



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Politics of Iranian Cinema**

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**Abstract**

Cinema is definitely one of the most preferred and suitable form of link connecting the politics and culture of a country. Iran, has a very rich legacy of supreme cinematic brilliance and each phase of development of Iranian cinema is linked with the country's political upsurge. The link between politics and cinema in post revolutionary Iran and how the Islamisation of cinema has taken place with advent of the state's political ideology is remarkably noticeable. The volatile changes in the political situation in the country have had considerable impact on culture and cinema in particular. The impact of state control on cinema is quite evident. The means and mechanisms and how censorship has been used by State to control political content of Iranian cinema. There has been complex negotiations and tussles between the State authorities and the extremely talented filmmakers who are constantly challenging the system with their concepts and ideas. The political discourse of 'social films' in relation to the reformist movement, their involvement in raising political consciousness, and the methods used by film-makers and cinema-goers in Iran to resist the regime's attempts at controlling the political contents of film is being stupendously carried on. Also, the negotiation of gender around controversial 'women's films' and the challenge the films pose to patriarchal values and institutions in society are flooding the film industry. The success Iranian cinema at international level is commendable projecting realities and moulding it in a modern way. The paper will talk about 2 movies to show how rebel film makers are helping in consciousness raising.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Iranian cinema is recognised as one of the most innovative and exciting in the world. The constant increase in the number of Iranian directors, screening their films over a wide range of themes, at international film festivals is a testimony to the fact. To understand the nature of renaissance of Iranian cinema, we need to understand its development in relation with art, state and society after Islamic revolution. A close link with cinema and politics is a part and parcel of Iran.

This paper tries to explore the various negotiations of power that goes on at the level of film making and the relationship between film makers and state control or authorities. It also tries to look at politicisation of cinema and how the people engage with the films and how it is received at national and international level. Iranian films range in a variety of issues on social justice, aftermath of Iraq-Iran war, place of clergy in society, women's issues and so on. An idea or understanding of an emancipated national identity in making the films, by defying censorship, overcoming various difficulties in projecting realities and gender issues, while embracing the modern world, is a characteristic of Iranian cinema. The constant tussle film makers have to go through and get permits from the censors, MCIG, to release their films, with certain objectionable scenes, is applaudable. The problems of women film directors stretch even further. According to Hamid Dabashi, cinema is a form of escapism and can be, thus, seen as

an act of defiance (Dabashi,2003, p.56). This paper will deal with 2 movies in particular ; Mohsen Makhmalbaf's "Marriage of the blessed" and Tamineh Milani's "Fifth Reaction".

The popular nature of the revolution in 1979 and the factionalism within the Islamic Republic, gave the public and several artists to directly engage with the state agencies. This was in form of protests, demonstrations, negotiations, co-operation and defiance. Most film makers, supported by liberal camps of the government, have exploited divisions within the regime to confront cultural conservativeness of the state apparatuses. After revolution, time honoured themes of Iranian movies like women and love, were put under strict Islamic jurisprudence. Sexual segregation and imposition of strict dress code for women had to be followed by film makers now. Ayatollah Khomeini, thought cinema had a great role in education of the masses and thus this tool too should be used like any other art form in the service of Islam. Attempting to bring culture under its control, the regime created the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance(MCIG) with the mandate to Islamize all kinds of art and cultural activities.

