

**Film Appreciation**  
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**Lecture - 36**  
**Iranian Cinema**

Welcome friends. So, as we have been talking about in one of our earlier classes; we are talking, our today's focus is on Iranian cinema. We will be talking about cinema from Iran, one of the greatest cinemas, one of the best cinemas in contemporary times. It comes from cinema, it comes from Iran and it has won the major film awards all over; it keeps on winning the major film awards all over the world. So, Iranian cinema. Now, how many of us are aware of film makers from Iran? Here are some of the major players. We have Dariush Mehrjui, one of the earlier film makers from Iran.

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Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and also his very talented daughter Samira Makhmalbaf, who made a movie called, the apple, when she was just 18. The apple was about a group of young girls, who are kept in seclusion about their patriarchal families and they are allowed to come out, only when they are grown up. After that it is their attempt to get adjusted to the customs of the society. So, the apple by Samira Makhmalbaf, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's daughter. Majid Majide, Abbas, Kiarostami; of course, he needs no introduction to people who are into cinema and the very controversial Jafar Panahe. I

want the first Iranian film that was shown internationally, was Dariush Mehrjui's 1968 film, *The Cow*. The cow is about a farmer in a village from Iran who loses his beloved cow and then, he misses it so much that he starts assuming the identity of the animal and ultimately, goes insane.

Iranian cinema experienced considerable growth, after the Islamic revolution of 1978 and 1979. Still in 1983, a cinema foundation was established to encourage films with Islamic values. So, that is one of the key concepts that we will be talking about Iranian cinema, the rule of modesty, the role of modesty, role of women in Islamic cinema, the village films, the new, then the new Iranian film's view; those are the key concepts that we would be talking about. Now, as a result of adherence to or insistence on Islamic values on screen, earlier you know, there were some restrictions, but now after the revolution, there was major insistence on Islamic values, but still, by enlarged film makers were free to make the kinds of films they wanted to, and freed from the burden of the past especially, the Pahlavi reign.

New directors such as Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami emerged with different kind of cinema. So, rule of modesty; they have to observe; they have to adhere the rules of modesty. So, we have been talking about eye line matching shots in cinema; that is conventional cinematic language. In the language of cinema, chapter or lecture we have been talking about all these things. There is something called eye line matching; a man looks at a woman, a woman looks back and they smile and we know that is falling in love, but in Iranian cinema, for obvious reasons, these things cannot be shown on screen. So, director had to reinvent the conventional cinematic language and they do these things in a number of ways.

So, what, how they do it; that is another area of discussion, altogether. Right now, I am just trying to give you a quick overview to some of the exemplary Iranian films. Now, there is a film called, it is Jafar Panahi film, *The White Balloon*, where we find a little girl Razieh and her father is absent throughout the film. We see the characters observing the rules of modesty on screen, where men and women do not make any physical contact with each other. So, this is one example that you keep referring to the father, but he is absent throughout. So, the child talks may be to the mother or just to the father, but both parents will not be seen on screen exchanging looks as would be so common in other parts; in cinema from other parts of the world, because that is how it is in Iran.

The modesty laws also ensure that women must be veiled in all circumstances. Following the courts of modesty, Iranian film makers resorted to rethink cinematic language. They did this by using allegorical figures and resisting cinematic closures. Now, Iranian cinema blends documentary with fiction and encourages the audience to consider the relationship between what is fiction, and what is real. It is also marked by an abundant use of color. Color is extremely important to express emotions and also, sweeping landscapes and country life. So, those are the common features of Iranian cinema. Village cinema is also extremely important. Cinema has been relocated from cities to the country side.

A significant feature of an Iranian cinema is its setting; 90s onwards, the film makers have become preoccupied, using actual villages, the villages and village locations, rather than the urban settings. This helped avoid the rule of modesty interest, where peasant women can be shown, wearing large outer garments and covering their heads with scarves. Otherwise with city women, you cannot show these things. It would be very unrealistic; that is not the way women are in the cities of Iran, but they had to show it on screen in a certain, even have to be a representative on a screen in a certain way and they could be realistic with women, covering their heads and wearing large oversize outer garments, only in rural settings. Now, new locations also enable the film makers to experiment with new techniques, such as the use of mobile camera, natural light and natural sound.

The films are also increasingly, self reflexive in nature, concerning the role of cinema in producing the social world, like the French novel work films. Then new Iranian films generally, follow one character and make us watch the socialist spectrum through his point of view. There is also the feminist question; Iranian's feminism into regress the question of chastity and virtue in women, although it is done in a very settled way. Then new film makers constantly, attempt to present women in a more realistic light. Still, the representation of women remains problematic with woman has on one hand, and as domesticated housewives on the other, is difficult to, but it still with all their constraints, they do try to interrogate their patriotic values and raise certain important feminine's questions.

