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MAKHMALBAF'S BROKEN MIRROR: THE
SOCIO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
MODERN IRANIAN CINEMA

by

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, modern Iranian films are being discussed in the West in circles that focus usually on 'high art'. Mohsen Makhmalbaf is a Persian film director who has attracted much attention in the West, both for the artistic merit of his films and their socio-political content. Tracing Makhmalbaf's life and work is of great interest since his active support of the Islamic revolution has developed into criticism of certain policies pursued by some factions within the Islamic government. His films of the 1990s reflect the issues and discussions that are taking place within Iran during this period, such as freedom of expression, censorship, the role of women, and the nature of subjectivity. Makhmalbaf has attained a popular following, and he could almost be considered a dissident, yet ironically, the fact that his films are screened in Iran shows the degree of 'openness' that exists there.

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INTRODUCTION

During the last decade of the twentieth century, internationally respected film-directors have become increasingly excited by films that have been produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The comments of the acclaimed Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa¹ about one of the giants of modern Persian film directors, reflect this tendency: 'I believe the films of [the] Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami are extraordinary. Words cannot relate my feelings. I suggest you see his films; and then you will see what I mean.'² The growing interest in modern Iranian films has become manifest at many international film festivals. From March 1994 to March 1995, 127 Iranian films were screened at 492 such festivals, winning 28 international awards.³ Ali Reza Shojanoorani, of Sima Films Iran, commented on the success of Persian films in international festivals in a joke told at a one-day conference entitled 'Iranian Cinema' held in London on 11 July 1999. Prior to the 'discovery' of Iranian films, commented Shojanoorani, Persian directors were stopped at airport customs to ensure they were not taking antiques out of the country. Now they are still stopped on returning to Iran, but only to check which award they have in their baggage.

There has been a wide variety of films produced in Iran since the Islamic revolution, including historical works, films which portray the effects of the Gulf War with Iraq, the position of women, and those that depict the innocence and ideal morality of children.⁴ Despite the diversity of Iranian films, several scholars have attempted to define the characteristics of the so-called 'new wave' of Iranian cinema, and a typical example is offered by Mir-Ahmad-e Mir-Ehsan: 'The essential feature of our New Cinema is the use of "polyglossia" towards the exaltation of life, until life itself has culminated into an artistic text; in other words, the aesthetic contemplation of a life capable of

¹ Kurasawa was the director of *Roshomon* (1951), *The Seven Samurai* (1954) *Sanjuro* (1962), and *Yojimbo* (1961). He died in 1998.

² Cited on the internet
<http://www.afionline.org/nft/may96/nft.kiarostami.html>.

³ Cited in the Persian newspaper *Hamshahri*, April 6, 1995. Also cited on the internet http://www.nima3.com/IranMedia/Iran_in_festivals.html.

⁴ In this last category, the film *Children of Heaven* (1997) can be included. It was nominated for an Oscar in the category of Best Foreign Film at the 1998 Hollywood awards.

turning into form!"³ Another characteristic of the new wave is the documentary nature of films that is achieved by directors using non-professionals or amateurs rather than professional actors,⁶ by adapting real-life occurrences to film,⁷ using shots of the film being filmed,⁸ and by allowing actors to take a large degree of responsibility for the script. Regarding this last point, Makhmalbaf has commented:

*I used to give my scripts to the people in the field to read but now I keep it a secret, not even two who are standing in front of each other should know what the other one will say. In a way a true and real reaction of an actor will be part of a film.*⁹

These characteristics have been described by Dabashi as a 'widening borderline between fact and fantasy'.¹⁰ The tenuous nature of this borderline heightens the relevance that such works have for the audience, for the 'willing suspension of disbelief' becomes that much easier when watching works of a 'story-documentary, film within a film'¹¹ nature that can be categorised under the term 'social-realism'. At the same time, these films are not mere replications of real events, for they are artistic creations that explore and develop the possibilities of art and its relation to life.

One of the many elements that are worthy of detailed investigation within the new wave of Iranian films is the political message and significance of such films. Mohsen Makhmalbaf is generally recognised as one of the most political

³ Mir-Ahmad-e Mir-Ehsan, "Dark Light", in R. Issa, and S. Whitaker (eds.), *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, (London: National Film Theatre, 1999), pp. 108.

