The New Iranian Film:
Central Themes within a Framework of Values in
Third Phase Post-Revolutionary Iranian Film

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zolm be'l-saviyeh adl ast (Oppression equally applied is justice) Persian proverb
We have art so that we do not perish from truth. Nietzsche

Much attention has been paid to the history and theory of European and American cinema as it has evolved over the last century, but there is comparatively little scholarship of films from the Middle East, an area that has been long misunderstood by the Western world. However, in recent years, the blossoming film industry of Iran and its many awards have begun to awaken the world to a brilliant new film tradition. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a new generation of filmmakers has emerged, and through a variety of subjects, they provide an authentic perspective of modern Iranian culture. The post-Revolutionary film tradition of Iran has gained respect and admiration globally for its subtle exploration of social issues while avoiding superficiality. International film festivals have awarded Iranian films in recent years for their simple, yet profound messages. In the 20th and 21st century, this relatively new medium of film has become the most accessible art form to populations around the world, and it has become the most vivid way to experience another country's culture. The history of film in Iran since the Revolution is that of an evolving relationship—both the filmmaker's and the Revolutionary generation's relationship to the government. Understanding the relationship between film and politics is the first step in understanding the films themselves.

The purpose of this work is to place Third Phase Iranian film within the history of post-Revolutionary Iran then to construct a framework for analysis including thematic elements used by the newest generation of Iranian directors. In the essay, "Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State," Ziba Mir-Hosseini divides post-Revolutionary film into three periods, each corresponding to political eras in Iran[2] . Each period represents different challenges and opportunities for filmmakers, as the government exercises different degrees of control over the industry. These periods also reflect changes in the political life of Iran. The First Phase began at the Revolution and ended at the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in the late 1980s. The Second Phase ended at the election of a reformist President in 1997, and the Third Phase has not yet terminated. These different periods also mark a change in the political demographics in Iran; the younger generation is now the largest percentage of voters, and their politics are less conservative than their parents'.

Beginning with the initial post-Revolutionary Neorealism, today's Iranian cinema has evolved into a unique and well-respected art. The new generation of Iranian film is a sophisticated school of film, responding to conflicts emerging in Iranian society.

First and Second Phase Post-Revolutionary Neorealism

The first phase of post-Revolutionary cinema lasted until the late 1980s, ending with the Iran-Iraq War and the death of charismatic Revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Hamid Naficy's "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran "3 creates a history of Iranian film as it evolved in this period; his essay outlines the changes in film production as Iran became an Islamic theocracy, and he shows how Iranian film has become the archetype of "Islamic" Film. In Naficy's conclusion on the future of Iranian cinema, he states,

The 'Islamic' cinema is in a quandary...[a]t the heart of the dilemma is the contradiction between the artists' fidelity to the state and their loyalty to the nation and to themselves. Chilean cineastes during a similar transition period in their nation's life, produced a manifesto which opted for the latter. It declared cinema a revolutionary art as long as there is a 'conjunction between the artist and his people, united in a common objective: liberation.' It is too early to tell definitively which of the alternatives will be chosen by Iranian cineastes and how that alternative will be expressed.4

There are numerous film traditions around the globe that have emerged from post-war societies, from the aforementioned Chilean tradition to post the World War II Italian Neorealism. During Iran's earliest post-revolutionary stage, the future of cinema seemed to be in the hands of the filmmakers to rebel against the system or conform to it. The uncertainty in Naficy's conclusion is understandable, as the Iranian film industry was faced with numerous obstacles during and after the Revolution.
In 1970s Iran, revolutionary leaders largely saw the cinema as another example of unwanted foreign, and ultimately Western, influence. Religious authorities were often advocates of the mass media "hypodermic" theory, seeing film as the west's attempt to pump moral corruption into the Islamic country. It is not the institution of film itself that was criticized, but rather the films that were being screened at the time of the revolution. Khomeini expressed these concerns at the inception of Iran's theocracy, stating:

We are not opposed to cinema, or to radio, or to television…The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers.5

The condemnation of cinema, as it was "Westoxified" in Khomeini's view, is merely one example of many in his mission to purify Iran from what he saw as the anti-Islamic regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1967-1979). It is no wonder then that the Iranian film industry drastically changed after 1979, including a significant increase of government control. In 1987, for example, the public sector was responsible only one-third of films produced6 . The government funds the majority of films produced in Iran, and they censor films that are not in line with what are conceived as Islamic ideals.
In 1982, the government produced a set of restrictions for cinema, banning films that:

