence and sex were shown in the movies (under the influence of Western culture).

The period 1960-1979 was termed as the 'New Wave.' It originated as a reaction to the mainstream commercial cinema, the *Film-Farsi*. The year 1969 marked a unique and important historical change for the new Iranian cinema. The introduction of this new genre attracted the audiences, Dariush Mehrjui's *Gav* (The Cow), Naser Taqvai's *Aramesh dar Hozor-e Digaran* (Peace in the Presence of Others) and Masoud Kimiai's *Qasar* created a stir in the Iranian cinema.

The Islamic revolution, which established the Islamic Republic in Iran and its impact on Iranian cinema, is considerably important. There were speculations that the new limitations would hamper Iran's cinema. Fortunately, the Iranian cinema survived and have come a long way. Today the Iranian cinema has reached a level of excellence and quality that Iranians take great pride in. Emotional immediacy, simplicity, humanist genre and close association with the social factors became the characteristic features of Iranian cinema during the post-revolutionary period. One of the best films of the post-revolutionary cinema in Iran was Amir Naderi's *Davandeh* (Runner) 1985. In the 1990s, films by Abbas Kiarostami (*Where is my friend's home*) and Mohsin Makhmalbaf (*Marriage of the blessed*) came to represent Iranian cinema on the international platform and flourished. It is fascinating to note that the major award-winning films have been made post-revolution Iran under the banner of the Islamic Republic. Films made after the Iranian revolution were *Bashu: The Little Stranger* 1986, *Shayed Vaghti Digar* (Maybe Some Other Time) 1988, and *Mosaferan* (The Travellers) 1992, among which *Bashu* has the reputation of being Bayzai's best post-revolution film. The pinnacle of Iranian cinema's success reached in 1997 when Kiarostami's film *Taste of Cherry* won the Golden Palm award at the Cannes Film Festival, and *Children of Heaven* was nominated for an Oscar.

It can be argued that social dynamics have always regulated the content of Iranian cinema. It has served as the platform that reflected the growth of the economy and politics. It was restricted to the contemporary themes prevalent within the society, and it has been manifestations of prevailing societal evils. It has not limited itself to only being a pleasing visual treat to its audience, but it

also served as an account of societal, political, and economic setup. The images that cinema provides can be synchronised with societal aspirations and the strong urge of humankind to recreate fun and entertainment. The cinema of the present world is the most sophisticated and powerful form of art with a long tradition of quality movies and thereby having a stronger impact on the masses. It has been significantly guided by the prevailing notions of society and has impacted society in turn too.

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⁶⁰ Bahar Davary, Film review: Women in Iranian cinema moving beyond famous legends, *International Women's Studies*, Bridgewater State University, Vol. 19, No. 6, 2018, p. 394.