⁶ A typical example of this is Makhmalbaf's 1995 film, *Gabbeh*.

⁷ Examples of this include Makhmalbaf's *Salaam Cinema* (1994), and Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990).

⁸ See Makhmalbaf's *Marriage of the Blessed* (1988).

⁹ See Talebinejad, and Golmakani, "A Talk with Mohsen Makhmalbaf: Reality is a Prison", *Film International*, autumn 1995. Also on the internet <http://www.nima3.com/IranMedia/Makh-int.htm>. A Persian version of this interview appears in "Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf: tekkeh-i az an ayeneh shekasteh" [In conversation with Mohsen Makhmalbaf: a piece of the broken mirror], which is an individual chapter in *Salaam Sinema, chand goftagu* [Salaam Cinema: several discussions], A. Khosravi (ed.), (Tehran: Nashrani, 1376). The quotation above appears on pp. 62.

¹⁰ H. Dabashi, "Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Moment of Innocence*", in R. Issa and S. Whitaker (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 117.

¹¹ A term employed by Hamid Reza-Sadr, "Contemporary Iranian Cinema and its Major Themes", in R. Issa, and S. Whitaker (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 42.

of modern Persian directors. His works offer a glimpse of the development of certain aspects of Persian culture and issues that engage the intellectuals in Iran, such as the relationship between freedom of expression and censorship in an Islamic state. At Cannes in 1999, he stated, 'I think cinema can play a very great role in helping bring about a free Iran. It acts as a mirror of society ... and when you look at a mirror, you see what's wrong and what needs changing.'¹² Makhmalbaf's films are of interest because he himself was a child of the Islamic revolution, and his early films depict his firm attachment to Islam. Although his sympathy to Islam does not appear to have wavered over the years, Makhmalbaf's support for certain policies of the Islamic government in Iran has not been completely unequivocal. This paper will investigate several of the major issues that Makhmalbaf has addressed in some of his films made during the 1990s. The prominent themes include the search for truth, the nature of subjectivity, censorship and the position of women in Iran. Such topics affect all Iranians, and Makhmalbaf's commitment to tackle these issues in subtle ways may account for the popularity of his films among Iranians. Although there is no doubting the mass-appeal of Makhmalbaf's works among Iranians, (and among many Western film critics who regard his works as representative of 'high art') some Iranians have complained that several of his films have not portrayed Iran in a favourable light to Western audiences. Yet the well-known German director Werner Herzog¹³ provided an answer to such criticism when he stated: 'Three hundred years [from now] ... the Iranian journalists will realise that the present generation of Iranian filmmakers was in fact like Khayyam and Ferdowsi. You [i.e. Makhmalbaf, etc.] are the poets of the present age.'¹⁴ Herzog addressed Makhmalbaf specifically:

*Your cinematic language is highly interesting and personal. It is your own special cinematic language and quite unlike anything I have seen anywhere else ... You have created your own cinema, and you have been very successful in creating a poetic film language ... One does not need to know Persian, one does not even need the subtitles to realise this, for the cinematic poem is a universal language.'*¹⁵

Aside from such considerations, Makhmalbaf's works remain accessible to a very wide audience, even on a popular level. One need only witness the opening scenes of his *Salaam Cinema* (1994) when thousands of young Iranians auditioned for a role in his film.

¹² Cited on the internet <http://www.iranian.com/News/1999/May/cinema.html>.

¹³ Herzog's most famous films include *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), *Heart of Glass* (1976), and *Nosferatu* (1978).

¹⁴ See "Makhmalbaf on Herzog on Makhmalbaf", *Film International*, spring 1994.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Given the themes of Makhmalbaf's films, it is necessary to mention briefly the political and religious context from which they have emerged, and in addition it will be useful to summarise the stance adopted by the Islamic government of Iran regarding freedom of expression in film.

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CENSORSHIP IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran, many groups that opposed the Shah felt that cinemas were a means by which the Shah promoted Western culture at the expense of the Islamic way of life. Ayatollah Khomeini held such a view, and in the will he composed just before his death in 1989, he stated:

The radio, the television, the print media, the theatres and the cinemas have been successfully used to intellectually anesthetize nations, especially the youth ...