[1] Weaken the principle of monotheism and other Islamic principles or insult them in any manner. [2] Insult directly or indirectly the prophets, imans, the Velayat-e Faqih (supreme jurisprudent), the ruling council, or the mojtaheds (jurisprudents). [3] Blaspheme the values and personalities held sacred by Islam and other religions

mentioned in the constitution. [4] Encourage wickedness, corruption, and prostitution. [5] Encourage or teach dangerous addictions and earning a living from unsavory means such as smuggling. [6] Negate equality of all people regardless of color, race, language, ethnicity, and belief. [7] Encourage foreign cultural, economic, and political influence contrary to the "neither West nor East" policy of the government. [8] Express or disclose anything that is against the interests and policies of the country which might be exploited by foreigners. [9] Show details of scenes of violence and torture in such a way as to disturb or mislead the viewer. [10] Misrepresent historical and geographic facts. [11] Lower the taste of the audience through low production and artistic values. [12] Negate the values of self-sufficiency and economic and social independence.

Of these twelve points, the first three are the most telling in the development of an Islamic film tradition, as they prohibit expression that is not in line with Islam, and more specifically, Islamic authority. By extension then, this policy prohibits expression that is not in line with Iran's Islamic government. Points seven, eight, and twelve are also political in nature, particularly interesting in their common theme of fighting foreign influence. Although these restrictions are little more than censorship, it is important to note points six and eleven as being both positive and ultimately constructive.
Within these constraints, what Naficy calls a "post-revolution moralist cinema" has developed. The new Iranian cinema is often compared to the post-World War II Italian Neorealist movement, which was characterized by an emphasis on the ordinary. Francesco Casetti, in his work, Theories of Cinema, summarizes the notable Neorealist theorist Cesare Zavattini, commenting that, "Zavattini's starting point is the idea that both the war and the fight for liberation taught everyone—even filmmakers—to appreciate the richness of the real and to discover the importance of current events"[7] . Although he is speaking of the Italian movement, the same effect can be seen in the Iranian tradition. After the Revolution, the majority of films tackle simple topics, as the protagonists are often peasants and children. Although the Iranian cinema is moralist, its characters are not perfect, instead, "they are never portrayed as congenitally moral creatures…they make the kind of choices that we are all capable of making"[8] . The form of Neorealism itself is a political statement; little montage, natural lighting, indiscriminate mise-en-scene, and eye-level angles generally characterize the stark film style of Neorealism, all an attempt to imitate reality. Dramatic theorist Bertolt Brecht, argued by George Lellis as the primary influence of the Cahiers du Cinéma[9] , postulates that, "the form of a work of art is as important to its political meaning as its content"[10] . If this is true then the stark, pseudo-documentary style of many Iranian films represents the harsh realities of life in Iran as much as any story of hardship could. Interestingly, the style of Iranian film strays drastically from the Persian tradition. There is a flair present in Persian art and language that is noticeably missing from its modern cinema. Glimpses of that flowery style are noticeable in the content of film, especially the attention to carpet weaving, but are largely absent from the form.
The second phase of post-Revolutionary film did begin in the period after Khomeini's death but more notably after the end of the Iran-Iraq war. The war had devastated Iran's economy and ended in a reluctant cease-fire. The tradition of Neorealism continued, as the period represented another a different kind of post-war Iran, this time from an external conflict. Little changed in the style of film, and government control remained

strict at the beginning of this phase, but continuously loosened, culminating with the reformist movements emerging in 1997 and the election of a reformist President.

Society and Film in the Post-Revolutionary Third-Phase

In response to Naficy's uncertainty regarding the future path of Iranian filmmakers—to either succumb to the pressure of the state or to be the voice of the revolution—The auteurs of Iranian cinema seem to have chosen a third way: to let reality speak for itself. Mir-Hosseini argues that, "the Islamization process has failed, as filmmakers, like other artists, have gradually managed to free their art form from feqh (Islamic Jurisprudence) injunctions and state ideology11 . Although feqh restrictions may have loosened, freedom from state ideology is a more difficult, if not impossible challenge. Rather than attack social and economic problems directly, directors show poor families struggle with everyday life and let their audience make its own conclusions. Twenty years after the revolution, the political climate of Iran remains tumultuous, fueled by an interminable economic depression.

