

Neorealist Iranian Cinema through a Child's Perspective – The flow of Life's Verse in Melody and Rhythm Connecting beyond Borders

Aaquib Shehbaaz Usmani

Faculty, School of Journalism at Delhi University (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Received: 22 July 2017

Accepted: 09 August 2017

Published Online: 25 August 2017

Keywords

Art and politics, cinema, Neo-Realism

ABSTRACT

The Iranian Revolution affected its Art and politics of representations. In the newer regime, the laws and layout of the social dynamics gave birth to a different kind of cinema. A cinema that could resuscitate arts and the verve of creative fine arts and sensibility attached to it. It was a call to work on poignant themes centered on intricate miniscule realities of life's daily strife through the perspective of innocent cute little kids. This Neo-Realism touched the hearts and minds of the audiences and created a niche for its own new genre. This paper would discuss major paradigmatic shifts and various types of films and directors, within that trend.

INTRODUCTION

The Iranian Revolution of 1977-1979 witnessed a historical political shift that changed the course of the Iranian Cinema. In the year 1979 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran by replacing the secular monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and adopted a new Theocratic- Republican Constitution.

This shift of power between two very different ideologies of national governance in Iran affected its Art and Cinema and paved the way for a New Wave Cinema also referred to as The Neorealist Iranian Cinema.

The new government dissolved almost all the technical and commercial aspects that instantly hit the system of film funding. The new Censorship laws with their strictness forcefully imposed their set of beliefs and values on artists, especially the filmmakers.

THE NEW REALISM BASED FILMS

Film directors struggled to rope in finances for their films. Big budget film production idea remained a mere figment of a vain imagination.

Therefore, many commercial filmmakers moved to making children films. These films were easier to make because of their simple yet poignant themes. The portrayal of a world through a child's perspective became a revolutionary characteristic. It wasn't just about innocence rather a step beyond as the children of the Persian Revolution symbolized the fragility of their social milieu.

Censorship stringently disapproved any portrayal of love between a man and a woman through any kind of physical touch or even gestures. Also banished completely was the thought of a female character as a singer, dancer, or just a visitor at a night bar. A female character smoking, drinking,

hugging or kissing a male character leading to sexual arousal was a highly punishable offense and a serious violation of Censorship. A woman had to follow the dress code of hijab that concealed the contours of her entire body covered her from head to toe except for her face throughout both outdoors and indoors. Even if she was to be filmed within the safe walls of her home it was still mandatory for her to wear hijab, which in reality would be something less taxing and more relaxing.

Such dire circumstances compelled the filmmakers to work around the codes of censorship without compromising with their vision. Such paucity enriched Iranian Cinema with a new language of Cinematic expression. A simple, minimalist, play of poetic realism through the Art of Allusion became a license against the moral policing of the state administration. The Art of Allusion technique mastered by filmmakers brought international recognition to Iran's Art Cinema and placed it in the top league of the World.

A child protagonist and his point of view became a key factor in defining the problems of society. Through a child's perspective the Neorealist Iranian filmmakers were able to create a space of comfort, to say the unsaid, to reflect upon the deplorable state of the Iranian society plagued by joblessness, corruption and depletion of morality amongst adults leading to a promiscuous and a licentious behavior. Such techniques of putting one's point across were quite safe and kept censorship at bay.

The portrayal of a village was also considered safe. The imagery of rural Iran, its slow pace and rhythm and the scale of its vast landscape had a meditative feel to shot taking. The voice of rural Iran was observational and less participatory representing a marginalized rural world in comparison with the urbanized cities.

Another very important aspect of the New Wave of Cinema was the employment of actors who were not trained professionally in an institute or otherwise. Non-professional actors needed minimal scripting in terms of written dialogues. Therefore, they possessed a major range in terms of spontaneity and improvisation in dialogue delivery or just performance. They followed the instructions given by the director with extreme patience and alertness, which made their presence endearing and convincing.

Children of the post revolution era had a strange aloofness to their demeanor. One film that caught international attention was that of Amir Naderi called, *The Runner* (1984), the story of a young boy and his insane fascination for running. He comes from an extremely poor background and has a desire of making his life better. The boy's ambitions and his reality are linked by juxtaposing shots of the boy running, with the shots of speeding trains and planes.

The success of *The Runner* (1984) was followed by an instant universal appreciation of Abbas Kiarostami's film, *Where is My Friend's Home?* (1985), the story of a young boy who accidentally brings home his classmates notebook and wants to return the same soonest because he knows that if his friend for whatever reason is unable to submit a complete homework the following day, he would get expelled. This sense of realization and concern for a fellow schoolmate makes him travel to the neighboring village. The film was premiered at Locarno Film Festival and instantly Abbas Kiarostami's work was being discussed with respect to Vittorio De Sica of *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).

The film, *Where is My Friend's Home?* (1985), is symbolic of preserving the traditions and humanistic beliefs of the Iranian culture. The boy in quest for his friend's house preserves and strengthens some core values of a humane intent, dignity, and loyalty and the etiquettes of civil duty.

Abbas Kiarostami in an interview in the article 'Life and Much More' with reference to *Where is My Friends Home?* (1985) mentions "When I make films for children, I try to empathize with their mood and understand problems from their point of view as well as my own. The content of the film is important; style and technique can be changed accordingly"

Another very significant film maker is Mohammad Ali Talebi who has a very unique portrayal of a child's emotion. Mohammad Ali Talebi collaborated with Abbas Kiarostami who wrote the screenplay of the film *The Boot* (1993), the story of a little girl yearning for a new pair of Wellington boots and eventually loses one of them. This endearing story resonates with the same vulnerable emotion as in the case of Vittorio De Sica of *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). *The Boot* was followed by *Bag of Rice*(1998) and *Willow and Wind* (2000) which are amazingly profound portrayals of a child's psyche.

