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IRANIAN CINEMA AND ISLAMIC REVIVALISM (1970-1990): THE ENTWINED TAPESTRY

Saima Ali¹ and Abdelaziz Berghout²

Abstract

The present work focuses on the relations between Iranian cinema and the Islamic Revival movement from the 1970s up to the 1990s. It examines how the Islamic revolution of 1979 affected Iranian cinematic production and its change from Western-influenced melodramas to Islam-centred narratives. It analyses how Iranian filmmakers managed to employ different film techniques to communicate religious concepts and promote contemplation. It showcases the complex relationship between religion, culture, and modernity in Iranian films, illustrating their distinct cultural value and deeper significance. This study also covers works of outstanding film directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Dariush Mehrjui and Bahram Beizai whose work reflects the equilibrium between innovation and spirituality. By examining different aspects of visual style including symbolism, mise-en-scène and reflective editing, the article provides an understanding of how these directors impacted the development of the Iranian film in a time of significant cultural and ideological change. It underscores the role of cinema in Iran as a medium for projecting the country's identity as well as an agent that informs and influences the nation's ideology. The findings revolve around the chronicles of religion, politics and art that the film presented. By analysing such interactions, this article reveals the dynamics of the global resonance of Iranian cinema and its capacity to go beyond cultural contexts, reflecting broader themes of Islamic revivalism and cultural evolution.

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Keywords: Iranian cinema; 1979 Iranian Revolution; Islamic values in film; cinematic techniques; Islamic revival

Introduction

A strong desire for social and ethical renewal, a call for spiritual awakening and most often a claim of cultural or religious validity are among the common characteristics of revivalist movements. These groups typically seek to restore a historically golden age of the faith or cultural tradition because they contend that contemporary society has become morally decayed or spiritually inert³. This makes revivalism both conservative, advocating for the preservation of tradition, and reformist, encouraging the revitalization of customs and beliefs in response to contemporary issues⁴. Movements in the Muslim world that seek to restore Islamic values in response to the challenges posed by secularism, colonialism, and modernity are known as Islamic revivalism, a specific kind of religious revivalism⁵. At the heart of these movements is a demand to revert to the foundational sources of Islam, specifically the Qur'an and *Hadith*, and a conviction that a society grounded in Islamic values will provide solutions to the social, political, and spiritual challenges experienced by countries with Muslim majorities⁶.

In the context of the 1960s and 70s, it was manifested in various forms across the globe, often intertwined with political, social and cultural movements. After the Islamic revolution, Iran's film laws were changed dramatically by the government. Initially, cinema production was completely banned by the Islamic Republic because the regime deemed it as a product of evil. It was unbanned at the end due to western pressure as long as it was put to use in accordance to the corresponding Islamic principles. Cinema was more or less used as a political tool during the early years after the

³ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. (Basic Books, 1973), 113.

⁴ Mark A Noll. *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*. (InterVarsity Press, 2003).

⁵ John L Esposito. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* Oxford University Press, 1992.; Sami Zubaida. *Islamic Revivalism: A Modern Problem*. (Routledge, 2003).

⁶ Abul A'la Maududi. *Towards Understanding Islam*. (Islamic Publications, 1982).

revolution in order to advance the arts in the Iranian community that reflect the Islamic code. Shift to right wing and more conservative and religiously inclined movie scene was precipitated by the post revolution political condition, which led to more strict censorship and Islamisation. Despite early criticism and hatred, cinema finally gained acceptance and respectability in Iran. A considerable shift in the government's attitudes toward Iranian cinema was also observed in the period after the revolution which still retains the impact of the new political and religious framework on the industry.

This article explores Islamic revivalism through the Iranian cinema from the 1970s up to the 1990s, that is 10 years before and after the Iranian revolution. It investigates faith, social justice and societal complexities together with the aesthetical and technical strategies applied to express these issues in the Iranian cinema. The 1979 Iranian Revolution significantly impacted the nation's political and cultural landscape, with cinema playing a pivotal role in promoting Islamic thought and values, from a pre-revolutionary era of glamour to a post-revolutionary era of Islamic consciousness. Before the revolution, Iranian cinema largely existed within the orbit of Western influences.⁷ Hollywood clichés were reproduced in *Farsi Westerns* and melodramas of the 1950s and 1970s⁸, which provided a romanticised picture of cowboys and illicit romances as a means of escape from ordinary life respectively. The deep Islamic legacy that formed the basis of Iranian identity frequently clashed with this Westernised aesthetic. The Islamic Republic led to a significant shift in Iranian cinema⁹, with filmmakers embracing artistic freedom while adhering to Islamic narratives and values¹⁰. The screen became a platform for articulating Islamic concepts such as *Tawhid*, *Adl*, *Ihsan*,

⁷ Jahan Akrami, *Friendly Persuasion: Iranian Cinema After the 1979 Revolution* (University of California Press, 2000), 23; Hamid Dabashi, *The Shah, the Islamists and Iran* (Random House, 2010), 124.