The third, or current, phase began in 1997 with the election of President Mohammad Khatami in conjunction with an emerging reformist movement, the Do-e Khordad12 Movement,13 that has begun to break away from the strict measures imposed by the early Islamic Republic under the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. More than sixty-five percent of Iranians are under twenty-five, and the youth of Iran are a generation disillusioned with the results of the Revolution. The economy of Iran is sagging, and there are not enough jobs for current college graduates. The youth of Iran reelected Khatami in 2001, and they expect to see, "more freedom of speech and social reform…[and] they want more immediate results on the economy"14 . Although this hope for a better economy is perhaps largely out of Khatami's control, it is the main characteristic of what director Abbas Kiarostami, in an interview for the documentary Friendly Persuasion: Iranian Cinema After the Revolution, calls revolutionary depression. I will discuss this phenomenon in the context of Iranian Populism at a later point.

The Third Phase represents the culmination of twenty years of Neorealism, refined and made Iranian. Naficy postulated that film would become Islamic, but instead it has become a reflection of the Iranian people. The Third Phase is most interesting because it coincides with the changing political climate of Iran. The people of Iran have been unable to ignore that the Islamic government in Iran has ultimately failed to provide a better life for its people after the Revolution. Ali Banuazizi notes that:

what Iran's experience with Islamic revolution and government demonstrates is that Islam can serve as a powerful ideology of resistance, that it has an immense capacity for mass mobilization for revolution and war, and that it can provide the juridical basis for the establishment and legitimization of a state. But as the hegemonic ideology of a modern bureaucratic state, Islam is no less susceptible to the corrupting influences of power and privilege than other ideologies. Indeed, as Mehdi Bazargan (the first prime minister of the Islamic Republic) warned in a recent interview, and many other devout Muslims have come to fear, the main threat in Iran today to Islam as a faith is the experience of people under the Islamic government15

The people of Iran are not only disillusioned by their economics, but also by the religious authority. If it was not Islam itself that failed the people, it was the religious authority that failed and effectively usurped control of the government from the people.
Morad Saghafi attributes the cleft in Iranian society to the contradictory elements of the revolution that can no longer exist together. He suggests that "there were two overlapping but profoundly separate phenomena in the Iranian Revolution: the popular versus the religious legitimacy of the new political order"[16] . These factions were united under the leadership of Khomeini, but after his death, the cohesiveness of Iranian government is gone. In its place is what Kaveh Ehsani accurately names the "specter of democracy." Recent events in Iran are a testament to the growing dissatisfaction of the people and an attempt of the conservative elements of the government to suppress democratic ideas after the election of the reformist Khatami. In the summer of 2000, "a conservative backlash had led to the imprisonment of Tehran's mayor, the closure of the daily paper Zan, the impeachment of the Minister of Culture and proposed legislation to seriously curtail press freedoms"[17] . As the opposition to the conservative Islamic government increases through election of politicians with democratic intentions, the conservative 'ulama is responding press restrictions and violent suppression. What this means for the future of Iran is unclear. The opposition to the Islamic government does not have access to the same system of organization and guidance that made the 1979 Revolution possible, as it is that system that maintains ultimate control of the society. If public unrest continues, however, the future of Iran holds numerous possibilities. If the democratic sectors of Iran manage to unite into one powerful entity, it is possible, perhaps through social revolution, for Iran to evolve into a democratic state. As of now, poor organization and undetermined leadership makes this impossible. Another possibility is a military coup, prompted by the inability of the mullahs and the President to control the frustrated population. In 2000, the threat of a coup loomed over the country when a letter written by "24 Revolutionary Guard generals threatened President Khatami for failing to maintain law and order"[18] . The opportunity for democracy is real and possible, however, and could happen if Khatami, as the foremost leader in reform, manages to unite democratic groups. Democracy has invaded Iran, despite the intentions of the 'ulama. There is no doubt that social change is in the future for Iran, and the current administration may be able to determine whether that change comes at the cost of another revolution. Within this uncertain future, Third Phase Iranian film offers a look into modern society. To understand this film tradition, it is necessary to create a framework for analysis in order to address common themes, and it is these common themes give the viewer insight into the value system of Iran today.

