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Iranian Avant-garde Cinema Before the Islamic Revolution: Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama

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Abstract

Iranian main-stream cinema in the 1951, 60s and 70s was heavily influenced by the imported culture from either the west or the east. Public interest in second-rate or third-rate Indian and American films caused commercial movies made for the box-office to base their narration style and aesthetics on the idea of pure entertainment, hence emptying it from any hint of Iranian history, civilization or culture. In this environment, filmmakers such as Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama started making films like *Night of the Hunchback*, *The Brick and the Mirror* and *Siavash at Persepolis*, presented a new, different and unconventional image of the country's cinematic productions in which nationalism, faith, history and culture were the main concerns. This special view towards cinema caused the works of these masters to become like mirrors held up to the Iranian society, history and culture and this was the basis for an avant-garde cinema in Iran before the Islamic Revolution.

Keywords

Cinema, Islamic Revolution, Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan, Fereydoon Rahnama.

Introduction

In most countries with a great cinematic tradition, the nonconformist or alternative cinema was made as a revolt against the industrial mainstream

cinema and it takes its roots from the historical, local, sociological and artistic contexts. This is also true about Iranian cinema. The new experimental and independent movement in Iranian cinema which is also called the New Wave of Iranian



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cinema, starts from 1961s and as a type of cinema stood against the mainstream movies also known as “Film-Farsi”. This was a clear and natural response from filmmakers who were trying to come up with new forms of expression for their films and were recognized as artistic mirrors in front of the national identity and culture. Film-Farsis were mainly influenced by American and Indian mainstream cinema and their structures and building blocks never came from the sociological identity, traditions or beliefs of Iranian people. The independent and nonconformist cinema at that time was unable to have any sort of meaningful effect on the narrative or aesthetic style of the mainstream cinema but what it did was to introduce a new kind of cinema to the audience. In that period a few directors went from the New Wave Cinema to the more economic productions so that they can try out the use of unconventional techniques and skills in the mainstream cinema. During the first attempts in this approach, changing the interests of mainstream filmmakers wasn’t an easy task and lots of the avant-garde filmmakers in Iran were faced with several problems during the production. These problems usually occurred in two areas: one of them was the ambiguous economy of Iranian Cinema in 1961s, and the other one was the made-up background of Iranian culture.

Mainstream producers were hesitant about the return of their money if they were to produce nonconformist films. On the other hand the filmmakers who actually belonged to the new wave were fighting to reshape the anti-cinematic taste of the audience back then. Attacking this inclination towards action scenes, sex and melodramas was at the pinnacle of filmmakers’ aims but most of the Iranian cinema-goers at the time were not interested in films that introduced them to new worlds and were looking for films made according to pre-established formulas. Because of the existence of this sort of attitude among Iranian cinema-goers as

well as the governmental censorship and limitations of expression, the experiments of nonconformist filmmakers were never able to turn into a consistent movement. In the making of the independent and islandic cinema in Iran before the Islamic Revolution there were three important figures. These three people with a theoretical and artistic background are among the pioneers of Iranian New Wave cinema: Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama. Rahnama and Ghaffari were completely familiar with the French New Wave due to completing their education in France. Ebrahim Golestan had studied in Iran but he was well acquainted with Italian Neorealism and at the same time he was hugely recognized as a pioneering novelist. These affiliations were the reason why the new cinema of Iran has always been associated with French New Wave and Italian Neorealism. Despite differences in aligning the narrative elements and the development of stylistic features among these three filmmakers, they had a common goal which was to battle the formulaic structure of the film industry and replacing it with a cinema based on the sociological and cultural values and traditions.

Research Background

After substantial study and research among the numerous books, essays, dissertations and credible websites about Iranian cinema before the revolution, there were no specific studies on the subject of “Iranian avant-garde cinema before the Islamic Revolution: Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama”. Although some books and essays both in Persian and English very briefly and sporadically introduce Iranian avant-garde cinema before the Islamic Revolution and the role of innovating filmmakers: *The New Wave of cinema before the Revolution, defying the dominant cinema* (Mirbaba, 2016 a, 22), *The New Wave of Iranian Cinema: A Cow’s Roar* (Zeydabadi Nejad, 2014), Iranian cinema and The

Islamic Revolution (Mirbakhtyar, 2006).

Research Assumptions

The Iranian avant-garde cinema before the revolution as an independent movement has been able to cause significant changes in the narration style and the implementation of stylistic features in Iranian cinema. This study is based on the assumption that filmmakers such as Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama in their cinematic productions like *Night of the Hunchback*, *The Brick* and *the Mirror and Siavash at Persepolis* by focusing on what constitutes Iranian identity and heritage and using them as cinematic tools and elements, started a significant change in the language and the expression of Iranian cinema, hence becoming the founders of Iranian avant-garde cinema.