Majid Makhmalbaf's *Gabbah* is a movie that raises certain feminist questions. It is a magical and visually rich film, set in the country side. The protagonists are an old man and his wife. They have a richly colored carpet that they cherish. Suddenly, a beautiful

young woman called Gabbah, she appears before them. She has oven the carpet and is the spirit of the carpet. So, the film uses color, character, fantasy, magic, realism, reality, spirituality to cover all to unravel the mysteries of love, family and traditional rituals. Here, is a scene from Gabbah. Makhamal Mal's Baf Kandahar is a 2001 film. It combines actual documentary footage with a fictional narrative to show us the horrors of a land, ruled by fundamentalist, who use religion to suit their own world view. The protagonist here is Nafurs, a woman born in Afghanistan, but who flees to Canada and she becomes a successful reporter. She returns to her former homeland or homeland rather, to find her sister, who lost her legs to a landmine explosion. As Nafurs explores her way through the country, we get glimpses of a land ravaged by war, poverty and immense suffering. Many of us would be reminded of Bunuel's surrealism when in a scene in Kandahar, artificial legs are air dropped from a helicopter to a make shift medical center in Afghanistan.

So, the screen is covered with limbs dropping artificial legs being dropped from helicopter to the middle of a medical facility in Afghanistan and very surreal. Now, Abbas Kiarostami, he founded the film department of the institute for the intellectual development of children and young adults, where a number of the highest quality Iranian films are produced. He ran the department for 5 years and at the same time, directed his first film Bread and Alley in 1970, making educational film for children at a non commercial organization helped him, with his basic approach to cinema. He was awarded the Golden Palm Award at Cannes International Film Festival for a film, A Taste of Cherry in 97. Abbas Kiarostami made several award winning films early in his career.

It was after revolution that he earned a formidable reputation on the stage of world cinema, where his ground breaking debut feature was Report in 1977. His master piece close up was made in 1990, and later, The Poetic Life and Nothing More, that was a 1992 film, led to Kiarostami's discovery in the west; the west discovered. He won the highest regard award at Cannes. The fact that Iranian cinema is considered one of the finest in the world is largely, due to the efforts of Kiarostami. I just mentioned Jafar Panahi's The White Balloon, which is a 95 minute movie. So, the film describes in real time, the adventures; the world is real time adventure of a seven year old girl and her older brother in the streets of Tehran in 85 minutes. The little girl sets off to buy a gold fish for herself.

On her way to the market, she loses her banknote and most of the film is devoted to her

attempts to get her money back. The film is also notable for his well sketched characters, the child's perception of time passing and this (refer time: 12:28). Jafar Panche's recent film, Taxi, stars Panache himself, as a taxi driver. So, this is again a common practice among Iranian film makers. They make films starring themselves. It helps them cut costs and it also helps in what I was just talking about self reflexivity; the fact that you know, drawing attention to the cinematic process. So, it stars Panahe as a taxi driver, faring a serious of characters around Tehran.

Again, it has politically charged content, like his 2006 film, Offsite, which depicts a group of football mad school girls, trying to catch a world cup qualifier, despite women not being allowed into the stadium. Taxi features a story line about a woman jailed for trying to watch a men's volleyball match. The Legend of Sai, which is a 91 movie. It is a feminist film by Tahmineh Milani. It draws on the literature of (refer time: 13:34) problems. According to the legend, Ah is a handsome young man, who materializes to help those in need whenever he hears heartfelt sorry. Milani's protagonist is a woman novelist, suffering from writer's block, who with the help of Ah, experiences the lives of four women from different strata. From Well The Tehrani, who feels unfulfilled by her life to a poor servant, to a truckman wife, unable to live the house without her husband's permission to a rebellious student.

The film offers a fascinating portrayal of a large, of a range of Iranian women, and their specific problems. Here is sequence of scenes from The Legend of a Sigh. Abbas Kiarostami's 1990 film, Close Up is based on a real incident. At first, it appears as a documentary of events, leading to the trial of Hussain Subjiyan for attempted fraud. The charcaters in the film are played by Kiarostami himself, Makhmalbaf and real tabloid journalists; journalists, who are always on a look out for a scoop. At the core, the film is an investigation to explore the phenomenon of the truth and Kiarostami rightly, points out that in order to reveal truth, one has to resort to life. Here is a scene from Close Up.

I have been telling you about Kiarostami's A Taste of Cherry, which is a 1997 film; it was a much appreciated film. It is about a man called Badi; he is very elegant. He is driving around, in the deserted landscape, desert landscape in his car, a range rover. Now, his problem is something very peculiar. He wants to commit suicide and he is looking for someone to help him in his burial. So, the plan is he will kill himself. He has already prepared a grave for himself. The idea is that the man who helps him, has to cover his dead body. The hero, or hero will just kill himself, lie down in the grave, and the helpers

are needed, help is needed, so that he can come and cover the dead body, and perform the appropriate rites; that is all he needs and there will be some amount of money, waiting for him in the car. Now, Badi never behaves in an obviously, despairing or miserable manner as one would expect him to. There are no cries or tears or lamentations, and he never revealed the reason for his desire to commit suicide. There is no music; the film has a very rough picture and sound, and almost in the tradition of Italian Neorealism.