General Framework for Analyzing Themes in Third-Phase Films

Most film theory has been created for Western film and is incomplete when applied to the Middle East traditions. Constructing an ideological hierarchy for Iran promotes examination beyond the visible and explicit elements into those elements that are symptomatic and invisible. Film Theorist David Bordwell describes symptomatic meaning as the ultimate step in understanding a film as it promotes analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes behind the creation of art[19] . Two essays by Jean-Luis Comolli and Jean Narboni in Cahiers du Cinéma define film as "'the product of the ideology of the economic system that produces and sells it'"[20] . They were referring to

the all-encompassing force of Capitalism in the Western world as an ideological force greater, yet tied to, the political system of democracy. The economic system of Iran is not as central. In Iran, Islam, and to a growing degree Populism, are analogous in their cultural significance to Capitalism and democracy.

Although Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf insists that "art can free an artist and it cannot be contained in a strait jacket of ideology,"21 his comment is perhaps too idealistic and ignores the intrinsic role of a cultural ideology. Comolli and Narboni, in their articles for Cahiers du Cinéma, created a film typology that includes films that abide by the dominant ideology, films that attack the dominant ideology and many categories between these opposing themes. One such category, and perhaps the most important, includes "films that seem to be entirely within the…system of representation, and yet end up dismantling it, not because they shatter the ideology that presides over them, but because they lay bare the image that ideology gives of itself"22 . In either its acceptance or denial of the status quo, ideology cannot be ignored. In Robin Wood's "Ideology, Genre, Auteur, "23 she creates an American Capitalist Ideology24 , creating a framework for understanding cultural influences on film. By creating a similar framework for Iranian culture, it becomes evident how films deal with their culture's values. The following five subjects help to explain some of the conflicts and topics explored in Iranian film: Populism, Family, Nativism, Ta'arof (etiquette), and gender identity. Absent from this list is the influence of Islam for it permeates each topic, and indeed every aspect of life, as the foundation of post-revolutionary society and its morality in Iran.

Populism, briefly defined, gives political power to the common people, not to an elite few. Within Populism, and also Islam, is a protection of the mostz'afan, the disinherited. Populism found its place within Iran's revolutionary ideals, as "populist ideology denounces foreign economic and cultural domination"25 . The recent reform movement in Iran illustrates a growing conflict between Populism and the Islamic governmental system of Iran.

The role of the family is primary in Iranian society, as it is throughout much of the Islamic Middle East. The hierarchy of the family places men and elders at the top, and their permission is needed for the younger generation to marry, move, and a variety of other life choices. It is also the duty of the family, especially the men of the family, to protect the honor of its women, and it is the duty of every individual in the family to protect the family from disgrace.

Nativism, a return to traditional values, is heralded by the Iranian authorities as an integral part of Islamic culture26 . The Shi'i asceticism epitomized in Khomeini is valued for its denial of materialism, which is linked to Western culture. Rural life typifies traditional values, as it is often "unblemished" by the corruption of big cities. The countryside is often the childhood home of city dwellers27 , and is remembered as an idyllic paradise. In Mohsen Makhmalbaf's Gabbeh (Gabbeh 1996), a rare example of Iranian formalism bordering on surrealism is seen in the director's use of extremely vivid colors throughout his tale of a nomadic peasant family in the countryside.

Ta'arof (etiquette) is an example of the detail paid to formal, public behavior; it "provides a set of ritualized phrases to use on meeting and departing; a set of euphemisms to describe unpleasant events; and a set of honorifics to substitute for the second- and third-person pronouns"28 . In a society where a family's honor is of primary importance, it is no surprise that social behavior should be so formally outlined and

detailed. It would be a great insult in Iran not to at least be given tea by a hostess or host when calling.

In discussing the role of men and women, I will briefly touch on the ideal female and male roles and their shadows. The shadows represent characteristics in society that are deemed inferior. Characterized by purity, the ideal female is the perfect mother and wife. She is chaste, fertile and obedient, selflessly caring for her family. She wears the chador, the symbol of tradition, and she embraces her primary role as a child-bearer and voluntarily segregates herself from men who are not her relatives. She is intelligent and educated in order to be a more productive member of her family. The ideal Iranian man is typified by the Persian word Gheirat (pride and honor) 29 . The responsibilities of a man in Iranian culture include financial responsibility and preservation of family honor. A man is to be strong, dominant, and emotionless; he submits to Islam and his government only.