Television films were the product of either Western or Eastern countries, tending to lead the young generation and men and women away from the healthy business of life, work, and industry and production and learning, and plunge them into a world of self-estrangement or of disrespect for and mistrust of everything native, including their country and even their culture, and their native artefacts, many of which were taken to museums and libraries in the Western and Eastern bloc countries.¹⁶

The association of cinemas with the regime of the Shah was instrumental in the closure of 180 cinemas just one year after the revolution of 1978, leaving 256 operational cinemas in Iran.¹⁷ After the revolution, the Islamic regime decided that it was necessary to promote the native Iranian film industry to produce films that reflected the Islamic-Iranian heritage. Cinema was a tool that could be utilised by the regime in its attempts to Islamicise society, just as the Shah had employed the cinema to reflect Western values. As Khomeini stated in 1979, in his first public speech on his return to Iran from exile:

We are not opposed to the cinema, to radio, or to television; what we oppose is vice and the use of the media to keep our young people in a state of backwardness and dissipate their energies. We have never opposed these features of modernity in themselves, but when they are brought from Europe to the East, particularly to Iran,

¹⁶ See Khomeini's last will (section M). *Matn-e kamel-e vasiyatnameh-e elahi va siyasi-ye imam Khomeini* (The Complete Text of Imam Khomeini's Divine Will and Testament), *Kayhan-e Hava'i*, 14 June 1989. See also H. Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran", in S. Farsoun, and M. Mashayekhi (eds.), *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 178-179.

¹⁷ H. Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran", *op. cit.*, pp. 183.

*unfortunately they were not used in order to advance civilisation, but in order to drag us into barbarism. The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but, as you know, it was used to corrupt our youth. It is this misuse of the cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers.*¹⁸

From the very beginning of the Islamic regime, the government was careful to safeguard the Islamicity of Iranian culture. Article 24 of the Constitution stated that the media 'are free to present all matters except those that are detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public'.¹⁹ These principles and rights were explained in 1982, and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), under Muhammad Khatami (who became President in 1997), established the Farabi Cinema Foundation in 1983 to supervise and support new films, and provide the personnel to make new films.²⁰ Guidance for film directors was clarified in 1996, when the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance outlined the boundaries which film directors were not permitted to cross in a book entitled *The Principles and Operational Procedures of Iranian Cinema*.²¹ These regulations included a ban on insulting references to monotheism, the prophets, the *imams*, the principles behind the Islamic government in Iran (*velayat-e faqih*), the police, and the armed forces. There was also a prohibition on films that promoted prostitution, corruption, foreign influence, violence, and on showing sexually explicit scenes, or images of women dressed immodestly (which meant that women were obliged to cover their bodies and hair).

The Ministry also subjected all films to a five-step regulation process before permission was granted for films to be screened to the public. These five steps commence when the MCIG reviews the synopsis of the film. It then analyses the screenplay (step two), and if both synopsis and screenplay comply with the

¹⁸ Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1985), pp. 258.

¹⁹ Dr Mohammad Bagher Ghahramani (Faculty of Fine Art, University of Tehran) in an unpublished paper entitled "Iranian Cinema after the Islamic Revolution: Perceived Limitations and Achievements", given at "The International Conference on Islamic Art, Culture and Civilization: Iran", held in the Islamic Centre in Maida Vale, London, on 10 April 1999.

²⁰ The Farabi Cinema Foundation has produced the following number of films: 1990, 56; 1991, 45; 1992, 52; 1993, 56; 1994, 45; 1995, 62; 1996, 63; 1997, 54; 1998, 64. See the internet <http://www.ima.com/20th-bahar/farabi/Survey3.htm>.

²¹ Ghahramani, "Iranian Cinema after the Islamic Revolution", *op. cit.*, see also H. Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran", *op. cit.*, pp. 190-191.

accepted Islamic standards, a production permit is issued which approves of the cast and crew (step three). On completion, the film is reviewed by the MCIG (step four), and the last step is the issuance of an exhibition permit. These measures have enabled the MCIG to keep effective control of the Iranian film industry, and Makhmalbaf has experienced delays in the release of his films to the public (see below), and has been forced to work outside Iran. He has deemed it necessary to film part of *The Cyclist* (1987) in Pakistan, *A Time for Love* (1990) in Turkey, and *The Silence* (1997) in Tajikistan.²²

