CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CINEMA: THE RELEVANCE OF POST ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IRANIAN CINEMATIC VALUES IN THE CONTEXT OF KASHMIR

Dr Shahid Rasool
Benish Ali Bhat

ABSTRACT

Cinema is a language that transcends all borders. Films become a form of communication of narrating stories from societies- not just where society is presently and what it's doing now- but where society has been. And these stories travel to other societies where they may or may not find relevance. The present paper attempts to recognise such a relevance of Post Islamic Revolution Iranian cinema to Kashmir. Kashmir's cultural history traces its roots in the Central Asia. It finds close proximity and resemblence with Iran. The Iranian films of the post revolution era are culturally rich and religion finds a large place in it. The women folk are shown fully covered and there is an attempt to maintain and depict largely accepted moral values in the cinematic language. The locales and depiction of close knit societies and construct of families bear a striking resemblance to Kashmiri society. The present paper attempts to understand adaptation of Iranian Cinema to cater to the cultural requirments of Kashmiri society in changed circumstances. The paper also tries to find if it can act as a model for Kashmiri film makers.

Key Words: Kashmir, Iranian Cinema, Films, Culture, Cinema studies

Introduction:

Kashmir has borrowed a lot from Persia since ages. Iran as a culture has always influenced Kashmir and historic resources in Kashmir, in almost all the fields, are replete with examples from Iran. The historic link of Kashmir and Iran and the wider Persian speaking world has been immortalized by poet philosopher Iqbal who referred to it as '*Iran-i-Sagheer'*, the smaller or lesser Iran.

The culture of Iranbears a heavy imprint on the Kashmir culture as well as an appreciation of arts, "moulded and refined" in the land of Iran. The enduring effect of Iran on Kashmir began with the establishment of the Sultanate rule in the 14th century. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (c. 1420–1470 CE) invited artists and craftsmen from Central Asia and Persia to train local artists in Kashmir. (Asimov & Bosworth, 1998)

Over time the crafts were adopted and modified but the imprints of Persia never left Kashmir. The current study tries to understand the value of those imprints and the significance of yet another art form, i.e. filmmaking from Iran, for Kashmir.

It is commonly said that media reflects the society and culture; the real life stories are an inspiration for films. Fiction however much away from the reality has its base in the human mind itself. Films travel only that distance that is allowed by the human brain and hence films are the revelations of the societal and cultural meanings.

*   Professor, Department of EMMRC, University of Kashmir.

*   Production Assistant EMMRC, University of Kashmir.

A brief genesis of the Iranian Cinema explains that the Islamic revolution of 1979 changed a lot for them. The cinema was firmly clutched by the Islamic revolutionaries and the artistic freedom was curbed to a great extend. The filmmakers, therefore, had to devise new tactics to express themselves. They minimalized casting of women in films and worked on themes that required mostly children for important roles. Stories were written in accordance with normally accepted Islamic principles and realism was incorporated. The changed political landscape resulted in creation of a 'new wave cinema' and Irannian film makers devised their own style to express their thoughts and to stay in business.

For many years after its beginning the Iranian Cinema could hardly be taken seriously, and rarely even took itself seriously. It is relatively recently- during the 1990's- when it began to be approached more thoughtfully by both film makers and critics.

In the years 1978-82 the Islamist revolutionaries attempted to customize the Persian Cinema in accordance with Islamic laws and jurisprudence. This was given a term "Islamizing" (Duhnkrack, 2009) the cinema. The new regime, however, quickly understood the power of cinema as propaganda. In 1982 detailed regulations on Islamizing the cinema were passed and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MICG) was entrusted with their implementation (Cinema of Iran, n.d.). The restrictions were formidable. Forbidden were films that question, alter or negate:

- Monotheism and submission to God and his laws
- The role of Revelation (vahy) in creation and in law
- The continuity of religious leadership (emamat)

Through its various organizations, the regime promoted the creation of a distinctively Islamic cinema in the early 1980s. In those years no quality film was produced, and women and love were almost totally absent from the screen, though women were present behind the camera, even working as directors (Dabashi, Theology of Discontent, 1993). In the absence of women, love and human emotions could be channelled through children, so stories based on children dominated the screen. This is where the context of Kashmiri society comes into play where morals, depiction of women and children and the whole plots as such can take away a lot from the post revolution films.

Talking of cultural significances the Iranian style of cinema is itself derivative of earlier Italian films. The term *Iranian Neo-Realism* is often used to describe the new films coming out of Iran, and it is a term that alludes to the many thematic and stylistic similarities between present day Iranian film, and the *Italian Neo-Realism*cinema that formed because of the post-war struggle for identity (Gregory, 2008).

