

Revisiting the Cinematic Journey of Samira Makhmalbaf within the Iranian New Wave

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Abstract

New-wave filmmakers in Iran have depicted the pressing political and social issues faced by the country through their films. These issues include oppression, ethnicity, war, authoritarianism, religious and cultural taboos, family dynamics, polygamy, divorce, loneliness, and existentialism, among others. Among these filmmakers, Samira Makhmalbaf stands out. This article aims to analyze five films created by Samira, focusing on their themes, plots, filmmaking style, treatment, and storytelling ability, using the method of qualitative visual analysis. The study reveals that Samira employs her films to question gender dynamics, particularly through the lens of education and empowerment. Furthermore, it concludes that her frames and shots possess a natural quality, with minimal use of cinematic gimmicks. The incorporation of metaphors and symbols is another notable feature of her filmmaking.

Keywords: New Wave Cinema, Iranian Cinema, Samira Makhmalbaf, Gender, Storytelling

The global film industry witnessed the rise of a new cinematic movement during the 1960s, and Iran was no exception to this trend. The socio-political and cultural backdrop of the country played a significant role in the development of new wave films. Moreover, the influence of new wave movements in international cinema, particularly the French new wave, Italian neo-realism, and German expressionism, also contributed to the emergence of this movement in Iran. The influence of international film festivals, formation of film societies and clubs also accelerated the process. Initially, film makers like Dariush Mehrjui and Masoud Kimiai pioneered the trend. Immediately after the Islamic Revolution in Iran 1979, a new set of filmmakers stole the show. The prominent figures include the famous Abbas Kiarostami, Majid Majidi, Jafar Panahi, and youngsters like Asghar Farhadi, Babak Payami, Samira Makhmalbaf, and Tahmineh Milāni. A new club of filmmakers in Iran is now

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leading the industry with its significant presence in renowned international film festivals and awards.

New-wave filmmakers in Iran have portrayed pressing political and social issues and themes which country face through their films. Issues of oppression, ethnicity, war, authoritarianism, religious and cultural taboos, family, polygamy, divorce, loneliness, existentialism, and so on. During 1990s, the filmmakers gave much focus on gender issues and questions. Immediately after Iran and Iraq wars, the sufferings of women became a big talking point. The movies made during the period discussed women's dreams, desires, and desperations from various angles. Such movies had women as key players (Muneer V, 2017).

The Question of Gender

Marandi (2011) notes that gender issues are treated subtly through films in Iran, a traditionally conservative society. Film makers including women raise issues and questions in this way. The treatment of women before the revolution was worse compared to the post-revolution period, where they were portrayed as mere objects – their roles in the film were limited to spouses and mothers. Compared to modern times, they were almost archaic (Bahar, 2010). Reza Sadr (2006) also substantiates this argument that women in Iran were portrayed as helpless victims during the pre-revolution period.

As with other regions globally, it is evident that significant changes have occurred in various aspects of women's lives, particularly among young women. These changes have persuaded young filmmakers to reconsider and redefine their conceptions of sexuality and gender, thus causing wider repercussions in the modern Iranian historical context. Gradually, a gender consciousness has been developed and reflected in Iranian cinema (Najmeh, 2015).

Many filmmakers, especially young women, have inculcated this gender consciousness and utilized the medium of cinema to reflect this phenomenon since the 1990s. Rakhshān Banietemad, Samira Makhmalbaf, Tahmineh Milani, Niki Karimi, and Marzieh Meshkini are prominent. Compared to the East and West, the powerful presence of women filmmakers grabbed much of the attention of world viewers and became a hot talking point in international film festivals. This tendency has inspired young women to pursue film studies as

their major and seek careers in the film industry. It has been deeply reflected in the increasing number of films women filmmakers produce in Iran.

The Story and Storytelling of Samira

Samira Makhmalbaf has made significant contributions to the growth of the Iranian film industry. 1980 she was born in Tehran and debuted in the film industry at eight. Her father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, produced the film 'The Cyclist' through which she was inducted into the world of Cinema. Samira produced her first feature-length film at age 17. The film titled "The Apple" was showcased at the Cannes Film Festival, with the director being the youngest participant in its history. *The Apple* has been screened in over thirty countries and invited to over one hundred international film festivals (www.makhmalbaf.com).