Another problem related to censorship of films was that the policies of the MCIG, with regard to cinema, were determined every year and announced through the annual *Fajr* Film Festival. This meant that the officials' likes and dislikes had an impact on the implementation of censorship policies, and due to the changing nature of the system, film-makers were not able to plan ahead for long term projects. In March 1998, the Deputy Minister for Cinema Affairs announced the introduction of five-year policies, which may assist film-directors. However, the draft cinema code was not discussed at Cabinet level because it was considered necessary to first concentrate upon legislation for the Press Code.²³

Aside from official forms of censorship of their works, directors are faced with an additional problem in that they have to engage in a form of self-censorship regarding their private lives (which are never really private due to their celebrity status). The experience of Abbas Kiarostami is a case in point. Kiarostami was the joint recipient of the Palme d'Or prize at the 50th Cannes Film Festival in 1997 for his film *The Taste of Cherry*. He received his award from Catherine Deneuve, who expressed her congratulations by hugging and kissing him. On phoning Iran to speak with his son later that night, Kiarostami was urged not to return to Iran immediately because such public displays of affection involving an unveiled lady might have been construed in an unfavourable manner by the more 'conservative' elements of the Islamic government in Iran. Subsequently, Kiarostami returned to Iran a week later, coinciding with the Presidential victory of Muhammad Khatami, regarded by many as a more 'liberal' face of Islam.²⁴

Yet censorship may be double-edged since modern Iranian film-directors have been able to produce some remarkable films during the period that 'Islamic' censorship has been enforced. Kiarostami himself believes this to be the case:

²² See "Poetry Inspires Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf" on the internet <http://www.salamiran.org/Media/IranNews/981202.html#HLN23>.

²³ *Film International*, vol. 7, no. 1, summer 1999, pp. 6.

²⁴ "In Dialogue with Kiarostami", Ali Akbar Mahdi, dated August 25, 1998, cited on the internet: <http://iranian.com/Arts/Aug98/Kiarostami/index.html>.

*I have a friend who is an architect. He tells me that he is at his best professionally when he designs structures for odd lots because these lands do not fit into the normal pattern and he has to work within a great deal of limitations. So, he must be creative and he enjoys this. It is these restrictions that provide an opportunity for people to be creative.*²⁵

Not all Iranian film-directors share Kiarostami's opinion. A notable example is Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (the female film director of *Nargess*, *The May Lady*, and *The Blue-Veiled*) who has stated publicly that she would prefer the restrictions removed.²⁶

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²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Rakhshan Bani-Etemad made this comment in a question and answer session at the National Film Theatre, London, on 6 July 1999, after the screening of *Nargess*.

MAKHMALBAF'S LIFE AND WORKS

Mohsen Makhmalbaf was born in Tehran in 1957, and left school at the age of eleven to support his family. In his youth, Makhmalbaf wanted to become a *mullah*,²⁷ but he became an agitator against the Shah's regime, and aged seventeen was seriously wounded in a skirmish with a policeman. He was arrested and thrown into jail, where he served four and a half years before being released during the early days of the Islamic revolution. It was after his release from prison that Makhmalbaf first went to the cinema, and like Khomeini, he was fearful of the effects that cinema could have on people.

*In my childhood I did not go to the cinema with my mother, and on one occasion I stopped talking to her for some time because she had gone to the movies. The reasons for my objections to the cinema were clear to myself. Cinema in our country meant selling dreams to people who longed for ideals. I first went to the movies at the age of twenty-three - after the revolution.*²⁸

Makhmalbaf's aversion to the cinema may have been encouraged by his grandmother, who believed that anyone who went to the cinema would end up in hell.²⁹

During the early years of the revolution, Makhmalbaf joined the Islamic Propagation Organisation, a semi-governmental production centre for arts that has been described as 'an outfit of avowed militancy'.³⁰ In 1982, he directed the first of four films that he himself considers his first period of film-making, which reflected his Islamic faith and revolutionary ardour.³¹ Between 1986 and 1989, Makhmalbaf entered a new period making three films that dealt with social issues; these films revealed his disappointment with the revolution's inability to solve many of Iran's internal problems. One of these films, *The*

²⁷ See the documentary by Hushang Golmakani, *Gong-e Khabdideh* 1995. This documentary is available with English subtitles under the title of *Stardust Stricken*.