### **Art of ambiguity and engagement of audience**

Artistic expressions such as cinema is an important project as it stimulates potential alternative dialogues among audiences. Cinemas inspired by realities of life, which are recognisable by the audiences does resolve a lot of engagement and dialogues between the artist and the viewers. This dialogue is assisted by the ambiguities in works of art. This ambiguity helps propel interpretations amongst viewers and such indirect communication has a strong resemblance to Iranian poetry. These symbolisms and allegorical references are generally not unknown to most Iranians. This tradition of multilayered meanings and hidden layers of symbols is a part of Persian mystical poetry culture. Love has always been the main theme of Persian poetry, but it is seldom clear whether the author is talking about divine or earthly love. Whether the beloved is male or female is also unto interpretations. Thus Persian language and poetic forms is always a work of ambiguities. Under Reza Shah's modernisation drive, women and love stories were an integral part of the film industry. Censors and bans were not very prevalent as long as everything positive was shown about the dynasty. Although a lot of conservative clerics considered cinema as haram and for many pious families going to cinema was considered a sin. According to Dabashi (1995) and Makhmalbaf, New Poetry has significantly influenced the cinema. 'Mulvey (1987) favours involvement of audience while making a play as the spectators themselves become involved a storytellers. As spectators, they are free to agree,disagree, omit or change any parts or scenes of the movie when they see it. They are constantly engaged in meaning making. Also awareness of film censorship also makes the Iranians extra vigilant with the hidden political messages in the social films. In doing so, they themselves reconstruct the film, by rejecting and accepting some parts of the film, as they feel. Cultural performances like cinema provide that opportunity to reflect and is produced as a phase of redress, when it tries to stabilise the destabilised situation. With Iranian Revolution and Iraq-Iran war in the background, films helped the audiences engage and produce new meaning in relation to the current political situations.

With the imposition of the ideological regime after Revolution in 1979, the authorities have met with major cultural resistances from the film makers and audiences. Socially critical cinema as resistance was a style adopted by many film makers. They made everyday life the subject of their films. They created a realistic vision by grounding their representations in local space,time and social issues. (Cook, 1981, p.39) However, in case of Iranian cinemas the film text, from script to finished film is constantly reviewed by the authorities. Hence negotiations are taking place at each and every level of film making. Therefore, reception of the films by audience becomes a little challenging. What the film maker wants to express and what finally comes up on screen have differences in many occasions. Many scenes might be deleted or blurred and audiences are kept to interpretation. Saeed Zeydabadi calls this process of reception of films from authorities viewing it and negotiation involved, as the life of a film. (Nejad, 2010, p.21). Creation of a hegemonic Iranian identity was also of tantamount importance for the conservative clerics. This was constantly being challenged by the reformist film makers. Their idea of showcasing other social and political realities as Nancy Fraser would call them, in "public spaces" was a constant challenge to creating a hegemonic identity. Open to interpretations and difference of identities was also evident in these film makers' works.

### **State control of Iranian movie**

The apparent contradiction between strict state control of film making on one hand and the making of several socially and politically critical films on the other hand, has created lots on interest in censorship. Some researches have suggested that film makers use symbolism, metaphors and allegory to evade censorship. For, Naficy(2001a), this is called as "tricks" played by filmmakers on censors and use of other indirect means to bypass censorship. Others like Tapper(2002) claim that censorship in Iran is united and impenetrable while Nejad (2010) maintains that

censorship code has not been clearly defined and the blurred lines keeps shifting. Censorship, under Shah was meant to prevent attempts at undermining state values and aspirations. For example, one can not show poverty, ruins and backwardness scenes to damage state's national prestige. Hence movies like *Cow* which was released in 1969 had to severe issues for release and later had to claim that poverty shown in movie was before Shah's regime. The traditional Shiite clergy was opposed to cinema and it mainly had to do with representation of women. Earlier persian films had women without Islamic dress, singing and dancing in cafes and also scenes with consumption of alcohol. These were banned and considered as social filth. During the revolution, 180 out of 436 movie houses were set to fire. They were considered symbolising Western values and a decadence to society. There was total chaos in cinema from 1979 to 1982, till new authorities in MCIG were appointed to regulate it. Khatami, a moderate cleric, took over the reins of MCIG during Prime Minister Mir Hossein Musavi's reign from 1980 to 1988. The new authorities announced their responsibilities as *hemayat*(Support), *hedayat*(guidance) and *nezarat*(supervision, more precisely censorship). They took numerous steps to revitalise the industry like importation of film making materials, lowering tax on cinema tickets, low interest loans for film making and trained many youth as film makers. The number of films rose and the director became the creative force behind film making. But there were many ideologically committed films produced as propaganda for Islamic regime and MCIG gave them support over secular films. Makhmalbaf and Majidi also were also committed to these kinds of film making and the Art Centre taught religion through films. There were Sacred Defence films made about legibility of Iraq-Iran war and participation in the same. There was a censorship code to be followed by film makers, under MCIG's guidelines. This would involve not insulting the imam and other jurisprudence, not encourage corruption, prostitution, wickedness, use of harmful drugs, smuggling, exploitation and not encourage foreign influence in Iran. Also, how a women can appear in a film would be regulated by MCIG considering the pious position of women in society. But amongst the film makers, two of them, Beheshti and Anvar, wanted to support mystical, philosophical and thought provoking films to improve the quality of film making.