⁸ Yasmin Tashakkori, *The Emergence of Iranian Cinema: From the Silent Era to the Islamic Revolution* (Routledge, 2013), 152–165.

⁹ Ali Jafarzadeh, *Cinema in Iran: A Historical and Critical Study* (Routledge, 2016), 198; Farideh Mirani, *Movies and Social Realism in Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁰ Lina Khatib, *Islamic Culture and the Cinema in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 78.

Ummah and *Ijtihad*.¹¹ By applying this lens, we explore martyrdom, especially from the *Shi'a* perspective, as shown in films such as Ali Hatami's *Mother*.¹² This article examines the nuanced portrayals of faith, social justice and individual struggles within the Islamic Republic.

This study investigates the cultural and intellectual influences that shaped cinematic narratives during the post-revolution era.¹³ It examines the masterful use of cinematic techniques such as symbolism, *mise-en-scène*, and contemplative editing to convey deeper Islamic meanings and foster spiritual reflection.¹⁴ The study also analyzes the works of prominent directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Dariush Mehrjui, and Bahram Beizai, highlighting their ground-breaking contributions to the aesthetic of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.¹⁵

The study is multidisciplinary, combining qualitative and historical approaches. It acknowledges the difficulties in archival research and the limitations of applying findings, and it describes the history of Iranian cinema within the socio-political background of the revival through the use of historical archives and film studies. Furthermore, by means of ethnographic immersion and interdisciplinary collaboration, the research strives to obtain primary insights and integrates varied points of view, giving precedence to ethical deliberations such as cultural sensitivity, while navigating around methodological constraints and linguistic obstacles. Through the use of these approaches, the study seeks to provide an analysis of Iranian film and its interactions with the Islamic revival movement. The paper maps an account of the shift in Iranian cinema during the era of the Shah and later being suspended by the Islamic republic

¹¹ Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 15.

¹² Ali Hatami, Film., *Mother* (Farabi Cinema Foundation, 1989).

¹³ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2011), 78; Hillary B. Johnson, *The Politics of Film in Iran: From the Islamic Revolution to the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 23.

¹⁴ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2011), 105.

¹⁵ Hillary B. Johnson, *The Politics of Film in Iran: From the Islamic Revolution to the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 23.

after the Revolution of 1979. After gaining its independence, cinema gave a glamorous image of Iran thus became vulnerable to censorship; used for official propaganda which led to shut down of theatres and curtailment of the import of foreign films. Finally, it also explains how Iranian film moved from being simply amusing to become a powerful tool of disseminating Islamic values. There is one particularly important facet of these dynamics and that is Islamic revivalism, which is generally defined as the process of giving a new focus and meanings to the Islamic tradition, on the background of modernity and globalisation. This kind of a movement aims at revitalising the religion and its privileging of the public life and culture, particularly after significant political changes, such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

By examining this period of time, we can better understand the interplay between politics, religion and creative expression in the context of Iranian culture. The cinematic portrayal of the transition from escape to education reflects the cultural and ideological changes Iran underwent following the revolution. It demonstrates how cinema served as a powerful medium for communicating the ideals, concerns and complexities of the Islamic revival effectively illustrating the dynamic relationship between faith and artistic expression in the post-revolutionary landscape.

Pre-Revolution: Glamour, Western Influence

Due to political circumstances and censorship, Iranian cinema has a complex history. Despite a late start, the country's cinema finally caught up with the West around the beginning of 1900. Political factors have always been dominant including censorship, which formally emerged in 1920 and focused on controlling public images. Things took a turn after the World War II, when nothing worthy of being called national cinema was produced.¹⁶ Iranian cinema known as *Film Farsi* was lacking in artistic quality but 1969 was a turning point as Iranian films started gaining international recognition. All of this happened despite censorship and consistent religious opposition.

¹⁶ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update, in Richard Tapper, ed., *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (I.B. Tauris, 2002), 4.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, where cinema was associated with Western influence, people recognized cinema's power to influence, either as a tool to fight opposition or promote ideology.

