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## Majid Majidi and Baran: Iranian Cinematic Poetics and the Spiritual Poverty of Rumi

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# Majid Majidi and *Baran*: Iranian Cinematic Poetics and the Spiritual Poverty of Rumi

## **Abstract**

Over the past several decades, Iranian Cinema, through the use of themes and stories, shots and pacing, has developed a narrative style outside of Western-dominated cinematic forms. The work of Iranian director Majid Majidi reflects some of the many themes of Sufi poetry. In particular, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's poetry characteristically and repeatedly expresses the beauty of the spiritual poverty that results in the struggle with the *nafs*, or the lower soul. Through the lens of the work of Rumi on spiritual poverty, this article shows how the themes and filmic techniques used by Majidi in the 2000 film *Baran* reveal a rich and compelling narrative of cinema.

Iranian Cinema has developed a thriving, compelling poetics of film in the past few decades – and this new cinema of Iran has been frequently cited to have begun with the 1969 Mehrjuri film *The Cow (Gav)*. Since this time, an increasing number of films and filmmakers have contributed to the growing international circulation of and discussion about Iranian Cinema. Works from, in particular, Abbas Kiarastami have taken a front position in the growing area of World Cinema Studies. Other directors, such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf, his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf, and more recently the Kurdish-Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi have made their own contributions, and the list is still growing. Through the use of certain themes and stories, shots and pacing, a narrative style has developed outside of certain Hollywood tendencies of Western-dominated cinematic forms.<sup>1</sup> Some of the more notable features of this cinema have been the use of untrained actors, simple or direct cinematography, minimal or highly selective uses of music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, and stories of children. Many critics have also pointed to the “humanistic” elements of Iranian cinema, and the degree to which they stand in contrast with the popular media-driven images of Iran as a dictatorial, fundamentalist, supremely repressive Islamic state.

While much critical acclaim has been given to works by Iranian directors of late, Majid Majidi retains the distinction of having been the only nominee for

an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1998 with *Children of Heaven*. The work of Majidi reflects a particularly compelling place in both the more recently lauded Iranian cinema and with regard to the particular aesthetics or poetics of Iranian Cinema. In particular, Majidi, as will be discussed here, consistently reflects a theme that may be best described as spiritual poverty, a central theme in the work of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, the 13th century Sufi poet. The confluence of Majidi's work and the Persian poetic tradition and, in particular, the Sufi themes in these works is something that Majidi himself has alluded to. When asked in an interview about the influence of religion in the "humanistic integrity" of his work, Majidi responded by suggesting that the influence of poets such as Hafiz, Saadi, and Rumi assign a great importance to the human being and that "contemporary cultural subjects are stemming from this tradition as well as the rituals associated with them."<sup>2</sup> The work of Rumi, who has become increasingly well-known in the West, exemplifies the qualities and emphases of particular Sufi worldview and discourse. Informed by Islamic and, in particular, Sufi principles and practices, Rumi reflects what become the key terms and tropes in Classical Sufism.

Although his approach is not systematic, there are certain principles and ideas that recur throughout his work. Here the focus is on the particular expression in Rumi of the notion of spiritual poverty. Reflecting the importance of this notion in Rumi's thought and work, Annemarie Schimmel has noted that,

“the concept upon which Rumi’s mystical theories focus insofar as we can detect any substantial theories at all is faqr, ‘poverty.’ The Prophetic saying ‘Poverty is my pride’ occupies a central place in his thought.”<sup>3</sup> This notion of poverty is central to a certain tendency and aesthetic in the work of Rumi, and it extends out into the work of other Persian writers, and artists, including the much more contemporary form of film. This is also particularly notable in the work of Majid Majidi.