The acting again, is largely non professional, and the film has a documentary feel. The strong imagery in the these films can be attributed to the fact that Kiarostami, who works in photography, which he exhibits in international venues, such as Venice (refer time: 17:27). So, he is a film maker; he is a distinguished photographer as well; he holds his own exhibitions at international venues. So, therefore, the deep cells of imagery in Kiarostami is worth. Kiarostami also sight the influences of international film makers such as (refer time: 17:54), Roberto Rossellini, Robert Bresson, Andrey Tarkovsky.

He is one of the most highly regarded film from across the world, generally, shoots his films without a formal screen play. Again, so much like Italian Neorealish and French new way film makers. His films often assumed a semi documentary form very seems to state that fiction is not reality, and reality is not fiction. The Wind Will Carry Us is again, a major film by Kiarostami, is a 1990 film, 1999 film. The film borrows its title from a poem by the controversial Iranian artist Farooq Farrokhzad, who preached progressive political and feminist doctrine. In this film, the poem is recited by the unnamed male protagonist, who is an engineer and photographer as he attempts to bill telecommunication plant in some rural area of Iran.

Being a journalist and a photographer, he is also interested in covering a feature story, about an extremely old woman, waiting for her to die so that, he can capture the mourning rituals among the villagers. It so happens that the woman doesn't die and the hero doesn't get his story. There is also scene that he attempts to seduce a young village girl. He is preoccupied with notions of tranziens and temporality and the film is the studying contrast, reflects the villagers' unsettlement by modernity. The village again, you know, there is a dichotomy within the village and the city as embodied in the engineer; the ancient and the modern curiosity and the concealment of it. The hero is a specialist in modern communication.

He is an engineer after all; however, his way of communication is impossible here in the

village. Again, our attention is being drawn to the fact that one has to walk an extra mile in order to communicate with people who have been left behind by the forces of modernity. So, I have been talking about *Taste of Cherry* by Kiarostami. Here is a scene from *Taste of Cherry*. So, again, we have been talking about *Where the Wind Will Take Us*, *The Taste of Cherry*. So, the car motive appears again in *Ten*, which is a 2002 road movie again, by Kiarostami that follows ten conversations that take place in a car as the car is driven through the streets of Tehran. *Where is the Friend's House* is the title of a 1987 film by Abbas Kiarostami. It is again a child story. This is important to note that many of recent Iranian films or post revolution Iranian films have children as protagonists; probably, because such subjects are less likely to involve social restrictions, (refer time: 21:26) stories about adult men and women.

So, it is a gently humorous film about children's royalty towards each other in the small village of Koker Ahmad, Ahamedpur and Mohamad Razaf; these are our young heroes. They are sitting in the local school room, which is a boys only school and they are listening to the stern admonitions of their teacher, who is very strict. Razaf has not been doing his homework, because of family problems and he comes to the class without doing his school work, without his school book. He is warned that one more such violation and he will be expelled. When the school bell rings and the boys run outside. Mohamad Razaf drops his workbook and in the commotion that follows, Ahmed mistakenly goes home with his, as well as his friend's workbook.

Kiarostami then follows Ahmed's journey in finding Razaf's home. Therefore, the title *Where is the Friend's Home*. Majed Majade is another important film maker. His debut as a director and screen writer, is marked by a film called *Baduk* in 1992, that was presented at Cane's festival and it won several awards nationwide. Since then, he has written and directed several films that have won international recognition. His most notable film is *Children of Heaven*, a 1997 film that won the best picture at Montreal International Film Award and it was also, nominated for best foreign film at the Oscar academy awards. *The Children of Heaven* is concerned with a nine year old boy, Ali and his seven year old sister Zahra, who live with their parents in a meager one room flat in south Tehran. Ali has been sent to have his sister's shoes repair, but on the way home, the repaired shoes are mistakenly taken away by a city rat picker, while Ali is shopping for some groceries. Now, this establishes the problem that drives the rest of the action. Ali is horrified by having lost the shoes, knowing that his family cannot afford to replace them,

and that he will be severely punished for his error. He and his sister take the only option that appears, because they attend school at different times; they must share Ali's snicker without telling the parents.

The film can be seen in the tradition of the neorealist cinema of Vittorio's (refer time: 24:08) and also Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*. Here is a scene from the *Children of Heaven*. So, despite the restrictions imposed by the fundamentalist Razim, most Iranian cinema has managed to find a distinct voice in world cinema, and is making profound comments on the human condition. From Iranian cinema, I would also like to give you a quick overview of the cinema from the Middle East. This part of the world has also been making several important films. In recent time, the tensions between Israel and Palestine has given birth to some of the best films to come from that region.

Elia Suleman's *Divine Intervention* in 2002, reflects at the situation at an Israeli Palestinian check point and is dealt with black humor. There is another film called *Syrian Bride*, which is also set in no man's land, between check points of Israel and Syria. There is a film maker, Amos Gethai, who made *Free Zone* in which, three women; an American, an Israeli and a Palestinian; they become traveling companions in Jordan. *Thirst* is another great movie by Thaufic Abuwell. It is about an (refer time: 25:39) family, living in an abandoned village in a dusty corner of Israel. So, great cinema from different parts of the world, and this was in continuation with our discussion of traditions in world cinema. So, please take a quick look at reading list; not too much.

Thank you very much.