After Khomeini's death in 1989, a lot of openness came into the economy under Rafsanjani. This was known as reconstruction period and there was more scope for debate and negotiations in the film fraternity. MCIG became more relaxed with their regulations, some banned films were released, the previously forbidden theme of love came back in mystical cinemas.(Nejad, 2010, p.42). Hollywood films began to be shown at the Art Centre. Despite these positive developments, censorship in cinemas continued based on political expediency, moral reasons, censor's tastes and private party law suits against films. Movie screening was also related to current political condition of the country, morality depicted around the image of women in cinema. For example Milani's *Two Women*, was prevented earlier as they thought it would make women shameless and challenging. Scenes suggestive of sexuality was also censored. Scenes of women's bare foot was asked to be deleted from *Letters of Wind* as it could excite male viewers. It depended a lot on the conservative authorities interpretation and sensitivity about sexual norms and ideas. Many times, shortage of funds and technical infrastructure led to rejecting of scripts by the authorities. Under Khatami's rule in MCIG till 1992 there was less restrictions on cinema. With Mirsalim coming to his post in 1994, new stricter codes of censorship began which became worse with Zarghami in 1996. But the reformist candidate Khatami was elected President in 1997 with landslide majority and much optimism rose in Iran. MCIG came under Mohajerani and Seyfollah Dad became a new cinema Deputy, both open minded and well educated personalities. New direction came in film making. Discrimination on film funds based on allegiance of film's content to Islamic rules was removed. Films began to be rated only on aesthetics and audience's tastes were taken into consideration. Under Dad, censorship ceased and several reforms were taking place. Role of MCIG was reduced and responsibility of good cinema came under civil society institution like cinema guilds. But Mohajerani's liberal attitude met with his impeachment in 1999 by the conservative hostility. Again with election of conservative president Ahmadinejad in 2005, restrictions on social and political films came back. But negotiations are still on, although quite difficult but film makers are still trying their best to fight for their right to make movies which will be secular and aesthetically appealing. The constant negotiations and turmoil in Iran's political atmosphere reflects on their films. Blurred lines of censorship and what constitutes as good of bad impact on society and culture keeps shifting with changes in ministers and changes in demand of society. With all these context in the back ground, we will look into the making of two films in this paper. The first one being Makhmalbaf's "*Marriage of the Blessed*", released in 1989.

### **Marriage of the Blessed(1989)**

This movie was a hostile engagement with a war veteran and his life. The eight year Iraq-Iran war was about to end and it released just after Khomeini's death in 1989. The movie is also seen as an unprecedented commentary on the social predicaments of post-revolution Iran, ten years after establishment of Islamic regime.

The movie is about Maji, a war veteran, suffering from the horrors and repercussion of the war front. One very famous scene captures it perfectly. Certain scenes capture these horrific moments very well. Like Totaro (2005) says that a recurring surreal flashback image has a typewriter in the extreme foreground of a desert battle setting, with hands frantically typing away while an army convoy strides forward from the extreme background. Another scene shows, when his fiancée, Mehri squashes pomegranate seeds by mistake, Maji sees it as blood from war scene. Haji's pre-wartime fiancée Mehri tries to acclimatize Haji to civilian life by plastering his room with happy family photos, but Haji is moved with photographs of social poverty in backward regions. He tries to adjust by returning to his newspaper job, but retains his social commitment by only taking photographs of social injustice and poverty only to anger his editor. While shooting a scene of the movie, where they were clicking photographs, the police comes for questioning and Makhmalbaf kept the camera rolling, blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction. Police questions them and takes them away for further interrogation and the camera shows two thieves, who were hiding behind the phone booth, come out and continue stealing. This clearly questions the function of police, who think culprits are the film makers and not the thieves (Totaro 2005). At the end of the movie, at Haji's wedding, he gives a violent political speech, framed like a dictator about how haram things are delicious. Many at the wedding follow his suite. Mehri, his counterpart has been shown as a strong woman who loves her man and is going against her family to marry Maji. She is life long willing to protect Maji who might not ever escape the repercussions of the war. She supports her man's work by clicking photograph of the downtrodden herself. Makhmalbaf delivers these pictures to showcase the futile promises that the regime could never fulfill. The film ends ambiguously, with Haji back in the sanitarium. Haji replies, "He will defeat the revolution from the inside," which indicates how Makhmalbaf thinks the revolution should be handled. The shallowness of the revolution has been exposed. The futility of the war has been questioned.

