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MAKING MOVIES UNDER SIEGE: JAFAR PANAHI'S MOVIES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Art and regimes share a very interesting history. Art had flourished under the patronage of rulers from time immemorial but after the dawn of nineteenth century art has become largely anti-establishment. This is more so true in a globalized world besieged with religious intolerance, rampant discrimination, power struggles, wars, poverty and injustice. Art, whether its canvas painting, plays, poems, novels or cinema have taken up the onus of exposing the lacunas of the society they inhabit. Increasingly artists are forced to work in a hostile environment. Repeatedly their freedom of expression is curtailed. Many artists have taken refuge in places congenial for their art to flourish. Many have chosen to work in exile. Bertolt Brecht, Salman Rushdie. Tasleema Nasreen, M.F. Hussain are a few artists who can be mentioned in this category.

So, it has been a widely accepted belief that art thrives where there is freedom of expression. Censorship, widespread surveillance is thought to asphyxiate art. But Iranian cinema stands as an aberration debunking the above-mentioned myth. It has adapted, evolved and has come up with new strategies. Instead of being in the state of inertia or resorting to making of insipid movies, Iranian cinema has unruffled its feathers of innovation to soar to new heights on the stage of world cinema. This article looks at how challenging it is to make a cinema and how a cinema differs from a mainstream movie. Finally, it examines how few directors especially Jafar Panahi in Iran have successfully circumvented rigid censorship rules imposed by the regime to carve a niche for themselves on the stage of world cinema.



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Making a Cinema is by far the most challenging of all the work of arts. Satyajit Ray once said:

Film Making is by far the most physically demanding of all activities that are dignified by the epithet 'creative'. The whole process takes place in three broad stages: writing, filming and editing. All three creative; but while in the first and the third one uses mainly one's head, the second calls for the use of all one's faculties- cerebral, physical and emotional- going full steam at all times. (Ray 3)

It is a humungous task to shape the contours of human life on the celluloid as it is no less than a spectacle of a conscientious artist striving to express himself in aesthetic terms. Even a person armed with a formidable array of theoretical knowledge finds film making a terribly hard job. Even the simplest of scenes are extremely tough to be captured in a camera. Ray recounting his first day of the shooting of Pather Panchali says:

On the very first day of the shooting of Pather Panchali, I remember I had a scene where the boy Apu went looking for his sister into a field of tall grass. In the very first shot all that the boy had to do was to walk a few steps, stop, look this way and that, and then walk again. Little did I know then that it was twice as hard to achieve impeccability in a shot like that than in a shot of say, a charging cavalry. (Ray 51)

So complex is the process of filmmaking that film makers have written so little about film making. Making a cinema is an intricate and elusive triangular relationship between the maker, the machines and the human material that is deployed. To describe even a single day's work in all its details of conception, collaboration and execution would call for abilities beyond most film makers.

Mainstream movies generally captivate the masses by de-sensitizing them with the sedatives of enchantresses, unrealistic stunts, songs shot in exotic locales etc. They pamper and please the senses of the audiences. On the contrary cinema portrays a side of society the mainstream film-makers have shied away from. Cinemas give voice to the voiceless; talks of the angst and the aspirations of the minorities, women, lower-caste people, the deprived, the marginalized and the exploited. Cinemas never adopt the escapist proposition and are not geared to work as distilleries of pleasure, instant gratification True cinema garners long lasting responses from the audience. Cinema as "art" can cause reflection for days, weeks, even years after initial viewing. It can be said to have life altering precepts. It can cause so much philosophical introspection that it can affect day to day behavior, of how one views the world around us, of how we interact with each other. It takes the audience to the realm of the "unknown." Cinema reflects personal expression and the choice is left to the audience to identify with the film and find any commonality. Cinema contains a higher degree of realism as there is more spontaneity and less tampering and over simplification to "dumb down" and capture the masses.

