

Narratives and Aesthetics of Iranian Children's Films

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Abstract

Films over the period have subjected children in productions to represent the adult world. These children have been used in place of men and women to give expression to their anguishes and aspirations. In Iranian films, children appear in a particular way: more often than not, these appearances are fraught with certain political intentions resultant of varying social milieu of the country. Children in Iranian films have been fortunate to show their faces in front of the world through global festivals because of the quality of the films they were central figures of. Politically, this has been a rule after the Iranian revolution. Towards the end of the 1990s, children became the hallmark of cinema from Iran. The young characters in Iranian films were used by the filmmakers to make the world realise the worth of Iranian culture. They wanted their young characters to symbolise innocence and emotions whereas the Iranian polity and society had been stained with violence and perceived by the world with scepticism.

Against this background, the article is an effort to unravel the meanings behind the employment of children as protagonists in the modern films of Iran. This analysis has been made by reviewing some of the prominent productions. Through the analysis, it is being concluded that the portrayal of children in Iranian films is a tact employed by the film makers to bypass the censorship and other consequences following the strict rules imposed by the political atmosphere after the revolution. The New Wave cinema depicts multiple modern characteristics of the Iranian society among the problems confronted by young people and their social institutions. The employment of children as key figures in their movies helped the producers to indirectly present the various problems of the society in a symbolic manner. Films of the 1990s had a common structure that was built around the mystery of the proactive child. The themes of the films discussed were made so in order to accommodate the child figures in them.

Keywords

Children's Films, Portrayal of Children, Iranian New Wave Films, Victim-child, Wise Child

Any analysis of films having children as central figures asks for multiple tools to make it a successful review. The phrase "Children's Films" is rather an umbrella term under which many genres can be classed. Some films are made for children, while some others have children as characters but may not necessarily be meant for children (Meibauer, 2013). Therefore, when the term "Children's Films" is used, it has to be treated with clarity.

Bazalgette and Staples have defined the term children's films: "This term can mean simply the exhibition of films for general audience containing some

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children; it can also mean the dedicated production of films for children. By ‘children’ we mean people under the age of about twelve” (Bazalgette & Staples, 1995, p. 92).

While making children’s films, the filmmakers need to be aware of the cultural and educational status of the audience. Consequently, for a true analysis of children’s movies, the analyst will need to adopt an approach that will have room for other disciplines like mass communication, child development, cognitive psychology, and literacy studies (Meibauer, 2013).

Children’s Movies Around the World

Children are traditionally understood to be carrying characteristics implied in the term ‘innocence’. According to Christian tradition, children are devoid of rational thinking. They are considered merely as little devils. Movies produced in America have portrayed children as being innocent. Walt Disney movies have represented children as stereotypes fitting into normal families and surroundings. All these projections have been accepted by the audience without much resistance. In films produced elsewhere, children are often pictured as pranksters. Movies produced in Britain are examples. Films produced in Japan, especially anime, employ child characters as carriers of the country’s identity (Wibawa, 2010). Cinema produced in countries like Brazil and Italy also have children as key figures. In such movies, these characters are placed in real-world situations amongst often insoluble problems (Traverso, 2005). While Brazilian films have orphaned children in them, in Italian movies, children are placed inside families that struggle on various accounts. Fisher quotes Deleuze as saying that Italian Neo-Realist movies portray children not merely as weak and lacking identity. They present young children as heroic (Wibawa, 2010). Italian movies *Children are Watching Us* (1943), *Shoeshine* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), and *Germany, Year Zero* (1948) etc have the protagonists having mature aims in their lives and they strive to realise their aims.

Film-Farsi: The New Wave Iranian Cinema

In all the countries of the world where there is a tradition of cinematic culture, the parallel cinema evolved as a revolt to the commercial stream. The Iranian cinema is no exception to this rule. The so-called New Wave Iranian cinema which had its inception in the 1940s also developed to stand against the industrial moviedom called “Film-Farsi.” This movement started as a spontaneous recognition of the necessity to give expression to the cultural ethos of the country. Initially, the movies produced in this manner could not fulfil their aspirations, yet they succeeded in marking a difference and

introducing something new and yet unexperienced to the audience. The artists involved in this new movement used the means of the movie to display the values that were unique to their country and its culture. These films raised many basic questions about the Iranian identity in terms of similarities and differences with other countries. This way, it was like a mirror held to the Iranian reality (Sarsangi & Soleimanzadeh, 2018).

Why Children?