Rumi’s focus throughout his poetry is the attainment of the highest spiritual states (*hal*) and stations (*maqam*). And this is found in the richness found in the qualities of God’s immanence and nearness (*tashbih*).<sup>4</sup> Rumi encourages the reader or listener of his work to move from God’s distance or the attitudes and experiences which keep us distant to his more positive qualities. For Rumi, as other Sufis, it is this very worldly distance, the poverty of our worldly lack or absence that is a sign and signal for us to turn to God, to turn inward – a call to return to the source. Rūmī’s poetry characteristically and repeatedly expresses the beauty of the spiritual poverty that results in the struggle with the *nafs*, or the lower soul. Moreover, this necessary struggle is the means by which one discovers and realizes the qualities of God. Rumi’s words, images, and lessons turn the reader (or the hearer) to a view of God’s nearness and intimacy (*tashbih*) and God’s positive qualities: Mercy, Compassion, Love, etc. For Rumi, the locus

of this discovery is the heart. Thus, heartache in this world is a call to another world. As Rumi remarks, “Should heartache enter you mind and ambush your joy, yet it prepares the way for happiness” (M V 3678-83).<sup>5</sup>

Another concomitant idea or ideal tied to Rumi’s expression of the ideal of spiritual poverty is the idea of fana, or annihilation. For Rumi, spiritual poverty is healing, it has the potential to bring us to an awareness of one’s dependence on God – from the Islamic perspective, this is a wholly positive dimension of experience. And for Rumi, he emphasizes the tashbih, or beauty of this dependence. The ultimate goal in Islam is to become one with God’s unity, but Rumi emphasizes that this felicity and happiness is possible now, before death. Annemarie Schimmel remarks upon the relationship of poverty and annihilation in Rumi’s thought:

He, the absolutely poor being, is contrasted with the eternally rich Lord, and after reaching perfect poverty, becomes annihilated in Him. Faqr with Rumi is almost a coterminus of fana’, “annihilation,” as it is prefigured in the poetry of Sanai and Attar. He who flies from ‘faqr and not-being leaves, in fact, true happiness.<sup>6</sup>

True happiness, then, is to be sought in love, and this love, in Rumi’s poetry, and Sufi poetry in general, is often portrayed as the love between human and God, or the Beloved.

Throughout his work, Rumi connects all the signs of life found in this world to God – the unity at the root of all the diverse forms and signs in existence. In another passage from the *Fihi-ma-fihi* or *Discourses*, Rumi remarks:

In the way of poverty you attain all of your desires. Whatever you may wish, you will surely attain it in this way—whether it be the defeating of armies, vanquishing enemies, conquering kingdoms, subjugating peoples, excelling your contemporaries, refined speech, eloquence, or anything of this sort. When you choose the way of poverty, you will attain all these things. No one has ever entered this way and then complained—in contrast to other ways. (F 145-146/154)<sup>7</sup>

Rumi, here, notes that poverty is the highest and most direct way to the highest spiritual states. Another line that emphasizes the dimension of beauty and nearness can be found when he remarks, “Last night I saw poverty in a dream, I became beside myself from its beauty.”<sup>8</sup> The theme of spiritual poverty, and its connotations, can be found throughout the works of Majidi, from the stories of overcoming poverty and hardship, the recurrent theme of love within the films, the references to dreams and use of dream-like images, to the realization of joy and beauty.

### **Spiritual Poverty and Beauty in Baran**

Majidi’s 2001 film *Baran* reflects a particularly explicit and compelling usage of the notion of spiritual poverty. In this film, Majidi explores the more complex world of relationships with older, young adults or adolescents, and, at the same

time, reflects more of the complexity of social relations and the life of refugees, particularly Afghans, in Iran. The film, like others of Majidi, employs untrained actors, minimal music, simple cinematography – all of which add to the power and beauty of the film.

The film begins with an announcement about the plight of Afghan refugees:

The first frame, after the Bismillah, “In the Name of God,” consists of a high-angle shot of bread being made – a ball of dough being pulled from a larger mound of dough – and kneaded and rolled into bread (a theme also employed frequently by Rumi as a symbol for the process of the spiritual path – from unformed dough to cooked bread, the soul is cooked and fulfills its spiritual maturation). We next see an overhead shot of hands counting bread – these hands turn out to be those of Lateef, an Iranian Azeri, who almost appears wealthy, his tattering clothes notwithstanding, as he goes to the store and orders an abundance of goods, including a large amount of pasta and a number of packages of cigarettes. He asks the grocer to put the items on credit for Memar, who we learn runs the construction site where he works. At this moment at the store we see the value of Lateef’s identification card – the only legitimate way that Lateef can travel and demonstrate who he is – the grocer keeps it while the bill remains unpaid. He asks the grocer to take care of it for him – this, as we will see at the