Roughly spanning the 1950s to 1979, the pre-revolutionary period of the Iranian cinema could be characterised as a colourful mix of social realism, subdued protest and Westernised elegance. The audiences, who enjoyed watching some of the Hollywood classics found Farsi Westerns including *Ardehsht* (1970) and *Gharibeye Sheher Farang* (Stranger of the Western City, 1973) seeking solace in their idealized depictions of gunfights and cowboys¹⁷. These films depicted some elements of the orientalist's view of the West, starring Fardin and Azarakhsh, offered audiences a break from the harsh realities of real life in their country under the Shah's rule¹⁸. Popular films like *Tufan* (Storm, 1974) dealt with social disparity and impermissible love as its target audience struggling with modern policies and changing social demographics¹⁹. Despite hinting at the emerging social conflict that lay beneath the surface of Iranian society, these films depicted romance and family relations in accordance with ethical Western standards starring Shohreh Agdashloo and Behrouz Vossoughi²⁰.

However, Iranian cinema prior to the revolution was just a fantasy and the emulation of the Western model. Other movies of the same period, Nowbahar's *Gharibeh and Farangis* (1965) depict hedonistic Persian aristocracy, the women dressed in Western fashion, seducing their lovers. But these films also pictured societal injustice²¹. The film that questioned the Shah's regime and shook up the despair of the population was Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1971) starring Ezzatollah Entezami and Assadollah Kimiayi. The film addressed the harsh realities of poverty and social injustice

¹⁷ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2011), 42.

¹⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *The Shah, the Islamists and Iran* (New York: Random House, 2010), 124.

¹⁹ Mohsen Akrami, *Iranian Cinema: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2000), 23.

²⁰ Yasmin Tashakkori, *The Emergence of Iranian Cinema: From the Silent Era to the Islamic Revolution* (Routledge, 2013), 152-165.

²¹ Farid Mirani, *Movies and Social Realism in Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 11.

challenging the Shah's regime and causing discontent among the populace.²²

Regardless of heavy Western influence, the Iranian element and spirit were observable to some extent in films such as *Gavaznha* (The Tongs, 1972), which blends modern ways of life as were prevalent in the West. *Daieha* (The Midwife, 1971) and *Chelovek-e-Ashgeh* (The Lover, 1972) depicted imperative social issues, containing rather clear undercurrents of Marxism prevalent in pre-revolutionary Iran. These films dealt with both sexuality and romance, as well as social comedy, and important issues of economic inequality and social disparity, which is reasoned by the context of a strong Marxist social-political movement before the Islamic revolution. Film producers employed cinema as an instrument of the lamentation of socio-economic systems and advocacy for the oppressed calling for Marxism. Hence, even as a host of aspects, these films can be seen to be underwritten by Islamic identity, it is also necessary to grasp their Marxist framework as a way of engaging the philosophical context and how art acted as an ideological conveyor belt²³. Although it did not outwardly appear to be a religious period, it was a time of ferment for Islamic philosophy and social criticism, which flourished more actively after the revolution. The conflict between social realities, Westernised ideals and the desire for a truer Iranian identity prepared the audience for the radical change in topics and aesthetics that would define Iranian film in the years after the 1979 revolution.²⁴ We may better comprehend the intricate interactions between Western influences, societal realities and the early stirrings of Islamic identity that moulded Iranian film before the revolution by looking at this pre-revolutionary scene. This understanding serves as an essential step in exploring the revolutionary era that would see Islamic philosophy and ideals prominently featured on the silver screen.

²² Ali Jafarzadeh, *Cinema in Iran: A Historical and Critical Study* (Routledge, 2016), 198.

²³ Ackbar Aghajanian, *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁴ Golbarg Rekabtalaei, Cinematic Revolution: Cosmopolitan Alter-Cinema of Pre-Revolutionary Iran, *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2015): 567–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2014.895539>.

Post-Revolution: A New Dawn of Islamic Cinema

Iranian cinema underwent significant changes after the Islamic Revolution. To establish a cinema that aligned with Islamic values and principles, censorship was imposed, restricting the portrayal of certain themes and content deemed inconsistent with Islamic ideals. Due to the political and financial uncertainties, as well as a lack of established Islamic intellectuals, the industry faced some challenges.²⁵ Cultural institutions, including the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, were established to regulate cultural life. Indian films were banned except for non-commercial ones, while Pakistani and Turkish films were screened only in exchange for the screening of an Iranian film. The Control Council established Production Permission in late 1980. Consisting of experts from different fields, the Control Council had the following responsibilities:

1. reviewing scripts;
2. examining directors and actors to make sure they are not individuals with any agenda;
3. monitoring the production phase;
4. monitoring the post-production phase;
5. making sure the final film is inspected and then permission to screen is granted.²⁶

Four connected entities agreed to enforce and execute broad guidelines in 1982 regarding Islamic morals in films, prohibiting anything that does not align with Islamic beliefs. Iranian film developed despite these obstacles, capturing the continuous conflict between conservative and progressive forces in the Islamic Republic.