Certain scenes of the film has left its mark on the audiences. One of them being the contrast of the visible Mercedes logo on the bonnet of the rich man's car and the writing on the wall "We want country to belong to shanty-town dwellers" has registered in many minds. This can be seen as how an Islamic state has failed to deliver its revolutionary promises. Many urban middle class could relate to this film as they were quite irritated with the current condition of Iran. There were voices for Makhmalbaf saying that he had a vision and was ahead of the general crowd and could raise voices against injustices. Makhmalbaf was raising consciousness through his films. By speaking against the regime, he was pro social justice. He was like a sub-altern and organically integrated with working class, hence an organic intellectual, as Gramsci would say. He came from the ranks of the subaltern insiders. As an insider he could see the injustices and so it was necessary for him to criticise. He called for collective action and lend his support to reformist Khatami. The success of the film allowed a hope for change within the regime and the opportunity of symbolic inclusion within Iranians.

However, the journey of Makhmalbaf as a dissent to the regime has not been easy. He had used tricks to bypass the censors, accused of treason and threatened by death penalty, spend considerable time in prison, followed by the intelligence agents and thus he and his films somehow survived a very dangerous atmosphere in the country. Hamid Dabashi (2001) addresses him as the "rebel filmmaker". The name of no other filmmaker is more synonymous with the dramatic rise of Iranian cinema in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution than Makhmalbaf. His cinemas remain coterminous with the vicissitude of a massive social revolution which might shake the hegemonic foundations. His experiments with various concepts and realities along with innovative presentation has helped him gain a huge name internationally as well.

### **Women's films in Neo-Patriarchal Iran and Fifth Reaction (2003)**

Films about 'women's issues' and their importance in Iran lack attention in scholarly works. Their works are labeled as political as they challenge the institutions and values of patriarchy in Iranian society. In recent years, Iranian women filmmakers have produced an impressive body of work making a mark at international film festivals with awards and glory. Despite such success, they face the brunt of the conservatives in the society. Tahmine Milani is one of the Iranian women filmmakers whose films directly address women's problems in a patriarchal society. In the supposedly enlightenment era, there is still a tough grip on women's films, although it has been repeatedly said that Iranian women filmmakers can easily make films about women's issues. Undeterred by all these adversities, women still have a sturdy presence in the Iranian cinema. These filmmakers strive to challenge the status quo, overcome the barriers of traditions and misogynistic characteristic of the society and their films depict these women faced with terror and torture. These films, as Mulvey (1987) argues, confer felicity to women since female viewers enjoy the strong character and wish to emulate the role model's identity. These women filmmakers are, indeed,

trying to raise feminist awareness amongst the women in the society, according to Mulvey (1989). Milani had studied architecture at university in 1980s. During the early 1980s when the state closed all the universities due to the so-called Cultural Revolution, Milani started working in film studios. Having worked for some years, Milani made her first feature film, *Children of Divorce* (1989). Usually Nikbin, her husband, is producer of her films and helped her get the director certificate from the authorities. Milani got recognition because of her movie, *Two Women* (1999) which confirmed her position as a filmmaker dealing with women's issues.