Although their stylistic range is wide, NIC (New Iranian Cinema) films are often made with non-professional actors, filmed on location rather than in studios, use direct sound, contain a number of long takes and frequently end with a final freeze-frame shot. They tend to have simple narratives, commonly open-ended, with seemingly little dramatization or sensationalisation, often set in rural areas of Iran and focusing on lower class characters. This approach has drawn many comparisons between New Iranian Cinema and the Italian neo-realist films, or the 'poetic realist' films of Satyajit Ray. (De Vaulx, 2012)

Simple and culturally rich portrayals of characters, with themes that have the power of conquering minds, is what Persian cinema specializes in. In her article 'Real Fictions', Rose Issa (2004) argues that Iranian films have a distinctively Iranian cinematic language, "that champions the poetry in everyday life and the ordinary person by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, feature film with documentary." The social issues that are relevant locally are showcased in the films. The new form of film-

making can be related to by Kashmiri film makers living in almost similar cultural and religious surroundings. The film 'Hurud' by a Kashmiri filmmaker, Amir Bashir, can serve as a great example. The director has copied the Neo-realistic style of the Iranian Cinema and the film was widely accepted and acclaimed in Kashmir.

The way this cinema showcases the society and the local problems can find relevance here and young filmmakers of Kashmir can look at it for inspiration. Though at first inaccessible, Internet has now made this cinema available around the world and its popularity is growing.

Hypothesis

The proposed study will be based by the researcher on the following Hypothesis:

The Cinematic values of the contemporary Iranian cinema can find relevance in Kashmiri society, because of cultural and religious proximity

Methodology

For the current study, methodology employed is Focus Group Discussion. In the social sciences, focus groups allow the moderator and the observer to study people in a 'more natural conversation' pattern than what typically occurs in a one-to-one interview. In combination with participant observation, they can be used for learning about groups and their patterns of interaction. Focus groups have a fairly low cost as compared to surveys and the results are obtained quickly. The sample size can also be increased by talking to several people at once.(Marshall & Rossman, 1999)

To understand the impact of cinematic values on viewers better and to find their relevance, if any in Kashmir, the researchers used the focus group discussion technique. Iranian films from post Islamic revolution of 1979 including '*Songs of Sparrows', 'Children of Heaven', 'Blackboards', 'Taste of cherry'* and *'Turtles Can Fly'* were shown to a select group of people followed by a discussion with them, involving a well trained moderator.The responses were carefully noted and anlaysed to understand the relevance of these films to Kashmir from the perspective of the respondents.

Sample and Technique

For focus group discussion the researchers chose students, purposively, pursuing Graduate and Post graduate courses. Each group was shown one Iranian filmand each screening was followed by a two hour interaction with them about the film.

Once the groups were selected, the researchers prepared a Focus Group Guide to ensure the discussions yield maximum data. A moderator was chosen to facilitate the discussion and the researchers participated as a silent observer. The discussions were recorded on an audio device with permission from the participants and the discussions were then evaluated according to certain parameters.

For each Focus Group Discussion six students were selected. The researchers chose students from varying backgrounds like sciences, and business studies to incorporate a layman perspective and two discussions were held with media students to get a clearer picture on how they react to Iranian Cinematic values and their relevance to Kashmir. The limited scope of the study allowed only five Focus Group discussions. The participants were selected through contacts. One contact was established in each

department or College and requested to nominate students willing to participate. The researcher then called the students and selected 6 students for the each of the five Focus Group discussions.

The Focus Groups were held in Baramulla Boys Degree College, Women's College M. A. Road, Amar Singh College, Business School, University of Kashmir and MERC, University of Kashmir.

Analysis

The Group Discussion recordings were heard and important aspects were noted down and then analysed according to the following parameters or variables: **Knowledge about Iranian Cinema, Cultural proximity of Iran to Kashmir, Portrayal of Religion, Family and Society, Appeal of a Realistic Cinema** and **Iranian Cinema as a model for Kashmir.**

To ascertain the relevance of the Iranian cinematic values in Kashmir Focus Group Discussions were analysed objectively. The overall analysis revealed that the youth in Kashmir don't have much know how about the Cinema of Iran but once shown the films they were attracted to simplistic narratives and depiction of human emotions. The consolidated responses to the above identified variables/parameters are summarised as under:

Knowledge about Iranian Cinema

Through most of the group discussions, except the ones held with the media students, the Cinema of Iran needed a formal introduction. The students had no idea that such a cinema existed. They were stuck on Bollywood and Hollywood for their share of entertaining movies. To the realistic style of film making they were being introduced for the first time.