Key Questions

- What are the features, paradigms and characteristics of Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama's avant-garde cinema?
- Why are the movies *Night of the Hunchback*, *The Brick* and *the Mirror and Siavash at Persepolis* successful examples of Iranian avant-garde cinema before the Islamic Revolution?
- Is there a meaningful relationship between Iranian history, civilization and culture with the pioneering filmmakers in Iran before the Revolution?

Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on descriptive-analytical approach and the data has been gathered through library research. This article other than expressing the generalities of the research and pointing out the features of Iranian avant-garde cinema before the Islamic Revolution in the works of Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama, will also try to analyze

the narrative and stylistic structure of their work.

Farrokh Ghaffari and the experience of *Night of the Hunchback*

Farrokh Ghaffari is one of the pioneers of Iranian modern cinema. He studied in Belgium and France when he was young and accumulated priceless experiences at the time. He was also a contributor in some periodicals such as *Varite* in France. He went back to Iran in 1328 (Iranian calendar) and founded the Cinematech of Iran which was one of his greatest achievements. He was trying to train a new generation of Iranian film artists and he also helped to screen artistic films which weren't seen at cinemas throughout the country.

In 1334 he made a short film called "Dead-end" with the help of Fereydoon Hoveyda who was one of the Iranian critics and novelists in France. Later he made a documentary called *Iranian Miniatures* in which he used the sources from Paris National Museum. This film as well as another documentary called "Ghali-shooyan" (Carpet washers) are significant productions because they portray the religious, ritualistic and nationalistic ceremonies in Iran. After constant traveling between Tehran and Paris he managed to establish a film studio called (Iran Nama) in 1957. Then he made his first feature film called "The South of the City". The film was banned due to many reasons one of them being the harsh portrayal of the police force. After that Ghaffari spent a lot of time on reading and writing about cinema. In 1964 he decided to produce another film called "The Night of the Hunchback". This film according to Parviz Davaei- a well-known Iranian cinema critic- is one of the first films of Iranian new cinema. Although in 1338 Ghaffari made another film called "Which is the Bride?" which was not a success.

The Night of the Hunchback which is a modern adaptation of a story from *One thousand and One Nights*, is also a significant, brilliant and impressive

piece of work in the history of Iranian cinema. This film presents a picture of Iranian culture and traditions and simultaneously portrays the manners and customs of a class of society who were not seen in Iranian mainstream cinema during 30s, 40s and 50s (Mehrabi, 2016, 120).

The story of the film is about a hunchback who is a performer in an Iranian traditional performing troop. One day after the show he chokes when having lunch. The members of the group who are really scared take the dead body to a house where it causes a lot of problems. Then the body is taken from one person to another who are all kind of guilty of something and they all try to get rid of the body. Finally the police finds the body and arrests the criminals.

In surface the film is about the relationship between crime and the police but in reality it is a psychoanalytical study of the society on how people react to a shocking phenomenon. The study of the psyche and manners of a limited group of people as a microcosm for the great Iranian society is a hidden theme in the film. The Night of the Hunchback is a manifestation of internal and sociological lives of Iranians and also their huge fear of the police. Because of this fear of the police the characters reveal their inner characteristics for the audience. Masoud Mehrabi on the The Night of the Hunchback:

In 1964 when most filmmakers are trying to make low-minded films to trick the audience and make huge sums of money and nobody is concerned about improving the thinking ability of the audience or the development of cinema itself, The Night of the Hunchback appears as a different type of film. This film is one of the most important Iranian films. The brilliance of Ghaffari's modern adaptation of One Thousand and One Nights is in the way he allows the audience to grasp the quality of life among the different classes of society and know the dark and bright sides of human behavior (Ibid, 136).

The theme of The Night of the Hunchback could be summarized in one word: FEAR. By using the camera spinning on the characters, drastic lights and shadows and low angles for each shot, Ghaffari has chosen a style in his decoupage and mise-en-scene which reveals the effect of fear on each character. In a cinema which was filled with instances significantly affected by Indian and American mainstream productions, this film presents a realistic image of Iranian society and people.

Although The Night of the Hunchback was not a box-office hit due to the current taste and trend in cinema, but was able to create a small wave among creative cinema-goers. Lots of critics considered this film as a pioneering example of the ideal Iranian cinema. For example Hazhir Daryush- director and critic- who was the editor of Art and Cinema magazine described the film as a powerful beginning for a new Iranian cinema. Daryush believed that this film as a work which has the potential to show the cultural and nationalistic capacities of Iran, has to be considered as an alternative to the fake image of Iranian society that FilmFarsi portrays (Jahed, 2014, 25).