Iranian cinema underwent a major evolution in the imprint of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, transitioning from superficial glamour to a heartfelt intellectual expression of Islamic principles.

²⁵ Samaneh Kafai, Censorship and the Dynamics of Iranian Cinema: Between Ideology and Art, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 3 (2013): 423-441.

²⁶ Hossein Eidzadeh, articles on Iranian and international films published in *Sight & Sound*, *Senses of Cinema*, *8 1/2 Magazine*, *Kinoscope*, *Keyframe*, *MUBI Notebook* and *Indie Wire*.

This transformation had a substantial influence on the international cinematic landscape.²⁷ The Iranian cinema has gained global recognition for its earnest thematic exploration and artistic ingenuity, as evidenced by the works of Abbas Kiarostami, such as *Ta'am-e Gilas* (Taste of Cherry, 1997), which was awarded the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival. The Iranian film industry is characterised by its intricate portrayals that are intelligently imbued with Islamic and social themes, which left a deep impact on the global stage. This is exemplified by Asghar Farhadi's *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin* (A Separation, 2011), which was awarded the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.²⁸ The film *10* by Abbas Kiarostami courageously examines women's struggles, sexuality and patriarchy in a conservative regime.²⁹ Iranian film was mostly influenced by and existed in the orbit of Western values and influences before to the revolution.³⁰ Filmmakers, however, seized the opportunity to use their newly acquired creative freedom to explore Islamic themes, historical and religious narratives, and the political and social shifts that the country was experiencing as a result of the revolution.³¹

Early post-revolutionary films often focused on moral instruction and didactic storytelling that reflected Islamic values and social conformity. Films such as *Tuba* (1979) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf and *Nar and Nil* (1982) explored the challenges faced by women in navigating the new Islamic framework, raising important questions about personal agency and individuality. These films not only described the restrictive societal standards imposed by the government but also highlighted the struggles of women to claim

²⁷ Ramin Azad. Iranian Cinema After the Revolution: Themes and Trends, *Journal of Film and Video* 64, no. 2 (2012): 38-50.

²⁸ Shirin Youssefzadeh, The Global Impact of Iranian Cinema: An Analysis of Abbas Kiarostami's Works, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 67-85.

²⁹ Lina Khatib. *Film and the Iranian Revolution: The Politics of Identity in Post-Revolutionary Cinema*. (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 97.

³⁰ Jahan Akrami, *Friendly Persuasion: Iranian Cinema After the 1979 Revolution* (University of California Press, 2000), 23; Hamid Dabashi, *The Shah, the Islamists and Iran* (Random House, 2010), 124.

³¹ Ali Jafarzadeh, *Cinema in Iran: A Historical and Critical Study* (Routledge, 2016), 198; Farid Mirani, *Movies and Social Realism in Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 11.

their identities and preferences within these confines. By portraying the apprehension between societal expectations and individual desires, these filmmakers provided a nuanced critique of the implications of the Islamic Revolution on individual freedom and agency.³² These films also explored faith and identity complexities through young protagonists.³³ Post-revolutionary cinema featured a variety of approaches, including moral instruction, focusing on marginalised communities and working-class struggles. Directors such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf explored these issues through religious symbolism and social justice messages. Films such as *The Cycle* (1978) and *The Bride of Fire* (1990) highlighted the concerns of ordinary people amidst societal changes.³⁴ Furthermore, post-revolutionary cinema developed a unique aesthetic and narrative style, focusing on everyday life, spiritual contemplation and the struggles of ordinary people dealing with the new Islamic imperative. Films such as *Khane-ye Doust Kojast?* (1987) and *Badayi-e Ma'soum* (1997) showcased childhood innocence and existential questions amidst religious fervour and social realities.³⁵

Cinema as a Canvas for Revival: The Islamic Revival on the Silver Screen (1970s-1990s)

Cinema was essential in portraying the aspirations and fears of the Islamic Revolution (1960s to 1980s) which brought about a profound shift in both society and creative expression. During this time, cinema became an important medium for showcasing the ideals and concerns associated with the Islamic Revolution. This era was marked by an emphasis on embracing Islamic values, advocating for social justice, and establishing a government that prioritised the needs of marginalised communities. Numerous filmmakers have endeavoured to convey such hopes through storytelling that

³² Lina Khatib, *Islamic Culture and the Cinema in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 78.

