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Majid Majidi and New Iranian Cinema

Abstract

The films of Majid Majidi act as a looking glass to a religion and culture that has been under much scrutiny and has been greatly discussed in recent years. This article dissects Majidi's most popular recent films, in order to gain a better understanding of Iran and the Islamic tradition. It explores how Majidi's films demystify an Islamic culture for a western audience.

Iranian cinema has struggled through as much turmoil, oppression, and change as the region itself has. From strict regime to strict regime, the cinema of Iran has been either completely rejected by Muslim clerics as a Westernized poison that corrupts people's souls, or it has been utilized by clerics as a means of propagandizing, throughout its very short history.¹ At present, Iranian filmmakers, for the most part, are conforming to the imposed confines of feqh (Islamic jurisprudence), while still managing to transcend boundaries through uses of symbolism and realism.² The term Iranian Neo-Realism is often used to describe the new films coming out of Iran, and it is a term that alludes to the many thematic and stylistic similarities between present day Iranian film, and the Italian Neo-Realism cinema that formed because of the post-war struggle for identity.³ The similarities between the cinema that arose from communism and war in Italy in the 1940's, and the present day cinema that has been getting some International acclaim in Iran, a post-revolution country that is coping with the meshing of religion and politics, are countless.

Majid Majidi, one of the most prominent of the current directors in Iran, has been working in the Iranian film industry for over twenty years, and has directed ten feature films, each one gradually taking a more politicized approach to storytelling. Majidi has managed to confront many of the issues facing Iran and Islamic fundamentalism, all the while continuing to portray the many beautiful

aspects of the Islamic faith. Through an in-depth study of Majidi's three most popular films, *Children of Heaven* (1997), *Color of Paradise* (1999), and *Baran* (2001), I will discuss the many common themes that appear throughout these films, and look at his stylistic approach to cinematic storytelling.

Children of Heaven, the first of Majidi's internationally recognized films, is probably also his most simple and translatable film, having mostly apolitical themes that would resonate with a wide audience. *Children of Heaven* tells the story of Ali, a young boy in the suburbs of Tehran, who accidentally loses his sister's only pair of shoes as he is out having them repaired. The entire film focuses on the children's difficulty in coping with having to share one pair of shoes while hiding the loss from their parents who are heavily burdened with money troubles. While the children both run into difficulty and face embarrassing situations over the fact that they are sharing one pair of shoes, their main concern is making life easier for their parents who are struggling with keeping the family afloat.

The opening shot in *Children of Heaven* is one of the most cinematically beautiful and resonating elements found throughout all of Majidi's films. The shot uses extreme close-ups of hands working. These close-ups expose what would ordinarily be seen as everyday mundane actions, and transform them into moments of beauty, giving dignity to the worker and to the action itself. Most of Majidi's films focus on the difficulty of the working class to survive, but instead of depicting

the exertion of the work, Majidi exposes the work as aesthetically beautiful, allowing the viewer to appreciate the art in everyday life. *Children of Heaven* opens on a static close-up of a worker's aged and dirty hands slowly and carefully sewing and patching a pair of worn, petite pink shoes. This shot lasts for several seconds before it cuts to a medium shot that introduces Ali as he waits and watches the repairman.

Ali's father is also introduced through a close-up of him chipping blocks of sugar for an upcoming religious ceremony. When he is given a glass of tea from his daughter, Zahra, he asks for a clump of sugar for his tea. Zahra is confused because he has piles of sugar in front of him. Ali's father explains that the sugar belongs to the mosque and it would be wrong to use it. This theme of self-sacrifice for the sake of religion and faith is presented in Majidi's films as an unquestionable and clear path that simply must be followed, regardless of the hardships it brings upon the family. This is also seen when Ali's mother gives Ali a bowl of soup to take to an ill neighbor, despite the fact that they barely have enough to eat themselves.

Another theme found in many Majidi films, especially *Children of Heaven*, is the idea of the interconnectedness of humanity. *Children of Heaven* goes to great lengths to portray this theme, and the result is a beautifully woven story that expresses how one person's actions, however unimportant they may seem to them, can have a huge impact on the lives of others. This is found in the scene where a

street beggar accidentally takes Zahra's shoes. As Zahra leaves for school wearing Ali's shoes, the viewer hears the street beggar walking about yelling the items he has for sale, which include girl's slippers. Zahra does not notice this, but she does notice when a young girl shows up at school wearing her shoes. Zahra follows her home, but sees that her father is blind, and so she leaves without trying to get them back.