end of the film, becomes a bound motif in the story (a more conventional element of the film). The story unfolds as we find Lateef returning to the construction site. Najaf, an Afghani refugee, has just fallen from the second floor – Lateef inappropriately and jokingly asks: “he jumped without his parachute?” Lateef’s job on the site is to make food, and to make tea, while he makes sometimes inappropriate jokes and scuffles with the other workers.

The next day Soultan returns with Najaf’s son, Rahat, and convinces Memar – the boss – to allow his son to work in Najaf’s stead. Rahat is a slight, silent boy and Memar questions whether Rahat is up to the task, as he does not want to hire anyone who is “deaf and dumb.” Najaf’s son quickly proves to be inept at heavy lifting and construction work in general and Memar soon gives him Lateef’s job handling the tea and taking care of food preparations. Lateef, realizing his life of relative luxury is now gone, is now consumed with anger at being toppled from his position and attempts to sabotage his nemesis’ work. Yet, what we see is how, in contrast with Lateef’s poor service and weak tea, everyone likes Rahat’s tea and the beautifully staged meals.

Soon, however, the stage changes dramatically when Lateef accidentally sees the young man and realizes that she is in fact a beautiful young girl. Along the way, he ends up saving Rahat from the immigration officials, and we later find out her name is Baran. This run in with the immigration officials brings her

employment, as well as the employment of Najaf, at the construction site to an end. Knowing that Najaf and Baran have no way to support their family, Lateef goes through a series of trials and sacrifices in order to help Baran's family. Moreover, he attempts to do these without disclosing what he is doing to Baran. After convincing Memar to give him his salary for the past year that he has saved for him, he attempts to give it to Najaf, not directly but through Najaf's friend Soultan. However, Soultan, another Afghani refugee, ends up keeping it for himself and uses the money to Afghanistan – leaving a note promising to pay Lateef back one day.

After a series of further trials, Lateef seeks to give up the final thing he has of value, his Identification card – a highly valued commodity in this context of refugees and illegitimate work. He attempts to sell it on the black-market. First, he tries to sell it to some men who in turn attempt to steal it from him. Then, someone notices these men, helps Lateef get away and takes him to someone who will give him a fair price. He forgoes his identification card, and also his identity – his last tie to the real, “legitimate world” and to the rules and laws of this world.

In the next scene, Lateef then goes to Najaf, and encounters Baran at the door. He asks to speak to Najaf, and when he sees him he gives him the entire sum of money from the sale of his identify card, but tells him that Memar sent it for him in recompense for his lost work. At each turn, Baran renounces his own

position, his own actions, and acts with compassion, but it is a hidden compassion. Najaf thanks him and tells an utterly disheartened Lateef that they are leaving the next day for Afghanistan. After Lateef hears the news from Najaf that they will return to Afghanistan, Lateef runs through all the places he had seen the Afghan refugees gathered. He goes to the local mosque, and walks into in a graveyard. The camera pans across the graveyard to the edge, the trees, and fog. Lateef turns back to the pool in the courtyard, and looks down at the water, his reflection in the water, and the fish in the background. He splashes the water on his face, another recurring image in the work of Majidi. The non-diegetic music comes in and accentuates the other-worldly feel of the scene. We turn back to the door, with Lateef – the cloth across the door undulates in the wind. The shot turns back to his hat, with Baran’s hair clip that he found, in the side of his hat. The camera zooms in on the hat and clip, the water to the side. Fading to the next shot, we see the door of Najaf’s house, the next morning.