³³ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2011), 105.

³⁴ Chelkowski, Peter. *Iranian Cinema: Art, Culture and the Islamic Revolution*. (Indiana University Press, 2008), 142-145.

³⁵ Richard Johnson. *The Films of Abbas Kiarostami*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 23.

emphasised the importance of community, the role of morality and the influence of faith in everyday life. However, with these principles arose profound concerns such as the anxiety of political oppression, the erosion of personal freedom and the clash between traditional values and contemporary life. Movies frequently depicted these concerns, concentrating on how individuals navigated the evolving social environment. Their focus was on the challenge of balancing the adherence to Islamic norms with the desire for personal freedom. In light of the ideals and concerns of this evolving era, Iranian cinema illustrated the intricacies of a developing society³⁶.

The post-revolutionary era saw the emergence of *cinema-e-motahed*, a movement centred around themes of social justice and spirituality. Filmmakers from Iran, including Masoud Kimiai have employed cinema to depict significant religious narratives as seen in his work *The Journey of The Stone* (1978), that presents the life of Prophet Abraham³⁷. These varied methods have established Iranian cinema as a significant medium for expressing essential Islamic values such as the concepts of justice, community, morality and the significance of faith are deeply intertwined and essential to our collective existence. The films from that era highlighted themes including social justice, family values and the role of women within an Islamic framework that embodies a dedication to ethical conduct and social cohesion.

Furthermore, depicting strength and optimism amidst challenges highlighted the wider Islamic concept of endurance. Through exploring these values, Iranian cinema not only added to the conversation surrounding Islamic identity but also showcased the continuous social and artistic developments and discussions during the era following the revolution³⁸.

After the revolution, the film industry employed narratives and visuals to communicate Islamic teachings and values, enabling

³⁶ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 78.

³⁷ Peter Chelkowski, *Iranian Cinema: Art, Culture and the Islamic Revolution* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 142-145.

³⁸ Shirin Yousefi, The Role of Women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 3 (2013): 367-386.

audiences to delve into the intricacies of faith and personal challenges³⁹. Films such as Masoud Kimiai's *The Deer* (1979) employed strong symbolism to highlight the essence of Islam amidst oppressive forces, encouraging audiences to contemplate the continuous struggle between justice and oppression⁴⁰. *Gabbeh* (1996) is a minimalist film by Mohsen Makhmalbaf; it narrates the journey of a nomadic tribe to acquire a coveted rug that showcases Islamic values of resilience, faith and nature harmony. *Shahadat*, a fundamental concept in Islam, has been a central theme in numerous films such as Ali Hatami's *Mother* (1989). The film portrays a mother's unwavering support for her son who chooses to fight in the Iran-Iraq War. This illustrates the collective sacrifice within the *Ummah*.⁴¹

Iranian cinema, aligned with the Islamic emphasis on *Adl* (justice), has been instrumental in scrutinizing societal issues and advocating for social justice. Ebrahim Golestan's *Brick and Mirror* (1977) exposed social and economic disparities during the Shah's regime, while Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cycle* (1978) criticized the moral corruption and decadence of the pre-revolutionary elite. These films served as poignant reflections of social injustice and encouraged audiences to question and strive for a just societal order. Mehrjui's film *The Cycle* satirizes materialism and advocates for a return to Islamic values.⁴²

Cinema of the Soul: The Quest for Meaning in Post-Revolution Iran

In addition to social commentary, Iranian cinema has undergone a series of distinct phases that reflect societal dynamics. In the context of political discourse and genuine revolutionary objectives, the

³⁹ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 84.

⁴⁰ Hillary Beth Johnson, *The Politics of Film in Iran: From the Islamic Revolution to the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 25.

⁴¹ Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Springer, 2017), 27, 58.

⁴² Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 92.

cinematic landscape of the 1980s prominently emphasised adherence to societal conventions and the principles of Islamic culture. The nineties experienced a significant transformation as directors endeavoured to explore the themes of faith and spirituality⁴³. Films such as *Nasser's Hair*, crafted by Abbas Kiarostami in the 1990s, depicts themes of existentialism and the quest for divine meaning of life, marking a significant exploration of subjectivity. Conversely, *Ghabeleh*, a film by Mohsen Makhmalbaf from 1996, evokes a distinct sense of spiritual harmony and balance, exploring the profound connection between humanity and nature. It is intriguing to reflect on this shift towards spirituality and self-assertion as indicative of a significant new era in Iranian cinema, as well as a manifestation of the societal issues that have surfaced over the decades. In their 1990s body of work, artists broaden spiritual themes within the framework of political discourse, uncovering a deeper understanding of Islamic identity that resonates not only with political dialogue but also with the everyday religious experiences of individuals and the community at large⁴⁴.