The "shadow" is a figure with characteristics that do not necessarily oppose the characteristics of the ideal male and female, but are generally not encouraged. The shadow of the ideal Iranian man and women is a modern figure. Modernization in Iran, as with other Middle Eastern countries, has been a difficult process. Modernization is frequently misinterpreted as Westernization, which has impeded economic and social progress. There are modern men and women in Iran; there is a growing number in the youth population that feels oppressed within their conservative country. Ehsani sites the example of a young man's frustration; he feels that, "'we have been denied a normal life. We cannot even have an ordinary conversation with the opposite sex. Getting a job or entering the university depends on your connections and your "Islamic" credentials'"30 . The young man's use of the word "normal" is particularly telling, as it suggests that perhaps the second generation of the revolution is not as attuned to the society the revolution created. If the revolution had truly been successful and its goals achieved, the youth population would not see their lives as an abnormality.

Of these five subjects, family and gender are the most prevalent in modern Iranian film. Children are frequently highlighted; therefore, family issues are often addressed. I will discuss family and gender dynamics within the context of four Third Phase films, and develop the themes presented in these films.

The Family and Children in Bacheha-Ye aseman and Rang-e khoda

Persian poetry frequently discussed love, although ambiguously, as "it is seldom clear whether the writer is talking about divine or earthly love, or whether the 'beloved' is male or female"31 . This ambiguity, while acceptable in poetry, is impossible to translate to the screen. Love is rarely dealt with, even in modern Iranian cinema; given the restrictions placed on the actors' and actresses' contact with each other it is impossible to create a realistic relationship on screen. A woman's perception of love is largely missing, and in that emotional and humanistic void, Iranian filmmakers found children. As Mir-Husseini notes, "In the absence of women, love and human emotions could be channeled through children"32 . In the First and Second post-revolutionary phase, director Abbas Kiarostami was the master of this genre—children as protagonists in adult films. His films Where Is My Friend's Home? (Khane-ye doust kodjas? 1987), Homework (Mashgh-e Shab 1989), and White Balloon (Badkonake sefid 1997) all star children in simple stories of duty and obligation to friends, teachers, and family.

In the third phase of post-revolutionary Iran, however, it is Majid Majidi whose films have amazed audiences with their simple stories and poignant child characters. The Children of Heaven (Bacheha-Ye aseman 1999) is the story of two young siblings that are forced to share the same pair of shoes. Ali loses his younger sister Zahra's shoes, and he takes on the responsibility for their loss instead of telling his parents. The semiotic square in figure 1.1 diagrams the conflicts in this story between the children and their parents, as well as the conflicts in other family relationships33 .

Every day Ali and Zahra rush to meet each other so that one can wear shoes to school. Eventually Ali enters a race because one of the prizes is brand-new shoes, and he plans to give them to his sister. Ali tries desperately to come in second at the race, and is truly disappointed by his first place win because he promised his sister the shoes. All his struggle is unnecessary, however, for the last scene of the film shows Ali's father with a pair of new shoes for Zahra.

The maturity of such a young boy is astounding, and his selflessness is touching. Although he loses his sister's shoes in the first place, at the time he was running errands for his family. His behavior and responsibilities are not characteristic of a child; the only childlike behavior he displays is emotion. His tearful reactions to the stress of his life, such as when he is late to school, would be completely unacceptable for a man and are barely acceptable for a male child.

Ali's devotion to his sister puts him in conflict with the authority figures at his school. He is frequently late for school and is even threatened with expulsion because of it. He displays the proper respect to his teachers, but is forced to place school second to the responsibilities of his family. The value of education is also emphasized in this film, as all the efforts of the children to share the pair of shoes are directly related to attending school.

Within the family, the main conflict is between the parents and children. Ali and Zahra are secretive about the lost shoes, as they would be in trouble if their father knew. The family structure is classically patriarchal. The mother is sick and unable to perform her normal household duties, so the young Zahra is responsible for most of the extra work. The most responsibility and difficulty in life rests on the male characters, however. The father has difficulty providing for his family, and it is he and Ali who take on extra work. It is also Ali who bears most of the burden for the lost shoes.

The Color of Paradise (Rang-e khoda 1999), although thematically similar to The Children of Heaven , is significantly more tragic (see figure 1.2). The protagonist, Mohammad, is a young blind boy who attends a school for the blind in Tehran. His father is attempting to marry a rich young girl and is eager to rid himself of his son to facilitate the process. As in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's The Silence (Sokhout 1998) and many other literary and cinematic traditions, being blind brings true wisdom. Mohammad sees beauty in all the right places; he repeatedly tells his old grandmother that she is beautiful. She is old, but her heart is beautiful, and this he can see.