Ebrahim Golestan was another filmmaker who had a significant part in establishing an avant-garde Iranian cinema. He managed to introduce a new path and method in Iranian cinema by making the film The Brick and The Mirror in 1965.

Ebrahim Golestan and the experience of The Brick and the Mirror

Ebrahim Golestan is an Iranian director, novelist, translator, journalist and photographer who is a well-respected figure due to his different and new approach. He is much affected by Italian Neorealism in his style of filmmaking. He spent most of his career as a filmmaker on making documentaries and these experiences really influenced his feature and fiction films. He founded the Golestan Film

Studio in 1965 and began producing documentaries, having had made his first feature film called “Why is the sea stormy?” which was never completed in 1962. Then in 1965 he made his second film called “The Brick and the Mirror” which became an everlasting experience for him in terms of directing, screenwriting and producing. This film introduced a lot of new discussions about Iranian cinema so much so that lots of critics believed that this is the beginning of Iranian avant-garde cinema. The film is about Hashem, a taxi driver. One day at the end of his night shift a woman who is wearing a chador leaves her infant child in the car. Hashem starts looking for the woman in the dark and among the construction sites. Eventually he takes the baby to the café with him to ask his friends for advice. Although his friends warn him about going to the police, he takes the baby to the police station. The commanding officer tells him to take the baby to an orphanage or the court tomorrow. Hashem and his girlfriend, Taji, who is a waitress at the café take the baby to Hashem’s place. Taji starts taking care of the baby and forms a bond with it, so she asks Hashem if they can all live together. The day after when Hashem is at the court to claim the guardianship of the baby he starts talking to somebody who warns him about the hardships of raising a child so he changes his mind and takes the baby to the orphanage. Taji who has been waiting since the morning for the return of Hashem with the baby, strongly objects Hashem’s decisions and asks him to take her to the orphanage. But when they get there Taji sees lots of orphans and starts doubting her decision. Hashem who has been waiting outside the orphanage, suddenly leaves and abandons Taji and the baby.

The Brick and the Mirror despite having a simple plot, managed to take on the commercial cinema of the time because of the director’s knowledge and mastery over the tools of narration and visual communication. Just like The Night of the

Hunchback, this film too was really well-received by the critics but didn’t do well in the box-office.

The Brick and the Mirror is quite tangibly influenced by the characteristics of Italian Neorealism. Just like Bicycle Thieves and Umberto D. made by Vittorio De Sica, this film uses a particular blend of actors and non-actors. In the process of making this film the way actors and non-actors communicate has consequently created a new form of cinematic expression in Iran. Most of the film has been shot in spaces other than a studio, usually public places like squares, bazaar and the court. Because of Golestan’s experience in documentary filmmaking, he has managed to create a living and dynamic atmosphere out of these places. Also the way the dialogues are written makes it much easier for the audience to enter the inner world of the characters and know them better. Mohsen Seyf writes about this film:

The entire film is pictured in a closed space and limited time through long shots. The words of the film esp. the conversations between the man and the woman, despite being quite long, are not really boring because they possess a poetic quality. Although the well-designed framing and composition of the pictures in each scene help reveal Golestan’s hidden idea in that particular scene. The Brick and the Mirror is a psychoanalytical realistic drama which to some extent reminds us of the manifesto of the Italian Neorealists. Especially in the way they believed there shouldn’t be a gap between what is shown on the screen and real life. If we consider fear as the dominant theme in Night of the Hunchback, we can say that in The Brick and the Mirror solitude and isolation are the main themes. This isolation is the result of two very different reactions to an event among two people who are very close. The man represents the brick and the woman personifies the mirror and when these two come together they cause the destruction of each other. As long as there’s a mirror, there’s a

reflection of the brick but as soon as the mirror is broken, the brick no longer means anything.

The third person who's had a significant role in Iranian avant-garde cinema before the Islamic Revolution is Freydoon Rahnama. His works really helped Iranian intellectual cinema's presentation and effect and even managed to alter the opinions of some politicians towards cinema at the time.