Samira's second film, titled "*Blackboards*," was filmed in Kurdistan in 1999. It had the honor of being selected for the 2000 Cannes Film Festival and was awarded the prestigious Special Jury Award. The film has garnered several notable accolades, including the esteemed "Federico Fellini Honour Award" and the distinguished "Francois Truffaut Award." (www.makhmalbaf.com).

Samira has collaborated with esteemed directors including Ken Loach, Shohei Imamura, Youssef Chahine, and Sean Penn on the collaborative project titled September 11. This project was showcased at the 2002 Venice International Film Festival. *At Five in the Afternoon* is the fourth production by Samira Makhmalbaf. This film was shot in Afghanistan, appeared at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival, and garnered the Special Jury Award. Two-Legged Horse, Samira's fifth film, was shot in Afghanistan in 2007. This cinematic masterpiece received the esteemed Grand Jury Prize at the San Sebastian Film Festival in Spain. (www.makhmalbaf.com).

In to the Cinema: Style and Stylistics

Samira believes cinema can change people, their thoughts, and their perspectives. They can reflect the suffering, pain, and agony of humanity. She tried to portray all these themes in her films. Being a young graduate, she had concerns over the education of the young generation, especially of girls of Iran. She construed that education is the only way to enlightenment. Knowingly or

unknowingly, the themes of education and empowerment were portrayed in her many films. In the research paper titled "Samira Makhmalbaf: Educationalist," Alexis Gibbs examines how the subject of education is portrayed in the films of Samira Makhmalbaf. In her first directorial effort, *The Apple*, and her subsequent film, *At Five in the Afternoon*, she emphasizes the significance of education. It is not necessarily the concept of formal or institutional education. It enables a person to exist and survive in the actual world (Gibbs, 2014).

Being the great daughter of a great father, Samira has been influenced by her father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, in film direction. Samira Makhmalbaf stands out due to her meticulous and rigorous examination and portrayal of the characters, environments, and perceptions within her films (Danks, 2002). The films of Samira generally fall under the genre of docu-fiction. It is a blend of fiction and documentary. She selects natural locations, not making sets. She picks non-professional actors and asks them to behave as they usually do in front of the camera. As her films depict the themes like poverty, suppression, education, and politics, especially of women, she picks characters from her surroundings. Her frames and shots are very natural and adopt fewer cinematic gimmicks. The use of metaphors and symbols is another feature of her filmmaking. Growing up, she observed her father's filmmaking techniques and immersed herself in the works of influential Iranian filmmakers such as Dariush Mehrjui and Abbas Kiarostami. As a result, she developed a passion for capturing authentic experiences within a realistic setting.

Filmography

1. The Apple

Her debut film, *The Apple*, is the story of two girls and their father. A father imprisoned her two children in the house for eleven years, from when they were two years old until they were 13 years old. When the neighbors became aware of the situation and notified the welfare ministry to assist the children, the sisters had already become mentally disabled and could not speak or walk normally. After some time, the welfare ministry sends the children back to their father so that he does not confine them again, but their father imprisons them again. A nurse who has come to the home to care for the children is compelled to confine the father inside in order to take the children outside to play. When

the girls enter the street for the first time, their father, who has been confined in the home, observes the condition of his imprisoned daughters. In conclusion, the now-free daughters struggle to release their father from house confinement (www.makhmalbaf.com).

In 1998, the film received the Sutherland Trophy at the London Film Festival and the International Critics Prize at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland. In the same year, it got Jury's special prizes at both Sao Paulo Film Festival in Brazil and Thessalonica Film Festival in Greece. In 1999, *The Apple* received an audience prize, a critic prize, and Jury special prize at an independent cinema festival in Argentina.

Samira says that *The Apple*, which was initially conceived as a documentary film, allowed her to research the question of how much playing in the alleys and streets, which is the exclusive domain of boys, helps men become more social than women who do not have the opportunity to play in the alleys and streets. The film also reveals the motivations of parents who act as their children's prison guardians. She was also curious about how neighbourhood residents can be oblivious of a virtual prison in their vicinity or remain indifferent upon learning of the catastrophe. Furthermore, she has yet to discover the answer to this final query(www.makhmalbaf.com).