The cinema does not stretch our "willing suspension of disbelief" never being able to return to the "realistic" as it irrevocably happens in mainstream cinema. As it is famous in French cinema- "Cinema verite" - Truth cinema- is devoid of bombastic, over the top picturization of events but it is



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often metaphoric, earthy and realistic, Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami talking about his cinema *A Taste of Cherry* rightly said

I prefer films that don't hold You hostage. You can see a film that almost makes you fall asleep and it can affect you days after... I want to be a filmmaker that causes people to think about my cinema after they have seen it. (Saeed-Vafa, 1)

Orson Welles in the same vein had once commented:

I want to give the audience a hint of a scene. No more than that. Give them too much and they won't contribute anything themselves. Give them just a suggestion and you get them working with you. That's what gives the theatre meaning; when it becomes a social act. (Saeed-Vafa, 10)

Cinemas are devoid of trappings of fast thrill but are thought provoking with vibrant observations which make the people watching it think, contemplate and ultimately question. Cinema through changing the mindset of the people can usher in the transformation of the society. It can question the prejudices, discriminations, follies of society and government policies thus, always is in the line of fire. It is always viewed with an eye of suspicion.

Gandhi is reported to have said that "*Cinema is a sinful technology. I have never been to a cinema... but even to an outsider, the evil that cinema has done and it is doing is patent. The good, if it has done at all, remains to be proved.*" (Sankar) The biggest irony is that many in the world understood Mahatma better after watching the cinema by Richard Attenborough and Gandhi is etched in everyone's memory because of Ben Kingsley. True, Gandhi's apprehensions are right to some extent when we see the hyper-reality that rules the screen today which estranges even as it stimulates. The viewer has been replaced by voyeur.

But many cinemas have ignited the minds of the people. So, it has been hated by successive governments in every country and especially by autocratic regimes. Iran is one such country. It is nothing short of surprise how Iran has produced great film-makers of the likes of Majid Majidi, Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi etc. It is even more interesting to note how these film makers have negotiated with the censorship issue and been able to create indelible niche for themselves in the international arena without compromising on the humanitarian agenda of the cinema.

Especially after the Iranian Revolution, also known as the Islamic Revolution, Iran was transformed from an absolute monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, one of the leaders of the revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic. Iran's rapidly modernizing, capitalist economy was replaced by populist and Islamic economic and cultural policies. Much industry was nationalized, laws and schools Islamized, and Western influences banned. After the Iranian Revolution the status of women changed substantially. Some of the rights that women had gained under Shah, were systematically removed, through legislation, such as the forced wearing of the Hijab, particularly the chador. A new family law was annulled, and veiling



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became obligatory. In Islamic Republic of Iran female government workers were forced to observe Islamic dress code; women were barred from becoming judges; beaches and sports were sex-segregated. Islamic revolution was ideologically committed to inequality for women in inheritance and other areas of the civil code; and especially committed to segregation of the sexes (Gorgin)

By 1982 very strict rules of censorship had been introduced by Khomeini, who was now Iran's spiritual leader, that applied in particular to all kinds of media and aimed to "ensure that they conform to the requirements of a new, purified culture" (Mottahedeh). Anything that he deemed powerful enough to reach even a small audience, (for example print media, television, music, the internet and of course film) was forced to censor its content and also undergo many phases of censorship before it could be approved for public consumption. After looking at the script proposed for a film and making sure that it adhered to their laws, that it did not show any part of a woman's body other than her hands and face (to uphold the newly enforced 'women's modesty laws'), that there were no same sex exchanges, no critique of the family unit or state, no coarse language or foreign words, no tight clothes on the women, no foreign music and even making sure that there were no negative or evil characters with beards (!) the censorship board could then request significant changes or simply ban the film altogether.

How do the filmmakers overcome imposing such censorship, constant surveillance and still be successful in presenting human life and truth? It is remarkable that filmmakers continued with their art at all under these severe circumstances. Interestingly post 1979 Iranian films have been highly regarded at festivals around the world for the incredibly creative ways in which they began to express their opinions with subtle imagery and metaphor to slip by the censorship boards and still make the impact that they desired to make, they found a way of circumnavigating censorship through visual metaphor.

Although it may be hard for Western or Indian audiences and filmmakers to understand how these writers and directors can stand to work in such conditions many of Iran's finest in the field actually find that censorship forces them to be more innovative and creative in their work, it drives them to find new and more artistic and subtle ways of expressing themselves which many find challenging and rewarding.