This interconnectedness continues when Ali gives Zahra a pen he won for having good grades, to make up for losing her shoes and making her wear his shoes. Zahra, who loves the pen, accidentally drops it on her way home from school, and the girl with her shoes finds it. She is seen at home admiring it and using it for her homework, but she finds Zahra and gets it back to her in the morning.

Another powerful theme in *Children of Heaven* is Majidi's use of misunderstandings that are never resolved. While Ali is acting very much like an adult in trying to solve his sister's problem, he is continually reprimanded for acting like a child. He is late for class because of having to wait for his sister, and the school superintendent punishes him for playing with friends and being late. Ali's dad also scolds him for acting too childlike, while Ali is actually trying to protect his family. Each time Ali is misunderstood, he takes his punishment without arguing, understanding that obedience is more important than anything.

While Ali does everything in his power to get his sister a pair of shoes, including running in a race in which third prize is a pair of shoes (though he accidentally comes in first), it is Ali and Zahra's father who buys the two children new shoes in the end of the film, symbolizing God's providence for those who work hard. The film ends before Ali and Zahra discover their new shoes, very typical of Majidi's style of never ending on a perfectly happy note.

Stylistically, *Children of Heaven*, being the first acclaimed film from Majidi, is very simple and fluid. Many shots seem to linger on their subject, adding to the feeling of realism. Majidi also utilizes mostly diegetic sound, using non-diegetic music very sparingly. Film critic Joseph Cunneen was less impressed with the aesthetic elements in *Children of Heaven*, but appreciated its ability to portray realism in an engaging manner, "Although *Children of Heaven* does not have the aesthetic subtlety of such recent Iranian movies as Jafar Panah's *The White Balloon*, its presentation of everyday life is equally authentic."⁴ 'Authentic' seems the perfect word for *Children of Heaven*. For the hour and a half that the viewer is watching Ali and Zahra's struggle, their emotions and concerns become yours, allowing the viewer to enter a world that would previously have been incomprehensible.

Majidi's 1999 film *The Color of Paradise* is decidedly his most religious film, though it focuses more on the beauty of God in nature than on the specifics of the religion of Islam. The most striking similarity between *Children of Heaven* and

The Color of Paradise is Majidi's use of children as his main protagonists. Because Iranian cinema is censored by the government's film agency, Farabi, many Iranian directors have been accused of focusing on children in their stories to avoid the complications of showing relations between women and men.⁵ While this may be the case for Majidi, his later film, *Baran*, tackles women's issues and male/female relationships head on.

The *Color of Paradise* tells the story of Mohammad, a young blind boy who is well educated and content. His father, a widower, only sees Mohammad as a burden, and is embarrassed by his childlike enjoyment of nature. Stylistically, the film opens with credits over black, as the sounds of a tape recorder and some indistinct voices are heard. This goes on for two minutes, and places the viewer completely in the shoes of the blind Mohammad. Mohammad is well liked by his sisters and his grandmother, and gets along fine with those around him, but his father cannot accept his condition so he sends him off to apprentice to a blind carpenter.

While religion and faith are mainly background themes in Majidi's other films, *The Color of Paradise* continually discusses God, and even depicts an 'otherworldly' bright light at two pivotal moments in the film, the death of the grandmother, and Mohammad's 'coming back to life' after his father finds him washed up on a beach after an accident. God is simply presented as real as any other

character within the film, though *The Color of Paradise* never crosses the line to being overly didactic at any moment.

The strongest element in *The Color of Paradise* is Majidi's manipulation of sound to keep the viewer firmly focused on the world around Mohammad. Several times within the film all sounds fade out, leaving just one prominent and noticeable sound, usually that of a bird singing. At these moments, the camera focuses only on Mohammad's face, and never reveals the actual subject making the noise. Majidi also films many close-ups of Mohammad's hands in slow motion as they play with leaves, trees, and feathers. The many vivid colors and textures shot in close-up leave the viewer with the impression that they, too, have felt these items, and know them intimately, not just by their appearance.

Majidi's 2001 film *Baran* is certainly his most politically motivated and overtly moralistic film of the three. It opens with a three-paragraph statement about the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, and discusses the 1.5 million Afghani refugees currently living in Iran. Fellow Iranian filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami, also focuses on Afghani refugees in his acclaimed film *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), but their struggle is briefly discussed, while Majidi chooses to focus on it as the main subject of his film.