Iranian filmmakers have a distinct place in the world cinema today. They achieved this distinction by demonstrating to the world that they can produce good cinema by making children as its focal point (Jones, 2000). The whole trend of films with children as central characters started back in 1969, ten years before the Revolution. During this period, many films related to children and their future were made. These films deliberately presented children as a challenge to the main stream traditions. Young film makers who were part of the Centre for Young People's Intellectual Development (CIDCYA) were the most responsible for productions of this period (Zahedi, 2014). A few years hence, the films produced by these young men would carry a distinct feature that H. R Sadr describes as “innocent and hard-working children to convey symbolically certain apparently abstract ideas in a realistic way” (2002).

Time after time, a lonely child came on the screen that had to find solutions to complicated problems created by the socio-cultural atmosphere using its own thinking capacity. The audience could easily see through these children the reactions of the grown-ups. At the same time, these child characters were seen to use their own child-like logic that were unlike the logic of the grown-ups (Zahedi, 2014). The society that the spectator witnesses in the Iranian cinema is formed by people living in Tehran's suburbs where families live in harmony. The leading actors representing this society in films are children (Jones, 2000).

The child-protagonists of the Iranian movies caught the eye of the world through global festivals and after being screened in theatres outside of Iran. Later, these children functioned as ambassadors of Iranian cinema. The repeated successes of Iranian movies in international festivals were indebted to the Kiarostami Film-making School. Also was their indebtedness to Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* which incidentally was the first ever Iranian movie to be nominated for the Oscar (Bacheha-ye Aseman, 1997). The child characters in Iranian cinema of the 1980s were responsible for the avoidance of new censorship laws that came into effect after the Revolution (Zahedi, 2014). Iranian children helped the filmmakers escape the strong-handed censorship rules put forth by the government. The children replaced actors and actresses who came on screen to sing and dance. They also came in place of

unveiled woman that was taboo in the eyes of the new regime. All these circumstances forced the hands of the film makers to employ children as their key figures (Naficy, 2011).

The New Wave Iranian cinema is a product of the pressures exerted by the social and political atmosphere of the country and its censorship laws. The government had set up a department named Islamic guidance and culture ministry (MCIG) with exclusive powers to impose controls over artists who were into film making. This department maintained that women appearing on the screen wear veil. According to the rules imposed by the governmental agency, the film makers were to avoid straight forward treatment of themes and exhibition of scenes which would tarnish the image of the state. The governmental department wanted film makers to uphold the traditional values of the country in their movies. Against this background, the Iranian film makers came forward to cast children as major figures in their productions to avoid being censored. They were exploiting the notion that the children are embodiments of compassion and innocence. According to Andre Bazin, the audience respond to the child figures in a differently from the normal ways to adults as children are historically perceived as innocent and incapable of corruption. Therefore, children can represent a sharp contrast to the situations of war and violence (Banerjee, n.d.).

Here are some of the most celebrated movies from Iran that have won acclaim on global stages:

1. *The Runner* (Amir Naderi, 1984)

The Runner by Amir Naderi has a unique place in the Iranian New Wave Movement as the first representative of the trend. The film boasts of an experimental structure that consciously avoids adherence to traditionally held filmmaking patterns. The film has its central figure a poor boy named Amiru. Amiru is a boy who has been made a destitute and homeless by the war. After engaging his daily life doing different jobs, Amiru finds out that the only way he can make his dreams come true is by educating himself. After joining a school, Amiru has to confront many situations involving other children in the school. He participates in a competition in the school where he competes with his mates by saying the alphabet in a single breath. Through this, Amiru tries to win the respect of others.

2. *Where is the Friend's House?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987)

In Abbas Kiarostami's 1987 movie titled "Where Is the Friend's House?" The protagonist is an eight-year-old boy named Ahmed who by mistake takes his friend Mohammed's notebook. Ahmed wants to give the notebook back to his

friend to avoid the friend from being sent away from school. Ahmed, very consciously makes a decision to spot his friend's house in the nearby village. The film is set in an Iranian village named Koker. The movie is part of a trilogy known as the "Koker trilogy." The other films that form the trilogy are "Life and Nothing More" and "Under the Olive Trees". He has taken the title of this movie from a poem written by Iranian artist Sohrab Sephehri (1928–1980). The film was an immediate success and has remained as one of the famous director's well-received productions.