The Apple, a persistent object of desire for the twins, represents their pursuit of freedom and their modest desire to purchase one. According to Al Sharji (2016), this film explores various themes such as gender, adolescence, the dichotomy between public and private spheres, the oppression experienced within the familial institution, as well as concepts of veiling and modesty. In her work titled *The Apple*, Samira challenges prevailing Orientalist notions of parentage and family by delving into the thoughts and desires of Ghorban, the abusive father of the twin girls. Rather than simply attributing Ghorban's mistreatment of his daughters to religion or culture, Samira provides a deeper understanding of his motivations and commitments, thereby refuting the Orientalist stereotype that portrays Muslim men as "evil, misogynistic savages" (Chan, 2016).

According to Irene Matthews (2001), "The Apple" can be regarded as a resilient poem depicting a family trapped in their own misguided ways. It effectively captures the challenges encountered by girls and women in the patriarchal

society of greater Iran. In her work, Samira criticizes the hypocritical values associated with patriarchy, without vilifying the patriarchal figure. Specifically, she highlights the detrimental impact on women, particularly young girls who are confined within their homes for 12 years, a result of their fathers' intentions to safeguard their purity from the perceived threats of the external world (Chan, 2016).

In his article, Toumerkine (2003) also explains how *The Apple* has become a positive symbol. Apples possess the biblical resonance of illicit temptation and conjure up misogynistic stereotypes of women who undermine masculine virility. However, apples become positive symbols in this film, serving as catalysts that imply two exploited girls may be able to escape their abusive families and become independent, productive citizens (Atakan, 2006). The conditions of women in Iran have symbolically many resemblances in this film. Derya Atakan (2006) adds that *The Apple*, an allegory with global relevance, is incredibly potent in Samira's native country, where the hopes and aspirations of the young are erupting through all the historically perpetrated injustices against women that have been received and ideologically reinforced.

2. Blackboards

Blackboards, the second feature-length film by Samira, provides a creative exploration of the impoverished and distressed lives of homeless individuals in Kurdistan. Following the chemical bombardment of Halabcheh in Iraq, a group of refugee instructors from the Kurdish community sought out students willing to receive an education in the border region. These instructors carried blackboards that symbolically resembled the crosses of Jesus Christ. One of the instructors encounters a cohort of teenage smugglers and endeavors to convince them to prioritize education while they transport their significant illicit cargo. The other teacher encounters a group of elderly and weary men who are returning to their home country after years of migration, seeking a place to spend their final days. Regrettably, the pervasive effects of starvation and insecurity have eroded any opportunities for educating the future generations. (www.makhmalbaf.com).

The film has received numerous international accolades. These include the grand jury prize established by the American Film Institute, a distinctive

cultural prize awarded by UNESCO, the Giffoni's Mayor prize, and the Francois Truffaut prize at the Giffoni Film Festival in Italy. Additionally, the film has been honored with the Federico Fellini Honor by UNESCO and the Jury's Prize in the official competition section of the Cannes Film Festival in France.

In addition to the horrific effects of conflict, especially on children, the arbitrariness of borders is one of the film's central themes. Samira, through her film, challenges the prevailing Western notion that war and violence are intrinsic to Muslim cultures by shedding light on the frequently overlooked victims of war. Instead, she presents a poignant portrayal of numerous Muslim individuals who endure the unbearable and terrifying conditions of the war-ravaged Badlands, illustrating their struggle for survival (Chan, 2016).

Blackboards reveals that the mountainous landscape exhibits parallel to suffocation and confinement, as its residents endure enduring poverty and monotony. Consequently, Makhmalbaf maintains her recurring theme of "striving for freedom." Unlike *The Apple*, which adheres to a clear chronological sequence, *Blackboards* employs a disillusioned perception of time. This blurred chronology, along with enigmatic narrative elements and the boundless expanse of the desolate wilderness, suggests an endless struggle for both the nomads and the young boys. (Mulvey, 2001, cited in Chan, 2016).