Many of them expressed surprise on watching the film and said that they had no idea that films of such quality were being made around the world and that they had not yet been able to explore it. The media students had the knowledge of the existence of Iranian cinema and some of them had seen some Iranian films and were much interested in the genre.

Cultural Proximity of Iran to Kashmir

A major part of the discussions revealed that the students were most stuck by the society that is depicted in the Iranian films. They found several connections between Iran and Kashmir and went on excitingly talking about how this all also happens in Kashmir. The best example similarity emerged from the group that was shown the film 'The Songs of Sparrows'. The group members spent 20 minutes discussing how this film feels so like Kashmir. The scene where Karim and his wife share food (a delicacy omelette of an ostrich egg is prepared) by sending it to all the neighbours and relatives, was mostly appreciated as it identified with their neighbourhood. Comparison was drawn how good food is usually shared, in Kashmir, with the neighbours.

In every group discussion the researcher could observe that group members got particularly thrilled on the resemblance of the culture between Iran and Kashmir.

The ambience and the landscape shown in the films was found, by many, to resemble Kashmir, especially the depictions of village life. The part of Tehran shown in the film "Children of Heaven" was equated to 'downtown' of the Srinagar city.

Portrayal of Religion, Family and society

Kashmir is a predominantly Muslim state and the religious proximity of Iran to Kashmir was also highlighted in all the groups. Although Iran has a *Shi'a* majority country but the basic doctrines of the religion are shared. The group to which the film "Children of Heaven" was screened, observed that the family system in Iran, depicted in the film, was so much like the family system in Kashmir. The parents have a decisive control over the children in Kashmir as is shown in the film as well. The students could relate to it.

The characters would often offer *Nimaaz* or Islamic Prayer which is not seen in many cine depictions by Kashmiris. Kashmir has been remote as far as producing films is considered and therefore the students felt that watching an Iranian film is like seeing the Kashmiri society in a mirror.

The moral lessons in the films were also discussed in three of the groups. They appreciated the way Iranian Cinema is working for the benefit of the larger society by carrying helpful meanings. The depiction of women was especially appreciated because of their presence on screen in purdah. Also the representation of children was much appreciated. The films were found to be practical and participants were moved by the fact that children had to face real problems.

Some members were happy that there was no obscenity or vulgarity depicted in the films and they could watch such films together with their families.

Appeal of a Realistic Cinema

An interesting outcome of the group discussions was that the students loved the films they watched. The Iranian films lack modern day glamour and are based on day to day events as already discussed, but these films had an appeal for all the groups. The members were surprised that they could appreciate such a cinema and its existence. To many there couldn't be better films than these.

The appeal was also evident as the members began to ask for soft copies of the films so that they could again watch these and more films of this kind with their family and friends.

Iranian Cinema as a Model for Kashmir

The moderator led every discussion finally to the most important question, "Does the Iranian Cinema find any relevance in Kashmir?

After appreciating the cultural proximity and the way life is depicted in the films, the group member believed that if Kashmir ever has a cinema it should be based on this model. It was discussed that Kashmir has many untold stories that need a vent and there can be no better way to carry forth the messages than through films.

Some argued that Kashmir should create its own model of cinema although they agreed that there is a lot to be learned from the Iranian filmmakers. They discussed that it would be better to watch and learn the art of film making from Iran's cinema than trying to copy Hollywood or Bollywood that generally does not reflect the Kashmir culture.

The simple way of storytelling, according to the discussions, is the one strong possibility that can help Kashmiri Cinema if one ever exists. Majority of the members agreed to make Iranian cinema as a model for Kashmir and wanted that such film should be shown to the people of Kashmir.

The media students in particular admired the style of filmmaking and expressed desire to be able to make such films.

Testing the Hypothesis

The above analysis of the group discussions reveal that the depiction of life in Iranian films has many similarities with Kashmir and Iranian model can be replicated in Kashmir. In other words Kashmir can invent its own model primarily based on the Iranian model. The hypothesis of the study, *'The Cinematic values of the contemporary Iranian cinema can find relevance in Kashmiri society, because of a cultural and religious proximity'* therfore tests positive.

Conclusion

The Focus Group Discussions clearly put forth the cultural and societal similarities between Iran and Kashmir as per the depictions in the films. A Kashmiri cinema if modelled can take lessons from the Iranian Cinema and be developed in tune with that. It would be easier to accept for the people because of the religious and moral values that are predominantly accepted in Kashmiri society.

Gaining an understanding of the Iranian cinema has helped the researchers to explore the unknown from Kashmir and the discovery was that it finds relevance in this context.

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