3. *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (Bahram Beizai, 1989)

Bashu by Bahram Beizai (1989) is an Iranian classic. It has war-time as its setting. The protagonist is an Iranian boy who loses his family during the Iran-Iraq war. Bashu, looking for refuge, is accommodated by a village woman who herself has two young children. The woman overcomes all the adverse circumstances to accommodate the boy. She even has to convince her handicapped husband. The major themes in the movie are love, solitude, and acceptance.

4. *The White Balloon* (Jafar Panahi, 1995)

The White Balloon tells the story of a seven-year old girl who wants a goldfish as a gift for New Year. She is given money to buy the fish by her mother, but she is afraid that she might not be able to buy the fish as the shops are going to close for the holidays. The girl's name is Razieh who with her brother Ali struggles to get to the market in time avoiding treacherous characters in their way. *The White Balloon* is a 1995 production by Jafar Panahi.

5. *Birth of a Butterfly* (Mojtaba Raei, 1997)

This film has been made by combining three stories. The stories tell a tale about children caught in highly emotional situations escalated by loss and isolation. The first story is touching and is about a father strictly sending his son away from home so that he will not have to see his mother die. The second story is about a disabled boy who is left alone at home when his family is away visiting a religious destination. The third one is about a teacher's dilemma when people in his village want to believe that he possesses spiritual powers. This movie would be better appreciated by the Iranian natives while the foreign audiences might be carried away by the scenic beauty of the Iranian countryside captured in the movie.

6. *Children of Heaven* (Majid Majidi, 1997)

The celebrated movie by Majid Majidi titled *Children of Heaven* produced in 1997 is a realistic cinema that is about the difficulties confronted by a boy of nine years. The protagonist's name is Ali. Ali, by mistake loses his sister's

shoes. To avoid angering the parents, the brother and sister decide to secretly share the brother's shoes between them. The sister's name is Zahra; she wears the shoes when she goes to school in the forenoon, and in the afternoon, when Ali's classes start, he is given the shoes. In this arrangement, time is a villain and Ali is always late to get to his sister. This predicament makes him find a way out. "Children of Heaven" became the first Iranian film to receive an Oscar nomination.

7. *The Apple* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998)

The Apple is half documentary and half feature. It tells about two teenage Iranian girls who have been kept in captivity by their father from the day of their birth. The father explains this situation to a social worker and says that he allowed the girls to go out of home. The chances were they would be spoiled by other evils in the world. The girls are decapitated by their imprisonment.

8. *The Colour of Paradise* (Majid Majidi, 1999)

In *The Colour of Paradise* Majid Majidi once again brings children as his central figures. The main character in the movie is a visually challenged boy who comes home for his holidays. The boy's name is Mohammed and he is not let down by his sight impairment. He banks on his other senses to understand the world. Young Mohammed is a very optimistic character, a trait that is not shared by his father for whom his son is a liability. Mohammed is motherless. The father's only concern is his remarriage. The movie demonstrates how a blind boy can experience the world by touches and by hearing sounds.

9. *Baran* (Majid Majidi, 2001)

In *Baran*, the main character is an Iranian adolescent boy called Lateef. Lateef is telling the story of Afghan refugees. His life changes when he is devoted to the caring of a man whom he does not know. *Baran* is a touching story about unreciprocated love.

10. *Persepolis* (Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, 2007)

Persepolis is about the euphoria of the Iranian revolution and the disappointment at the new regime's failure to live up to people's expectations. The story is told from the point of view of a young girl named Marji. Marji is critical of the new government's tyrannous ways. Uneasy about their daughter's ranting, Marji's parents send her to Vienna for higher education. The film also portrays Marji's confrontations with disagreeable characters

abroad. Finally, Marji returns home to find that her country has changed for worse for girls and women.

Portrayal of Children

When Iranian Revolution brought new censorship laws making political discussions in cinema impossible, Iranian film makers began to feature children as main characters in their movies as a tactic to bypass provoking the power. According to Sadr (2002), children figuring in Iranian movies are in fact used as substitutes for grown-ups. This strategy has been adopted by the film makers to enable themselves to deal with issues that might otherwise anger the rulers. Sadr opines that children in Iran “were freer than adults; they could go anywhere and do more or less anything” (2002: 235) (Wibawa, 2008).

Iranian cinema centring on children in effect portray on the screen several unprecedented aspects of Iranian society namely alienation of the young, the unemployment situation, disintegrated family and violence. In place of war-based themes, the new movies started to subject the problems of daily life for treatment. Jafar Panahi’s 1995 film *The White Balloon* is a classic example for the child-centred cinema. It tells about a young but serious girl who overcomes passivity to become energetically active to face up to situations in front of her and resolve the complexities of life around her. Covertly, this girl transforms her will power to the spectators. *The White Balloon* has won many prestigious awards including the Cannes.