The film "Blackboards" delves into the dire circumstances faced by Kurdish nomads following the Iran-Iraq War. These nomads live in constant fear of gunfire and the hidden danger posed by chemical weapons. Through the characters navigating the rugged landscapes with the hope of eventually reclaiming their homes, the movie effectively conveys the theme of poverty and the profound impact of conflict (Chan, 2016). Thus, the film depicts the unending miseries and never losing hopes of the oppressed people and their dependence on education as a tool to survive.

3. God, Construction, Destruction

The film, set in Iran, analyses the post-9/11 experience of Afghan emigrants forced into exile by Afghanistan's bleak conditions after the Soviet invasion.

Following the events of September 11, there was a prevailing sense of apprehension among Afghan refugees residing in Iran regarding the potential for

the United States to launch military actions against Afghanistan. A teacher gathers her Afghan pupils to observe a moment of silence to remember the incident's fatalities, despite their apprehensions regarding the American attack. In terms of understanding the importance of the occasion, the infants are unable to grasp its significance. At a later point, the teacher leads the students to a towering brick-baking furnace and states, "This furnace is similar to the New York Tower." Subsequently, she requests the children to observe a moment of silence as they gaze upon the chimney releasing thick smoke, in memory of the individuals who lost their lives in the New York tower tragedy. The 11-minute film, titled "God, Construction, Destruction," is part of a collection of 11 films created by esteemed filmmakers including Ken Loach, Claude Lelouch, Danis Tanovic, Sean Penn, Shohei Imamura, Amos Gitai, Youssef Chahine, Idrissa Ouedraogo, Mira Nair, Alejandro Inarritu, and Samira Makhmalbaf. It is based on the September 11, 2001 attack (www.makhmalbaf.com).

The initial sequence of Samira's film showcases a gathering of Afghan civilians who are depicted retrieving water from a parched well in Iran. This group represents the largest refugee population globally, which experienced a substantial surge in numbers between December 1979 and February 1989 due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Afghan refugees were compelled by the conflict to relocate to neighboring Iran and Pakistan, seeking shelter from the violent turmoil in their homeland. Samira's film specifically centers on those Afghans who continue to live in exile within the borders of Iran. In her work, titled "God, Construction and Destruction," the director explicitly explores the post-9/11 experiences of Afghan refugees residing in camps (Espiritu, 2012).

Remembrance Pedagogy

According to Roger Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert (2000), Samira utilizes the term "remembrance pedagogy" to depict a particular form of historical awareness. Remembrance pedagogy involves a mindful focus on, learning from, and active engagement with the memory of the remnants of traumatic history (p. 3). The objective of "9/11 remembrance pedagogy" surpasses a mere recollection of the suffering endured by others in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Instead, approaches to 9/11 remembrance pedagogy should take into account not only what is remembered, by whom, how, and when but also the challenge of representing and grappling with the

event's inherent limitations. This phenomenon arises because the extremity of the 9/11 event both shocks and resists assimilation into preexisting discourses (Espiritu, 2012, p.7).

4. At Five in the Afternoon

At Five in the Afternoon explores the challenges faced by Afghan women as they strive for education and positions of authority. The focal point of the film revolves around Noqreh, a young woman residing in a war-torn Kabul, sharing a shattered building with her father, sister-in-law, and the latter's baby (Al Sharji, 2016).

After the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, a young woman strives to make the most of her newfound freedom for her social development as a woman. In 2003, the film bagged Golden Peacock for best film at India's 34th International film festival. The film was honored with the Grand Prize from the Society of Churches of the World and received a Special Jury Award at the Cannes Film Festival in France. In 2004, it also earned the Youth's Cinema Award at Singapore's 17th International Silver Screen Film Festival (www.makhmalbaf.com).

In this film, Samira Makhmalbaf examines freedom, the hopelessness of conflict, and destitution, all emphasized by the surreal images of Kabul's congested and decaying streets. In this instance, much like *Blackboards*, the theme of conflict holds a significant position, although the backdrop shifts to Afghanistan and the central character is an ambitious street girl from the country. Samira's portrayal of Noqreh and the other Afghan women reflects Lila Abu-Lughod's examination of the Western perspective on Afghan women in her work titled "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" (Chan, 2016).