*Fifth reaction* opens with a frame of five well-educated women lunching at a fine restaurant, sharing the joyful experiences of their lives. They keep talking about love and married life; each of them boasting about mutual love. Fereshteh keeps listening as she has just lost her husband. In the same scene, Taraneh tells Fereshteh that she has to be thankful as she still has her father-in-law to support. Apart from Parisa who is single, they all believed that a man is needed in their lives for support. In this frame, Milani tries to project that women are not immune to patriarchal idea of having a superior male in family for protection. As the film proceeds, the first problem emerges during lunch. Taraneh's husband enters the restaurant with his twenty-year-old secretary, and soon realizes that his wife is also present at the restaurant. Seeing this situation, he orders his wife to go home and attend domestic responsibilities to which she objects. Here, Milani tried to object the fact that it is immoral for a man lunching with opposite sex, to stop his wife who is lunching with same sex friends. Some women know that their husband has extra-marital affair but they keep quiet to save face. Seeing this, every woman comes clear about their marital situation. Farideh lets her friends know that her opium-addicted husband married another woman and she would not want to file a divorce as she believes her daughters need a father figure. Nasrin's husband who was a prisoner of war for 12 years has changed from a loving husband to an unloving one; Nasrin does not love him anymore and she would not want to divorce him as she says if she files for divorce, she would be blamed for divorcing a war champion. Taraneh, then resolves to teach her husband a lesson. She goes home, packs her bag and lives with her sister until her husband comes to his senses and apologizes. Her strategy works and in two weeks' time she is back home to her husband who gives her a new automobile as a make-up gift. The second problem which happens when Fereshteh, the underpaid schoolteacher and the mother of two sons, gets into a tiff with Haj Safdar, her father-in-law. He orders her to move back to her father's home, leaving the children behind with him while giving Fereshteh visitation rights. Haj Safdar tells her that because she is now a widow, she no longer has any legal ties with the men in the family, so he is asserting the right to say who will live in his house, believing that the two children will be better off living with someone rich. Fereshteh, however, implores Haj Safdar that the boys need a mother irrespective of her income level. Haj Safdar justifies his decision by saying that "everything should be at its place: a flower in the vase, bread in the bread bin, and a widow at her father's house." Then, he offers a compromise: "you can stay in the house with the two sons on one condition: marry Majid." Majid is another son of Haj Safdar and Fereshteh's brother-in-law. Rejecting the offer, Fereshteh leaves the house and sees the boys on weekends. This scene shows how brutally a woman has no say in her own children. One day, Fereshteh learns that the boys will be soon sent to Isfahan, and she fears that the boys may soon be sent to live with their aunt in Singapore for good. Consequently, she consults with her friends who come up with a solution to fly to Dubai for job. However, Haj Safdar doubts that she is about to run away, so he chases her as she goes to the airport in her friend's car. The plan to go to Dubai fails. Next, Fereshteh, then decides to evade him by leaving the country instead by boat. Fereshteh heads to the Persian Gulf, living in houses of friends along the way, but Haj Safdar keeps track of her movement. When he finally locates her in Bushehr, the port city, he reports her to the police who take her into custody. Zeyrmadineh, Fereshteh's brother's landlady, who has much influence in the area, lectures Haj Safdar on the need of children for their mother. Warning him of her local influence, she says she will not allow Haj Safdar to take away the children. He goes into the cell and tells Fereshteh that she can keep the children "on one condition." It is unfortunate that the end of the film shows Fereshteh inside the prison cell which can be a metaphor for women's eventual imprisonment within a patriarchal society. The movie ends without telling audience about that condition. The *Fifth Reaction*, identifies a host of customs and government regulations that favor men over women in Iran. All this is detrimental to a woman's equality and rights. Milani beautifully exposes it in the film, thus making it obvious how strong the man finally stands over the woman. Milani is strongly advocates herself as a feminist and thinks that the image of a feminist is liberating for her. She would like to carry this tag forever.

## Conclusion

Iranian films have been doing very well in the international film festivals. With regards to international market, Iranian people are quite sensitive about their country's image in the West. They hope to counteract the negative image of their country and politics with their movies. In one of the interviews, a film director sought to humanise Iran in the West through his films. Overall, the Iranian cinema is a series of complex relationships and interdependence. A lengthy process of negotiation and intricacies between the film makers and authorities take up a

major chunk of these movies, However, that does not deter them from coming up with major social and political concepts. Resistance, compromise and negotiation constitute multidimensional political realities that must be understood in local context.

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**Filmography:**

- Marriage of the Blessed : (Mohsen Makhmalbaf,1989,Iran)
- Fifth Reaction: (Tahmineh Milani,2003,Iran)