Iranian cinema during the revolution era (1970s-1980s) effectively used visual elements to convey Islamic messages and aesthetics. The use of Islamic iconography, such as calligraphy, mosques and religious garments, often adorned films and made them visually aesthetic. The recurring image of hands raised in prayer in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The House is Black* (1987) evokes a deep sense of devotion and submission to God.⁴⁵ Wall calligraphy and prayer rugs also adorned films such as *Mother* (1989) which emphasized unwavering faith and reliance on God at the time of the protagonist's son's absence due to war.⁴⁶

⁴³ Richard Mackie, The Evolution of Iranian Cinema: From Political Ideals to Spiritual Exploration, *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 4 (1999): 467-486.

⁴⁴ Shahram Khosravi, Spirituality and Nature in Iranian Cinema: Analyzing Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5, no. 2 (2012): 145-162.

⁴⁵ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 102.

⁴⁶ Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Springer, 2017), 28.

These films provide contemplative environments for viewers to discover their spiritual paths, resonating with the Islamic principle of *Ihsan* (moral and spiritual excellence). On a personal level, the filmmakers prompted viewers to contemplate their own ethical and spiritual growth, fostering a profound inquiry into individual morality and the pursuit of inner tranquillity. At the societal level, these films frequently explore collective values such as justice, compassion and social responsibility, demonstrating how individual actions weave into the larger tapestry of society. Through the portrayal of characters who pursue moral integrity, filmmakers highlighted the significance of collective wellbeing and ethical conduct in addressing social challenges⁴⁷.

Ultimately, at the institutional level, Iranian cinema interacts with the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic, either critiquing or reinforcing the values espoused by the state. Through a contemplation of the ways in which these institutions shape individual and collective experiences, filmmakers articulated themes that resonated with viewers, cultivating a profound comprehension of their cultural identity and spiritual yearnings. Through these layers of exploration, Iranian cinema functions as an essential medium for expressing intricate Islamic values and promoting discourse regarding the interplay of faith, morality and society.⁴⁸

Frames of Faith: The Role of Censorship in Iranian Islamic Revivalism

The 1979 revolution saw the establishment of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1982. This marked a turning point for the film sector as it enforced stringent censorship laws that shaped the narrative landscape of Iranian cinema. These laws not only restricted certain themes and content but also served as a tool for promoting Islamic

⁴⁷ Shahram Khosravi, *Islamic Ideals in Iranian Cinema: The Case of Farhadi and Kiarostami*, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5, no. 2 (2012): 115-132.

⁴⁸ Shirin Yousefi, *Exploring Inner Journeys: Spiritual Themes in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 95-114.

revivalism. By regulating what could be shown on screen, the authorities aimed to align cinematic production with Islamic values and principles, effectively using film as a medium to communicate and reinforce the ideological tenets of the post-revolutionary regime. This intertwining of censorship and ideological promotion underscores the complex relationship between Iranian politics and film, revealing how legal frameworks can influence artistic expression and societal values.⁴⁹ Despite these challenges, Iranian cinema managed to navigate the complex web of political, religious and cultural influences and flourish.⁵⁰

Contribution of Notable Film Directors during the Islamic Revival (1970s-1990s)

The Islamic revival era (1970s-1980s) in Iranian cinema saw a significant shift toward incorporating Islamic values, with notable directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Dariush Mehrjui and Bahram Beizai, playing instrumental roles in shaping the genre.

Abbas Kiarostami (1940-2016), a prominent Iranian filmmaker, skilfully incorporated Islamic values into his films. His works include *Ten*, *Taste of Cherry* and *Close-Up*. These films explore themes of faith, mortality and identity, with a blend of a documentary and fiction elements. His films also include the Palme d'Or winner *Where is My Friend's House?*, which showcases Islamic values of community and compassion. His existential dramas also explore themes of faith and mortality.⁵¹

Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1970-2010) is known for his cinematic works during the Islamic Revival era which includes *Gabbeh* (1996), *The Cyclist* (1989), *Kandahar* (2001), *The Moment of Innocence* (1996) and *Once Upon a Time Cinema* (1995). These films explore

⁴⁹ Fariborz Mazda, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Ghaffarifar, Farzaneh. *Iranian Cinema at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Cultural Identity and Globalization*. Routledge, (2019).