In the film *At Five in the Afternoon*, Makhmalbaf directly challenges Western portrayals by vividly illustrating the aspirations, challenges, and brutalities of war through the character of Noqreh. These thematic elements persist throughout the movie as Noqreh, a young Afghan girl, dreams of becoming the future president of Afghanistan, yet faces both literal and symbolic destitution. Together with her family, she traverses the desert in pursuit of a meaningful existence. *At Five in the Afternoon* proposes that Afghan women, exemplified by Noqreh and her political ambitions and affinity for poetry, possess a voice.

However, they find themselves adrift in the barren landscapes of conflict and a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction (Chan, 2016).

5. Two-legged Horse

The film is a brutal and merciless examination of power relationships. The film analyses the master-servant relationship between a deformed boy and Mirvais, an underprivileged youth who works as the disabled boy's carrier.

In order to obtain the position, the youngster must compete against other impoverished children in a contest. The victor will be any boy who can carry a boy who lost his legs while running like a horse during the conflict on his back to school. The youngster ultimately triumphs in a gruelling competition. In exchange for a daily wage of one dollar, the boy must transport the disabled boy to and from school daily. When the young boy carries the child with disabilities on his back, he participates in street sprints alongside donkeys and horses. Prior to placing the disabled boy on the swing, the boy carefully bathes and cleanses him. However, the disabled boy expresses dissatisfaction towards the boy, as he yearns for him to transform into a horse.

In 2008, the film received numerous international accolades. These include a special mention award at the Rome International Film Festival in Italy, the Georges Delerue Award for best music at the Ghent International Film Festival in Belgium, and a special Jury prize from the 56th International Film Festival in Spain.

Samira desires to ascertain the extent to which a relationship between two individuals can develop. On the one hand, two individuals reach the pinnacle of affection, companionship, and sacrifice for one another, while on the other, one exploits the other as an animal. In the meantime, she endeavours to discover, through this film, the limits of human tolerance and how much a person can endure to satisfy his requirements and transform. Let us consider how often each of us has been someone else's steed. Or did we use someone as a horse? (www.makhmalbaf.com).

Conclusion

Samira Makhmalbaf has made significant contributions to the expansion of the Iranian film industry. She firmly believes that film has the power to alter people's perspectives and thoughts, serving as a reflection of humanity's distress, pain, and anguish. In her films, she endeavors to portray these profound themes. Particularly as a young graduate, she became deeply concerned about the education of Iran's youth, particularly young females. What sets Samira Makhmalbaf apart is her meticulous and rigorous analysis and depiction of the status of characters, settings, and perceptions in her films.

The majority of Samira's films fall under the documentary-fiction genre, skillfully combining elements of both fiction and nonfiction. She opts for natural locations rather than creating elaborate sets, choosing to capture the authenticity of real environments. Additionally, she deliberately casts amateur actors and guides them to perform naturally in front of the camera. Her films often revolve around female-centric themes such as poverty, oppression, education, and politics, drawing characters from her own surroundings.

Samira Makhmalbaf's filmmaking style is characterized by its natural compositions and perspectives, employing minimal cinematic devices. Metaphors and symbols also play prominent roles in her films. Growing up immersed in her father's filmmaking process and being influenced by Iranian new-wave pioneers like Dariush Mehrjui and Abbas Kiarostami, she developed a passion for documenting reality within a realistic setting.

Her first film, *The Apple*, represents not only the siblings' pursuit of independence but also their modest ambition to afford one. This film addresses gender, adolescence, public and private spheres, family oppression, veiling, and modesty. *Blackboards*, Samira's second feature-length film, is a creative investigation into the lives of Kurdistan's homeless, who are destitute and distressed. *God, Construction, Destruction*, set in Iran, examines the post-9/11 experience of Afghan emigrants forced into exile by Afghanistan's dismal conditions following the Soviet invasion. *At Five in the Afternoon* examines the struggle of Afghan women for education and leadership. The film is a ruthless examination of power dynamics. *Two-Legged Horse* explores the master-

servant relationship between a deformed boy and Mirvais, an impoverished adolescent who serves as the deformed boy's carrier.

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