Fereydoon Rahnama and the experience of Siavash in Persepolis

Fereydoon Rahnama studied cinema at Paris University. He presented his dissertation on the subject of cinema and realism in 1936. He is also an important poet who wrote most of his poetry in French. When he decided to make his first film, the influence of poetry was substantially obvious. He borrowed a new tone and expression from modern poetry and that hugely affected his style of narration in his films. He was one of the cofounders of the organization called Free Cinema. He supported a lot of young and talented filmmakers in there so that they could produce films with a low budget and an 8 mm negative. Lots of Iranian innovative and avant-garde filmmakers are disciples of the Free Cinema. They managed to establish a new wave of cinema in Iran because of their 8 mm productions. Rahnama's first film was a documentary called *Persepolis* in 1961. This film was a poetic documentary about the Persepolis which is ruined by Alexander the Great. Hamid Shoaie writes about this film (Rahnama, 2002, 21):

This film is about the rise and fall of a great empire. War is the reason for both victory and the downfall of the empire. Iranians built an empire based on waging never-ending wars and stretched the empires boundaries as far as Greece and Egypt, just like a lion who wants to conquer the rest of the world too. But that civilization gradually became weaker and weaker to the point where others were able to impose their will on us. In this film after

the portrayal of war and peace, Rahnama shows us images of the remains of the stairs, gates and columns (Mirbakhtyar, 2006, 62).

Unlike other documentaries which always try to portray a serene and beautiful image of Persepolis, Rahnama presents a realistic and historical image of this ancient place. In Rahnama's view although we have had a magnificent and powerful history, there's nothing left but ruins today. His main idea is that we shouldn't always rely on our history.

In 1946 Rahnama went back to Persepolis, this time to make a fiction film called *Siavash in Persepolis*. The plot is presented in two different contexts: one is the ruins of Persepolis and the other one is some verses from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The film is about the conflict between Ahoora Mazda and Ahriman which is symbolically pictured in the war between Iran and Turan which has a very special place in the Iranians' knowledge of mythology. Siavash is a symbol of light, justice and purity. Siavash is trying to end the war between Iran and Turan. A war which doesn't allow people to be themselves, but the people around him won't stay calm and through lies and deception they start yet another massacre.

Siavash in Persepolis has a theatrical structure and is based on ancient Iranian rituals. This is what makes this film unique compared with other similar documentaries. Due to its different way of expression, it had very different receptions from the critics. Nasib Nasibi who was a supporter of the film writes:

Rahnama's technical savvy helped him reach an authorial combination of reality and myth. Rahnama in *Siavash in Persepolis* has rightly used the mysterious cultural and mythological heritage of Iran. One of the most important aspects of this film, is the encounter between reality and myth in the past and the present of Siavash's character. *Siavash in Persepolis* is the product of an Iranian mind who is aware of our cultural and historical

difficulties both in past and present (Mirbaba, 2016 b, 22).

Siavash in Persepolis talks about the unalterable fate and that's apparent in Siavash's character. He's a martyr for the written history. The film is about Siavash and people like him in the past and the present who bear the difficulties of life in order to reach their fate. Rahnama in Siavash in Persepolis believes that we can understand the present better if we know about history and that way we can expect tomorrow more strongly. In this film he is particularly looking for the lost Iranian cultural and historical identity. The same idea is repeated in his next film called "Iran's son has no news about his mother". Rahnama made his films exactly in a period of time when the culture of the country was being heavily influenced from both east and west. He tried to revive the past through his camera with an unconventional and new expression for the young generation and in his own way tackle the prescribed modernization of the country. In one of his interviews, Rahnama says:

We need a cinema in this country which is based on our culture, philosophy and traditions. We want a cinema that prepares the context for discussion about our literature and ancient history. A brief glance at our literature shows us what a great source of imagination we have (Jahed, 2005, 33). Ebrahim Golestan is one of the few filmmakers who in all of his documentary and fiction works is concerned with reflecting some aspects of Iranian culture, art and civilization with an analytical and sociological approach. This has caused his name to be renowned as one of the three pioneering filmmakers in Iranian avant-garde cinema.

Conclusion

A national cinema based on Iranian culture and traditions was the goal Farrokh Ghaffari, Ebrahim Golestan and Fereydoon Rahnama were trying to achieve. Cinema and its particular visual

techniques were the tools that these artists used in order to present the values of their homeland to the world. The ideal national cinema that they talked about was dealing with questions like who are we? Where do we live? And how to live like an Iranian? So it became like a mirror held up to what we have as Iranians.

Attention and interest towards Iranian culture and literature and their representation through innovative and new styles of expression in Iran's cinema, caused the first steps towards an independent and national cinema to be taken. Ghaffari, Golestan and Rahnama involved their camera directly with the realities so that they can capture and present vivid moments of Iranian identity and history.

In the decades when cinema was generally and quite heavily influenced by imported and low-minded Indian and American productions, *Night of the Hunchback*, *The Brick and the Mirror* and *Siavash in Persepolis* were the films that introduced a new approach in Iranian cinema, hence cementing the foundations of Iranian avant-garde cinema before the Islamic Revolution.

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