Opening with Majidi's signature close-up of hands at work (this time they are making bread), *Baran* tells the story of a young man, Lateef, who works as a runner at a construction site in Tehran. This construction site employs Afghan refugees who constantly have to hide themselves from the building inspector during his visits. When an older Afghan falls from the building and breaks his leg, he sends his daughter, Baran, who is dressed up as a man, to fill in for him so they can continue to receive wages. Baran goes by the name Rahmat, and is not strong enough to haul cement up and down stairs at the construction site, so Baran is given Lateef's job as a runner/tea maker, and Lateef treats her horribly (thinking she is a man) thereafter. Lateef discovers that Baran is a girl one third of the way into the film, and spends the second third simply observing her in amazement. After the Afghans are discovered to be working at the construction site, Baran is no longer able to work there so she takes a grueling job hauling stones out of a river. Lateef is moved to tears with love and pity for her, and he takes out his entire year's wages to anonymously help her family. Lateef also sells his identification card to help Baran, which is clearly a symbol of his new acceptance of his oneness with the Afghan refugees.

In the last scene of the film, Lateef helps Baran and her family pack up their house as they prepare for a move back to Afghanistan, and it is the first moment in the whole film that allows Baran, now dressed as a woman, to make eye contact

with Lateef. The film ends with Baran's family driving away from Lateef. As Lateef turns in sorrow he notices her footprint in the mud. Lateef smiles, and watches as the footprint fills with rain. This shot is similar to those in *The Color of Paradise* for its use of rich sounds and visually tactile images of rain and mud.

While themes involving women and love were forbidden in the years following the Iranian revolution in 1979, the modern day "Third Republic" is now giving filmmakers more liberal allowances to tell the types of stories they want to tell.⁶ This can be seen in *Baran*, especially in relation to Lateef's incessant observations of Baran's every move. Another shocking element is Majidi's willingness to cinematically break Hejab (modesty through the covering of the head) in the scene where Lateef sees Baran in silhouette through a window as she is combing her long hair. These moments, while innocent and beautiful, would have been considered absolutely immoral and corrupt by Iran's other regimes.

While *Baran* is one of Majidi's most progressive films, thematically, dealing with issues of racism, poverty, refugees, and love, it is also one of his most stylistically impressive films. Majidi uses long continuous shots of the workers moving throughout the construction site, bright colors, and many scenes with either snow or rain falling. These elements not only represent Majidi's growth as a cinematic storyteller, they also suggest Iran's growing film industry as an art and as a business.

Anthropologist, Hamid Naficy, in his article 'Iranian Cinema Under the Islamic Republic', discusses the two avenues Iranian filmmakers are currently taking in cinema today:

The populist cinema inscribes post-revolutionary values more fully at the level of plot, theme, characterization, human relationships, portrayal of women, and mise en scène. The quality cinema, on the other hand, engages with those values and tends to critique the social conditions under the Islamic government.⁷

Majid Majidi masterfully exposes the beauty of the Islamic tradition, while simultaneously criticizing some of the negative aspects of politically mandated religious practices. His characters are often upright and religious Muslims, but his films focus mainly on the fact that they are outsiders who see the world from unique, non-conforming perspectives. Majidi is trying to tell stories about the struggle for identity within a strict political environment, much like the filmmakers of the Italian Neo-Realist movement did. Like the martyred priest in Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), who states that "anyone who strives to help others is on the path of God, whether they believe in him or not", Majidi's Lateef in *Baran* is never presented as a deeply religious character, though his selfless actions seem to be guiding him closer and closer to God and a profound happiness. This theme can be found throughout Majid Majidi's films, suggesting that Majidi is not only concerned about the end, but sees the means to the end as of the ultimate importance.

¹ Nacify, Hamid. "Iranian Cinema". *The Oxford History of World Cinema*. Ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997. p. 675

² Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State. *Middle East Report*, No. 219. (Summer, 2001), p. 26.

³ Weinberger, Stephen. "Neorealism, Iranian Style". *Iranian Studies*. Vol. 40, Issue 1. March 2007, p. 5

⁴ Cunneen, Joseph. "An Iranian drama that could alter U.S. policy, two films with offbeat heroes. (At the Movies)". *National Catholic Reporter*. February 19, 1999, p. 18.

⁵ Moruzzi, Norma Claire. Women's Space/Cinema Space: Representations of Public And Private in Iranian Films. *Middle East Report*, No. 212, (Autumn, 1999), p. 52.

⁶ Mir-Hosseini, 29

⁷ Naficy, Hamid. Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic. *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 97, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), p. 549.