⁵¹ Giancarlo Sobh and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (I.B. Tauris, 2003), 158.

themes of resilience, faith in God, harmony with nature,⁵² poverty, social justice⁵³ and the fight for freedom⁵⁴ within an Islamic context. They also address sensitive topics such as child execution, sparking debates about justice and Islamic interpretations of the law.⁵⁵ The documentary *Once Upon a Time Cinema* provides insight into Iranian cinema before and after the revolution.⁵⁶

Dariush Mehrjui (1939-2023) contributed satirical films during the Islamic Revival era. Among them are *The Cycle* (1978), *Ghahremieh* (1969), *The Tenants* (1987), *Hajji Washington* (1983), *Gavazn* (1979) and *The Bride of Fire* (1998). These films critique materialism,⁵⁷ social hypocrisy,⁵⁸ bourgeois values, societal dysfunction,⁵⁹ themes of faith,⁶⁰ scepticism, oppressive regimes, Islamic Justice⁶¹ and societal expectations.⁶² *The Cycle* juxtaposes the decadent parties of the pre-revolutionary elite with the struggles of ordinary people, advocating for Islamic values of simplicity and social responsibility. *Hajji Washington* explores faith and scepticism, while *Gavazn* critiques the oppressive nature of the Shah's regime.

Bahram Beizai (1938-2007) directed some well known films

⁵² Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Springer, 2017), 58.

⁵³ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 98.

⁵⁴ Mohammad Amin, *Cinema and Society in Iran: Themes of Resilience and Justice* (Routledge, 2003), 91.

⁵⁵ Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Springer, 2017), 60.

⁵⁶ Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Springer, 2017), 54.

⁵⁷ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 92.

⁵⁸ Giancarlo Sobh and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (I.B. Tauris, 2003), 144.

⁵⁹ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 95.

⁶⁰ Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Springer, 2017), 37.

⁶¹ Hillary Beth Johnson, *The Politics of Film in Iran: From the Islamic Revolution to the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 28.

⁶² Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 100.

during the Islamic revival era, such as *Chess of the Wind* (1976), *Death of Yazdgerd* (1981), *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986), *The Building* (1989), *Day of the Angel* (1990) and *The Chess Player* (1990) are significant for understanding post-revolutionary Iran. They explore themes of resilience, family and identity amidst societal changes influenced by Islamic values⁶³ besides the complexities of power, faith and life within an Islamic framework.⁶⁴ Beizai's films also explore Iranian mythology and pre-Islamic history, using chess as a metaphor for power, strategy and fate.⁶⁵ In the context of the Islamic revival, Beizai's works reflect the challenges individuals face while navigating a transformed cultural landscape. His integration of Iranian mythology and pre-Islamic history seeks to reclaim national identity, blending contemporary issues with historical narratives. Additionally, the metaphor of chess in his films symbolises the complexities of power and strategy, mirroring the political dynamics of the time. Through these themes, Beizai provides critical insight into the interplay between culture, faith and identity in the Islamic revival process.⁶⁶

Global Echoes of Belief: The Iranian Artistic Responses to the Islamic Revolution

“If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions.” Theodor W. Adorno's quote might serve as a fitting preface to this essay regarding Iranian art produced during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Do Iranian films provide answers to their own queries? Iran's creative landscape was greatly impacted by the Islamic Revival in the 1970s and 1980s. It fostered a vibrant revivalist thought in a variety of art forms that emphasized themes of faith, identity and the place of religion in society.

⁶³ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 97.

⁶⁴ Mahmood Mohammadi, *Islamic Values in Contemporary Iranian Cinema* (Springer, 2017), 33.

⁶⁵ Giancarlo Sobh and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (I.B. Tauris, 2003), 165.

⁶⁶ Hamid Naficy and Hasan Tibi Yasin, Introduction, in Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 86.

Two important contributors to the literary revival were Ali Shariati and Simin Daneshvar who combined Islamic philosophy with modern social criticism. Daneshvar's works examined the intricacies of rural Iranian life,⁶⁷ whereas Shariati's writings were centred on justice, emancipation and religious participation.⁶⁸ Their writings offered new insights into Islamic philosophy and its applicability in the modern day. Furthermore, the admiration of old artistic forms enriched with Islamic patterns and symbolism has driven the modernization of visual arts⁶⁹, especially calligraphy and miniature painting. Islamic stories and historical personalities were reinvented by artists such as Mahmoud Farshchian and Sadegh Tabrizi, who displayed their contemporary sensibility⁷⁰ and skilled brushwork. This renewed engagement not only preserved cultural heritage but also effectively explored Islamic values.