Many filmmakers often have denounced censorship and its effect on their films as well like female Iranian filmmaker Mania Akbari, who started her film career as a director of photography and later went on to predominantly direct documentary films. She believes that the fear an artist lives in when trying to adhere to these laws and slip hidden meanings in to their films undetected "can be repressive and it can ruin the whole atmosphere" and states that ideas generated in this hostile environment cannot in her opinion be 'genuine art' (Cousins). On the other hand, Samira Makhmalbaf, daughter of one of the darlings of Iranian cinema art Mohsen Makhmalbaf, would disagree with Akbari's opinions on censorship. Makhmalbaf has been making films since she was seventeen years old, becoming the youngest director in the world participating in the official



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selection of the 1998 Cannes Film Festival with her first film 'The Apple' and she believes that the censorship laws have actually forced her to be a more creative filmmaker, claiming that

sometimes limitations can make you think harder and seize any opportunity that comes your way to express yourself" (Cousins). A vivid demonstration of this philosophy can be seen in "The Apple", based on a true story about two Iranian girls who were locked away and deprived of social contact by their father for eleven years. There were no actors in this film, the roles were played by the real people who were involved in the case and Makhmalbaf took a very objective stance on the subject, not passing judgment on the situation depicted or making the film seem biased in any way. She states that it is far more interesting to have sympathy for people and try to listen and understand their situations through the medium of film than to be judgmental (Cousins). The film seems to subtly comment on how much freedom the average woman in Iran actually has, rather than accentuating the ways in which she is trapped, another philosophy of Makhmalbaf's who believes that Western women are in many ways less emancipated than Iranian women, forced to wear short skirts and low-cut tops rather than a headscarf.

Another interesting case to look at when exploring the pros and cons of censorship and its effects on Iranian cinema is that of film director Jafar Panahi. Panahi who was in news as he was arrested because he "tried to make a documentary about the unrest that followed the disputed 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadijenad." (actual reason being his outspoken movies "The Circle" and "Off-side" which highlighted the plight of women in Iran) Panahi is a fiercely independent movie maker who believes in just showing the problems rather than saying what is wrong and what is right. He makes apolitical movies set in the geographical area of Iran, but his movies have been successful in transcending the boundaries and have had worldwide impact and appeal.

How has Panahi been able to make such powerful Cinema under strict censorship? Firstly, the secret lies in Panahi's style which is often described as an Iranian form of neo-realism, Panahi who was influenced by the Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves (1948), has a tendency to make "film time" the same as "real time," where the length of the film is almost the same as the length of time taken by the story. As a neo-realist film-maker, Panahi creates a realistic vision by grounding their representation in local space, time and social issues. He mastered this in his early children movies "The White Balloon" "The Mirror" and "Off-side," "The Circle" being the only exception. His films are connected by a "tension between documentary immediacy and a set of strictly defined formal parameters" in addition to "overtly expressed anger at the restrictions that Iranian society imposes"(Wilson) This technique allows Panahi to work with shoe string budget and he does not have to bother about extravagant sets and seek government permission. Documentary style of cinema allows the director to constantly modify and alter the script radically different from the script submitted to the regime.

Secondly, Panahi depicts human characters as 'non-specific persons' more like figures who nevertheless remain full-blooded characters, holding on to the viewer's attention and gripping the



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senses. Panahi evokes humanitarianism in an unsentimental, realistic fashion, without necessarily overriding political and social messages. In essence, this has come to define the particular aesthetic of Iranian cinema. So powerful is this sensibility that we seem to have no other mode of looking at Iranian cinema other than to equate it with a universal concept of humanitarianism.