Duty to family is an important theme in the film, but this is seen only in the inability of the father to perform his duties properly. His decline begins when he gives his son to a blind carpenter, so that he is relieved of the burden of feeding him and so Mohammad can learn a trade. Mohammad is devastated, as is his grandmother. She leaves her son's house, but he finds her and begs her to come back. He realizes his error too late, however. She becomes ill from walking in the rain, and soon dies. When the family of his fiancé

finds out about the death so close to the impending wedding, they cancel it. Mohammad's father loses both his mother and his only prospect for a more financially secure life. When he finally goes to retrieve his son, an accident causes Mohammad to fall into a turbulent river. There are a few moments where the father seems to consider letting his son die, and it is perhaps this final bad decision that seals Mohammad's fate. Although his father does jump in the river to save him, he is too late. Mohammad's father in Color of Paradise is not a bad character, but he does make bad decisions. It is obvious, however, that his life is the hardest of all the characters. In addition to the family farm, he works a variety of jobs constantly to provide for his family. His wife died years earlier, so he is responsible for the care of his children, with the help of his mother. There are several levels to this character; he is failure, but he is also extremely loyal to his duties. He is not the ideal male, and on several occasions he cries in sadness and frustration. Yet the harsh realities of his life show that his choices, although ultimately wrong, seemed like good decisions at the time. Although he gave his son away, he gave Mohammad to a blind carpenter where he could learn a trade and, ultimately, be a self-sufficient adult.

The primary structure in these films is the family and next to family obligations, education is central to the lives of these children. It is their education, rather than their age that keeps them from the full responsibilities of adulthood. Although both these films star children, they deal with serious family issues, most notably economic problems. Both families suffer from their fathers' inability to provide, but not through their own shortcomings. One family lives in the city, the other in the country, but the financial situation for both is less than ideal. It is the very basic need to clothe and feed the family that causes conflicts within and outside the family.

The Characterization of Women: Dayereh and Leila

Women, largely absent from Iranian films during the early years of the Islamic Republic, remain a controversial topic even in modern cinema. Jafar Panahi's The Circle (Dayereh 2000), which deals with issues of female subordination in Tehran, was banned by the Iranian government. The status of women in Iran is often sited as an example of Islamic repression, as Iran imposes harsh restrictions, both legal and social, on its female population. Although Iranian women veiled themselves as a symbol of protest against the Western influence during the Revolution, their involvement in the revolutionary struggle did not lead to the advancement of women's rights in Iran. In Haideh Moghissi's introduction to Populism and Feminism in Iran, she comments that:

> It is no secret that women have been the main losers of the 1979 Revolution in Iran. They have been increasingly deprived of personal and social freedoms under the clerical government that replaced the Shah[34]

Two different examples of the woman's perspective of life are presented in The Circle and Dariush Mehri's Leila (Leila 1998). The Circle is a disturbing and tragic look at the social and legal obstacles that face women, and Leila presents a woman dealing with her inability to bear children. Despite their differences, the films each show the hardships of women—socially, legally, and emotionally. The women in The Circle are tragic characters; their oppression, presented in a circular vignette form, is continuous and endless (see figure 2.1). The circular nature of the film is visually strongest in the

beginning and final scenes. The film opens with the birth of a baby girl, an event hardly cause for celebration for the mother's family, as she knows it will lead to her daughter's divorce. The institutional white door with its small window is the first shot of the film, and it is the same style of institutional door that closes the film. The final door, however, is the door to a jail cell filled with each female character portrayed in the film.

These women face only difficult choices and harsh consequences for their actions. The character Nayereh is a single mother who abandons her daughter in the hope that she will be adopted by a family that will give her a better life. After finally being able to leave her daughter, she accepts a ride from a man and gets arrested. Pari finds herself pregnant; it is no surprise that she cannot get an abortion without a male relative's permission, as she can't even rent a room in a hotel without a man. Elham has a good job and a secure family that knows nothing of her criminal past, but she lives in fear that her husband will discover who she really is. Her desire to keep her family unit segregates her from the other female characters, as she understandably, but selfishly refuses, to help her Pari get an abortion. The circle is not only the title of the film, it is also one of the main themes. The vignette structure is circular in that the story of each character is blended it the next. This structure allows for a detached style; the viewer never knows where one story ends and one begins. This technique blends different stories together in a way that makes the plights of the women seem connected—as women they all face different degrees of the same problems. They cannot be who they are, or they are punished for who they are. The circle is also symbolic of eternity, as it has no end. For these women, their struggle is life-long. Panahi also uses the circle as a visual element, working it into the frame in several scenes—the shape of the steps in front a theater, for example.