Lost Innocence

As far as Iranian cinema is concerned, employing children in major roles has been a developmental tactic as it represented, interpreted and reflected on Iranian life. These children are generally portrayed as innocent and hardworking. Through these portrayals, the film makers have been able to project some ideas in a symbolic manner. Even though, the world might forget the Iran-Iraq war that raged for eight years, those who have seen Iranian movies would not ever forget the children depicted on the screens of Iranian movies. These children who have to move away from their natural situations and have to do tasks like the adults, it is sometimes perceived as a case of lost innocence.

The children appearing in Iranian movies maybe termed as non-actors. They do not act like the adult professional actors perform. This fact provides Iranian movies a subtlety and genuineness. Their naturalness and innocence give the characters authenticity and individuality as they are coming right from the middle of the social situations. The faces of the children reflected the

heaviness of their inner life. Iranian movies have created some enthusiastic 'non-actors' whose performances have thrilled the audience and this often is described as loss of innocence. There are child characters embraced by audience worldwide. Ahmadzadeh in "Where is the Friend's House?" and Afravian in "Bashu, The Little Stranger" are some among them (Sadr, 2002).

Victim-child vs Wise Child

Traditionally in mainstream cinema, children are pictured as victims. But in the New Wave Iranian movies, the audiences are served with wise children. This is not accidental. It is a deliberate strategy on the part of Iranian film makers as means to their end of presenting a realistic picture of Iranian life on the one hand, and on the other to overcome the restrictions imposed by the rulers in the name of prudence and censorship. This practice of centring children in Iranian movies has a history of nearly twenty years. During these years, an observer can see three distinct phases. These phases are the phase of rebellion, the phase of enthusiasm, and the phase of reflection. In all the examples cited in this article, there can be observed the wise child coming as a reaction to the necessity of representing the modern Iranian socio-cultural situation and the crisis of identity resulting from that. Iranian movies use the school as a setting and are used as a sample of the social space to project the problems of society. The children in Iranian movies are in search of their identity. In their search, they move away from their immediate circles of family and its protection. Thus the child has become an inevitable tool that is used to escape the controls meted out by the state power. Each Iranian director has used the child figure in his or her movie in unique way (Zahedi, 2014).

Different directors have treated the child-subjects differently. For instance, while Beyzaei disintegrates the child-symbol only to reconsolidate later, Abbas Kiarostami uses a postmodern technique of deconstruction. The difference between the modern treatment of the child and the previous ones is that while the traditional child-characters had been helped by their families and so on, the modern child uses his own smarts to get over the hurdles. The modern child learns by himself in the absence of a teacher-figure. The traditional wise child returns home to the safety of the family after all his travails; but for the straying modern child, there is no homecoming. This highlights the identity crises experienced by the whole of the society, the collective (the family) as well as the individual (Zahedi, 2014).

There was a surge in the production of child-centred movies in the 1990s. Already existing and newly-invented stories were adapted to movies during this period, but the common feature was the child. Jafar Panahi's films "The White Balloon" and "The Mirror" tell the stories of two girls whose portrayal

marked a high point in the history of movies with children. Panahi's *The Mirror* was experimental in making the film by breaking the narrative into two distinct levels. The director uses the child as an allusion to the present situation obtaining to the audience. The protagonist in the mirror slips away from those who want to have a say over her role.

Conclusion

The Iranian children movies went on a tour of the world after the Islamic Revolution on the wake of some success stories at global film festivals. In the 1990s, Iranian children in the movies became brands for their cinematic productions. The child-centred cinema's history started ten years before the revolution where children and their education were the concerns. Later, film makers used the ethos as a means to correct the vision of the world about Iran portraying children as symbols of innocence and compassion.

By portraying children in their movies, Iranian film makers managed to bypass the restrictive laws imposed by the government. Children-centred movies brought to the view of the audience multiple aspects of Iranian social life like the alienation experienced by children and the unemployed youth, and also fragmented families. As an opposite reaction to the stereotype of child as victim in romantic movies, the wise-child emerged in Iranian cinema to represent adult character. The 1990s saw a spurt in such movies where the myth of the wise child is used as an apparatus. The stories adapted for this purpose were done so around little boys or girls.

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