Thirdly, Panahi's cinema works through extensive use of allegories. Take for example his 2006

film 'Offside' (Inspired by an incident when his own daughter was refused entry to a football stadium) which narrates the series of events that happens when a group of six girls try to sneak into that sacred space - the stadium where the Iran-Bahrain World Cup qualifying match is taking place, is broadly considered to be one of the bravest and most groundbreaking films to come out of post-revolution Iran. The Women sneaking into the stadium defying the social laws can be seen as an allegory to the director's effort to blatantly defy the censorship laws. One could easily argue that this incredibly moving and intelligent film would not have been as powerful if not for the restrictions imposed on filmmakers by censorship laws, and the innovative ways in which they must circumnavigate these restrictions. In addition to it, the entire vocabulary of film Offside has been altered in Iran due to censorship making it almost impossible to remove an Iranian film from the context of artistic censorship. A film like this could not be made anywhere but Iran, its subtlety and complex exploration of humanity from many angles is a breath of fresh air to the Western viewer, and the artistic ingenuity and metaphorical imagery that has become synonymous with Iranian film, due almost completely to the challenges created by censorship that artists were forced to overcome, is clearly demonstrated in 'Offside',

One more example of Panahi's obsession to work through allegories can be seen in his cinema The Circle. The story of The Circle, portrays four women of different ages but tries to imply that the four women were actually the same, one woman at different stages of her life. The first story is of a woman who wants to get married; the second is of one who is married with children; the third is of a married woman, a mother, who wants to leave her child and go on the road; the fourth is of a woman, already on the road, who is about to become a prostitute. The story can be read as an allegory to a closed society like in Iran where there is no way to escape for women from these fixed role plays. So, in a very short period of time the movie covers a long period of time in one woman's life, through depicting it in different stages of four women's lives. So, each player hands over to the next player, as it were. The movie employs different camera technique to depict different women. The film is almost silent; there is less light and more darkness.

Fourthly, Panahi's use of visual metaphors and intended irony is masterful. In Offside he nurtures the viewer's empathy for women, whose only wish was to be able to watch a football match in the stadium, by placing us in their position through his use of visual metaphors. The fact that we are never shown footage of the match is in itself a visual metaphor, and forces us to long for that right in the same way that the women do. A beautiful visual statement is made when one of the women asks a guard why they are not allowed to watch the match in the stadium and he replies that it is wrong for



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men and women to sit together, but the lines are spoken whilst these two people sit side by side with the bars of a barrier separating them. A beautiful visual metaphor depicting just how ridiculous the 'women's modesty' rules can be.

Fifthly, the form and content of Panahi's cinema itself is unique. He avoids sentimentalism and melodrama. Without using the classic cinema clichés, he achieves the required effect. In the movie *The Circle*, utilizing a completely modern form, Panahi divulges the unspoken pain and chagrin of an Iranian woman who, of course, does not epitomize all women in the country. *The Circle* offers a picture of several low-class Iranian women who face aberration caused by (social) incompatibilities. Panahi does not present any slogans in the film. Nor does he play with the viewing audience's feelings or act as the all-knowing (conscience) and the judge. Panahi does not use his personal views to idealize the incompatible realities either. Nor does he merge with the characters and rob the addressees of their power to judge. He merely offers a visual and pictorial report.

Finally, Panahi's innovations of making a cinema like casting of non-professional actors, guerilla style camera technique and his non- adherence to the original script submitted to the censor board can only be an outcome of highly prohibitory censorship.

The issue of censorship in Iran is a complex and multi-layered one. Making movies under siege has been extremely restrictive to the artist and his/her ideas, but on the other hand it has been strangely motivational to creative filmmakers and forces them to perfect the artistry of filmmaking in order to make their statement. These directors have created a cinematic vocabulary to circumnavigate the censorship laws that has given birth to some of the most breathtakingly thought provoking and visually stunning films of the past thirty years, so perhaps the saying is true that necessity is the mother of invention, if you restrict an artist they will evolve to grow around these restrictions and draw incredible defiant energy from their oppression. Ironically, post-Revolution Iranian cinema portrays the pure humanity and multiplicity of its culture (and in particular its women) better than any other national cinema. So, in some strange way, the government restrictions on artists in Iran have created an environment in which the very ideas that censorship attempts to suppress can subtly bloom. Panahi with his innovative neo-realistic cinema full of non-professional actors, shot in real time with shoe string budget notorious for not adhering to the script submitted to the censor board, metaphorically and allegorically suggestive, not being judgmental, violence which is intentionally kept amorphous, brimming with irony yet reflecting the sour truth and human life stands testimony to this.

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