The camera pans from the door to a man with a bundle from the door across a small bridge to the truck. We see Najaf at hobbling around the truck, making preparations to depart. Baran comes out the door, proceeds to walk a few steps, and drops the basket of food that she is carrying. Now Lateef comes from the direction of the truck and begins to help her pick it up. Then, a low-angle shot of the hands and the food, nearly touching – almost close. At another moment

Baran is looking up at Lateef. He returns the look. Then Baran closes her burka down over her head – Lateef can no longer see her face, and he is symbolically separated from the possible union. Baran heads toward the truck but loses her poorly fitting shoe in the mud as she crosses the bridge. Lateef goes to help her and places it down on the ground in front of her. She puts it back on and turns to go back to the truck. She looks out of the truck as it slowly departs down the road. We see a final shot of Lateef as he turns back to walk toward the house. He sees her footprint on the ground, and smiles slightly. The rain begins and begins to fill up her footprint. The image fades, and the sound of the rain continues.

In the final moments of the film, Lateef is transformed through his poverty into love. At first, arriving at the house of Baran the morning of their departure, Lateef is shocked. Baran looks on at him, and Lateef cannot hide his love for her. He is distraught, and has given up all that he owned in the world, including his identity, symbolically sold with his identification card. In the next scenes, almost as if in a dream, Lateef is annihilated in his loss of Baran or, rather the possibility of being with Baran, and is transformed in the process. In another passage from the Mathnawi, Rumi writes, “Poverty is not for the sake of hardship. No, it is there because nothing exists but God” (M II 3497).<sup>9</sup>

Through this distance, Lateef is made whole. He is brought from distance to nearness in his acceptance of the situation. Among other elements and motifs of

the film, the last scenes particularly capture the feeling of spiritual poverty, particularly its dream-like mode. Rumi writes of poverty and dreaming:

Last night I saw Poverty in a dream, I became beside myself from its beauty.

From the loveliness and perfection of the grace of poverty I was dumbfounded until dawn.

I saw poverty like a mine of ruby, so that through its hue I became clothed in silk.

I heard the clamorous rapture of lovers, I heard the cry of “Drink now, drink!”

I saw a ring all drunken with poverty; I saw its ring in my own ear.

From the midst of my soul a hundred surgings rose when I beheld the surging of the sea.

Heaven uttered a hundred thousand cries; I am the slave of such a leader.<sup>10</sup>

It is as if the space that Lateef enters is like in a dream. He saw true spiritual Poverty (as in Rumi’s words, the Poverty is capitalized) which signifies that its source is God. As Baran departs, Lateef is confronted with another reality. The reality behind the world of material, human form is realized. He finds it beautiful (“I became beside myself from its beauty”). Lateef is annihilated in this experience of poverty, and its release. It is night, and then he returns to the home of Najaf and Baran as they are getting ready to leave for Afghanistan. Lateef’s smile is the signal for his acceptance, and he is, from the point of view of poverty and annihilation returning to the merciful qualities of God, as he is “clothed in

silk.” Perhaps Baran’s footstep invokes something akin to Rumi’s “clamorous rapture of lovers” – though, from the point of view, the view of the world, it is overwhelmingly silent. The sound of the lovers is from the other world. In the rain, symbolic of God’s mercy, Lateef hears and sees an affirmation of this love – the river affirms the existence of the sea, a frequent metaphor in Rumi’s work for the abundant love of God. Rumi’s poetry while focused on spiritual poverty always returns, as Lateef in his own realization, to love and the true beloved, God: “Love is that flame which, when it blazes up, burns away everything except the Beloved” (M V 587).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful discussion of the dominant themes of Hollywood Cinema, see: Robert Ray. *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema: 1930-1980*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> “Interview with Majid Majidi,” *Thoughts on Culture and Europe Series*, <http://www.cinemajidi.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Annemarie Schimmel. *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1978), p. 306.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of the names of God and the qualities of nearness (tashbih) and distance (tanzih) in Islam, see: *Sachiko Murata and William Chittick. Vision of Islam* (St. Paul: Paragon House Publishers, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson. *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’ddin Rūmī*, Books V and VI (E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2001), p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Annemarie Schimmel. *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1978), p. 307.

<sup>7</sup> William Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 187-188.

<sup>8</sup> A.J. Arberry. *Mystical Poems of Rūmī 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 220-221.

<sup>9</sup> William Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> A.J. Arberry. *Mystical Poems of Rūmī 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 220-221.

<sup>11</sup> William Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 215.