The White Balloon (1995) by Jafar Panahi, with screenplay by Abbas Kiarostami is one endearing story of a little girl in quest for a beautiful goldfish reflects an amazing sense of aesthetics. Panahi being one of the most famous directors of Iranian New Age Cinema is known for his amazing sense of realism and its even better translation into the realms of Cinema. A simple, organic treatment of a story, in sync with its reality becomes a very comforting experience.

Children of Heaven (1998), Majid Majidi's first internationally acknowledged film is a simple story of struggle and compassion. The film portrays the hardships of a working class family with a balanced emotion and an authenticity that makes the viewer appreciate life and Arts. In addition, what flows through the film organically without being didactic is a wave of realization of a life's preciousness within a family, self-sacrifice, obedience, empathy, patience so on and so forth. A young boy and the beautiful relationship that he shares with his younger sister becomes priceless when he loses her sole pair of shoes in the market while having them mend. The film is about this sibling bond facing trouble and embarrassment over the fact that they now have to share a single pair of shoes while going to and coming back from their school. Dearth of money in the household and to see their parents struggle in silence stops them from sharing the news of the loss, as they don't want to burden their parents with more stress.



The opening shot in *Children of Heaven* is a recurring resonance of Majidi's language of empathy in his shot compositions. His intent is to shoot the close-ups of life's everyday boring actions in order to transform them into a dignified realm of beauty, as deserved by the worker and his action. Steady close-up shot, of a worker's aged and somewhat dirty hands very carefully mending a pair of petite pink mary-

janes inspires the viewer to appreciate life as an Art in moments leading to aesthetic beauty and dignity.

Children of Heaven (1998) with its universal connect of a child's world became the first Iranian film to receive a nomination at the Oscars in the category Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

Known for the versatility of his cinematic style and his definition of "poetic realism" the filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf's cinema was about an ordinary working class life and he preferred working with non-professional actors to make his films authentic and believable. Some of his best known films are, The Cyclist (1987), A Moment of Innocence (1996) etc.



Neorealist Iranian Cinema matured over the years as though it were an extended metaphor having an allegorical significance. The philosophical undercurrents of the cosmic poetry and the expression of magical realism in cinematography, the dignifying aesthetics and the mise-en-scene. Life as an experience, meditative, comforting, uplifting, unstoppable. The Neorealist Iranian Cinema's never ending quest through poetry in remembrance of one's loss within and around, travelled far and beyond.

Even after several years of successive regime changes; these directors and the style of this type of film making is a popular and all-acceptable kind of a healthy entertainment pattern in Iran and elsewhere. What started as a clandestine

assertion of creative outburst and persistence; now forms an indelible imprint on the minds of several film makers.

Quick to follow the trend in the rest of the world, many producers made such movies on pristine humane issues through the vehicle of children. The following are worth mentioning:

1. *Homerun* is a **2003 Singaporean-Mandarin Film**. Homerun is a drama about two poor siblings and their adventures over a lost pair of shoes. Set in 1965, the year Singapore separated from Malaysia, the film satirizes the relations between these two neighboring countries, leading to its banning in Malaysia.



The film was written and directed by Singaporean filmmaker Jack Neo, and produced by Mediacorp Raintree Corporation. Filming took place in the rural outskirts of Kaula Lumpur during November and December 2002.

2. *Beyond the Clouds* is a 2017 Indian film written and directed by Majid Majidi for zee Studios. It stars

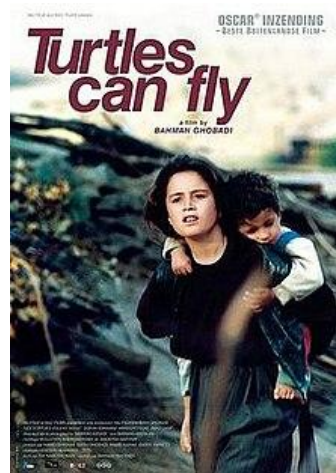
debutante Ishaant Khattar, a street hustler and drug dealer in the city of Mumbai & Malvika Mohannan as Tara, is the sister of Amir. She works for a dour merchant Akshi. The film's story is centered on bonding between the siblings, and a take on human relationships in general. The sibling's bond is put to test when Tara lands in jail for a crime committed by

Amir which forms the crux of the film. The film is a grown-up version of Majidi's previously

directed *Children of Heaven*(1997).



3. *Turtles Can Fly* is a 2004 Kurdish war drama film written, produced, and directed by Bahman Ghobadi.



4. *Bumm Bumm Bole* is a 2010 Hindi film directed by Priyadarshan. The film stars Darsheel Safary. The film is an authorized adaptation of *Children of Heaven* yet again. *Bumm Bumm Bole* was released on 14 May 2010.^[21] The title of the film is based on one of the songs of Taare Zameen Par.
5. *Masoom* (The Innocent) is an Indian film (1983) and directorial debut of filmmaker Shekhar Kapoor. It was an adaptation of 1980 novel *Man, Woman and the Child* by Erich Segal which had earlier been adapted into a 1982 Malayalam movie *Olangal* and a

1983 American movie by the same name as that of the novel. The film is a coming-of-age story starring Naseeruddin Shah in lead role. The film was remade in Telugu as *Illalu Priyuralu*.

So to conclude, I would like to reiterate that the trend was not merely an escape or easy route in times of strong censorship but it was a novel discovery to finely express sentiments. It soon became a worldwide trend to follow and soft cinema was subsequently made. It thus contributed to the repertoire of cinema and humanity simultaneously – creatively and realistically.