Iran's soundscape changed by a revival of *nasheed*, a religious music genre that combines Islamic hymns and chants with traditional Iranian features. Through the global language of music, well-known vocalists such as Mohammad Reza Shajarian became iconic characters.⁷¹ *Nasheed* offered a powerful way to express faith and connect with Islamic traditions and religion through the universal language of music.

The Iranian Islamic revival of the 1970s-1980s was a transformative period that reshaped the landscape of Islamic thought globally. It saw diverse artistic expressions across regions, each imbued with the cultural nuances of Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia and the broader Arab world. Pakistani Sufi music, with its soul-stirring *qawwals* of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan,⁷² Aziz Mian

⁶⁷ Simin Daneshvar, *Clay and Blood*, trans. Vida Yazdi (New York: Mage Publishers, 1988), 152.

⁶⁸ Ali Shariati, *Path of Freedom*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), 39.

⁶⁹ Sadegh Tabrizi, *Miniatures of Sadegh Tabrizi* (Tehran: Cultural Heritage Organization, 1979), 12.

⁷⁰ Mahmoud Farshchian, *Thirty Years of Farshchian's Calligraphy* (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1981), 7.

⁷¹ Mohammad Reza Shajarian, *Nawa: Invocation* (Tehran: Soureh Mehr, 1985), 18.

⁷² Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, *Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan: The Essence of Qawwali* (London: EMI Records, 1990).

Qawwal,⁷³ and Abida Parveen,⁷⁴ transcended borders and enriched global appreciation for this spiritual tradition. In Turkey, Rumi's teachings found renewed expression in Sufi music and the captivating *Raqs*.⁷⁵ Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book* offered a nuanced perspective on Islamic thought through literature.⁷⁶ The Arab world witnessed a revitalization of Arabic music and literature, exemplified by the works of Naguib Mahfouz⁷⁷ and Kateb Yacine.⁷⁸ In Indonesia and Malaysia, the echoes of the revival manifested in various art forms, such as Malaysian artist Shahidan Shahir's photo essay *The Malay Archipelago*.⁷⁹ The Iranian Islamic Revival era stands as a testament to the transformative power of art in shaping a global conversation on faith, identity and the multifaceted nature of Islamic thought.

Conclusion

The study of Iranian cinema during the Islamic revival offers a unique perspective on the relationship between religion, culture and modernity. It challenges traditional assumptions about the connection between religion and artistic expression, revealing the complex nature of cinematic engagement with Islamic values. Iranian filmmakers such as Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf, Mehrjui and Beizai skilfully balanced expressing Islamic values with social realities, using sophisticated aesthetics to convey complex messages. Their works transcended entertainment, expressing societal anxieties and aspirations, fostering public discourse and shaping a shared Islamic identity.

The exploration of themes such as faith, community, and

⁷³ Aziz Mian Qawwal, *Aziz Mian Qawwal: The Master of Qawwali* (Karachi: EMI Records, 1978), 23.

⁷⁴ Abida Parveen, *Abida Parveen: The Queen of Qawwali* (Lahore: EMI Records, 1982), 17.

⁷⁵ Elaine Crystal, *The Story of Sufi Music* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2001), 32.

⁷⁶ Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 157.

⁷⁷ Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 120.

⁷⁸ Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962), 47.

⁷⁹ S. M. Zainul Abidin Shahir, *The Malay Archipelago: A Photographic Journey* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2009), 43.

justice in Iranian cinema is articulated through the use of *mise-en-scène*, narrative structures, and cinematic techniques. The era defined by the 1979 revolution transformed Iranian cinema from mere escapist melodramas to narratives deeply embedded in Islamic themes, mirroring the nation's evolving identity and ideological shifts. Scholars continue to investigate the complex connection and interaction between religion and art. Iranian film offers a deep dive into the intricacies of Iranian culture through its specific creative value and historical relevance, making it a unique voice on the global cinematic arena. The worldwide impact of the Islamic revival as expressed through artistic forms highlights the intricate relationships within cultural realms and the capacity of cinema to surpass national frontiers. The evolution of Iranian cinema from its pre-revolutionary allure to the post-revolutionary emphasis on piety illustrates the profound influence of political and social turmoil. This transformation has incorporated Islamic motifs and facilitated a novel era of artistic expression, mirroring Iran's complex historical narrative and its continuously developing identity. Between 1970 and 1990, Iranian cinema underwent profound transformations as a result of the Islamic revolution, reshaping its thematic focus and artistic expression. The centrality of Islamic values was established, yet a multitude of diverse perspectives and innovations surfaced. The evolution of Iranian cinema persists, engaging with social and political themes while preserving its cultural essence. The enduring impact of the revolution and its resurgence in cinematic expression provide profound reflections on Iranian society and its artistic evolution.

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