One of the simplist methods the director uses in The Circle to show oppression is through smoking cigarettes. Something so ordinary as smoking a cigarette is impossible for these women. One is chastised by a street vendor not to smoke in public; one is told not to smoke in a hospital after hearing bad news. At the end of the film, as one woman is riding in a bus for jail after being arrested for prostitution, she tries to light a cigarette and is told to put it out—no smoking is allowed on the bus. When one of the male prisoners on the bus asks to smoke, he is not restricted to the same rules. The woman says nothing to this obvious hypocrisy, lighting up a cigarette this time more tentatively. These women couldn't travel, couldn't rent rooms, couldn't get abortions without men, but the frustration over their not being able to smoke cigarettes was the most vivid example of blatant prejudice because of gender.

The Circle ended on a bleak note, but the acting style was introspective and did not allow penetration of the surface emotions of the characters. What they said and their facial expressions were the only clues to the emotions of the women. That approach is logical, as they are outsiders alienated from their society, but the film lacks the emotional value of Leila because of it. Leila's greatest strength is a lead character who narrates the film with her thoughts. Her pain, her suffering is not only seen in her face, but voiced by her (see figure 2.2).

Leila finds out early in her marriage that she is not able to have children, much to the dismay of her mother-in-law. Her husband, Reza, does not care. He is completely in love with Leila, and he is happy with the life they have together. Leila's mother-in-law, however, cannot get over the fact that her only son will not have children. She suggests from the start that Leila should "be nice" and let him take another wife. Reza resists, but

his mother pressures Leila for months, nagging her to let Reza have a child with another woman. Finally, Leila and Reza succumb to the pressure, but Leila finds that she cannot handle living in a house with her husband and his new wife. After the birth of their daughter, Reza's second wife leaves him and her child, because she knows that he is still in love with Leila. In the final scene, Leila realizes that, despite all her heartache, she has Reza's daughter to love and raise.

The film is unique in its portrayal as Leila as an extremely complex woman; her happiness is shattered when she finds out she can't have children, something that she doesn't particularly care about, except that it is something her family wants. At first, it does seem as if the she is weak by giving in to her mother-in-law, but eventually it is clear that she has no other choice. Her mother-in-law tells her every day that Reza will eventually leave her if she does not allow him to take another wife for children. She tells Leila that Reza loves children, and that he could not possibly be happy at a life without them. The only primary character in the film who sees Reza's taking another wife as a necessity is the mother-in-law . Reza's father and Reza himself, both primary male characters, don't see the necessity for children. It is the mother-in-law who wants to ensure her posterity through her only son. This adds a complex element to the film because a woman is oppressing another woman. Of course, this is only an explicit interpretation, as the mother-in-law is representative of a patriarchal system, and her being a woman does not ensure that she will help other women maintain equal rights. Her character is similar to that of Elham, the woman who would not help her old friend Pari in The Circle.

Conclusion

There are countless theories that discuss the meaning and purpose of art, but a central theme resonating through them all is the centrality of the culture that creates the art. Whether an artistic expression is a reflection or a product of its culture, each country's unique history permeates its art. The societies and the politics of history all combine to create a cultural tradition. In the 20th and 21st century, the relatively new medium of film has become the most accessible art form to populations around the world, and it has become the most vivid way to experience another country's culture. Through film, people can begin to understand cultures that, on the surface, seem far different from their own. Through Iranian film, one can learn to value the family and simple life, no matter how simple or scarred. When the blind boy Mohammad dies in Color of Paradise, the "moral" of the story, in the most simplistic of terms, is that even a blind child spreads joy. Even a man such as Mohammad's father who faces a life full of disappointment and labor sees the value of his blind son.

The future of Iran is still unclear, as the young generation grows more disenchanted in the face of an economic recession. The country has been in turmoil, external and internal, for twenty years, and is moving towards democracy, despite the efforts of conservative clergy. The country is in a constant state of political evolution, and that evolution can be seen in a film tradition that has changed slowly over the post-Revolution years into a expression so unique that it applauded around the world. It has escaped being an "Islamic" film tradition and remains instead on its third way—a creative and controlled expression of a creative and controlled population.

Notes

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