²⁸ Cited on the internet <http://www.torinofilmfest.org/e1996/mohsene.html>.

²⁹ "Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf", *op. cit.*, pp. 73.

³⁰ G. Cheshire "The Figure in the Carpet", *Film Comment*, July-August 1997, pp. 63.

³¹ See F. Rava, "L'Individu, L'Art et L'Avenir Démocratique: Un Entretien avec le Cinéaste Mohsen Makhmalbaf" [The Individual, Art, and the Democratic Future: A Talk with the Film Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf], *Europe Revue Littéraire Mensuelle*, 76, 1998, pp. 213.

Peddler (1987) with its depiction of the plight of the urban poor of Tehran is reckoned to be Makhmalbaf's artistic breakthrough, especially in the West where it screened at twenty international film festivals.³² Makhmalbaf's next two films represent his third period, in which he explored themes of relativity. These films were extremely controversial in Iran; *A Time for Love* was not released outside Iran for almost five years because of its 'morally relative take on adultery'.³³ In three stories, Makhmalbaf portrayed different relationships between a woman and two men, each story revealing the perspective of one of the three major characters. In this way, Makhmalbaf explored the possibility of discovering truth from different angles, denying the reality of absolutes.

Makhmalbaf was able to make such films because he enjoyed the support of Muhammad Khatami, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. However in 1992, Khatami was ousted from his job by individuals who disliked those themes in Makhmalbaf's works that included 'taboo subjects like adultery and suicide - and hinted that tyranny did not end with the Shah's departure'.³⁴ By this period, Makhmalbaf had become a national figure in Iran, to the extent that one young man attempted to pass himself off as Makhmalbaf and gain recognition and respect from society. The trial and re-enactment of these events were captured on film by Abbas Kiarostami in his 1990 film, *Close Up*, which was a massive hit in Iran and among the 'art-house' cinemas in the West.

The fourth period is characterised by an interest in cinema, which has permitted Makhmalbaf to investigate themes of the 'reality' of the image, censorship and power. Although he has claimed to have drifted away from 'politicised cinema to move towards poetry',³⁵ Makhmalbaf's films still contain messages of a political nature that cannot be ignored. After all, statements such as 'art ... liberates us; it tends to originality ... It put us on the road to freedom',³⁶ says as much about power and politics as it does about poetics and art.

During Makhmalbaf's fourth period, his name has become increasingly familiar among Western film critics,³⁷ and he also consolidated his position as

³² See the internet <http://www.torinofilmfest.org/e1996/mohsene.html>.

³³ See *Salaam Cinema: The Films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, on the internet <http://cinematheque.bc.ca/previous/makh.html>.

³⁴ S. Macleod, "Iran's Big Shift", *Time*, vol. 149, no. 22, June 2, 1997.

³⁵ Cited on the internet <http://www.salamiran.org/Media?IranNews/981202.html#HLN23>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ According to the Farabi Cinema Foundation, Makhmalbaf's *The Cyclist* was the second most popular film for foreign sales (date not given), beaten only by Majid

one of the most popular film directors in Iran. This was made clear with his film *Salaam Cinema*. Not only was the film Iran's third largest box-office hit in 1995,³⁸ but the opening shots recorded the mass-hysteria created by Makhmalbaf when he placed an advertisement in the national press inviting people to appear in Tehran's Firdaws Park to audition for parts in his new film. On the morning of the audition, thousands of aspiring actors, men, women, old and young turned up, and pandemonium ensued as people were trampled underfoot in their attempt to be first in the queue to fill out application forms.

By 1997, Makhmalbaf had become a national name, perhaps even a national hero, and he felt confident enough to criticise a government minister in public. A conflict erupted between Makhmalbaf and Mr Mir Salim, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, concerning their agreement to export Iranian films to Israel. In an open letter to the Persian press, Makhmalbaf claimed that this decision had been accepted by the minister, and witnessed by Makhmalbaf himself and six other important personages of the film industry. Subsequently, Mir Salim denied this agreement, perhaps realising that the more 'hard-line' and anti-Israeli elements in Iran would act against it. The Farabi Cinema Foundation claimed that screening the films in Jerusalem was 'art banditry ... a plot hatched by Europe and the illegal state of Israel ... incompatible with the most basic principles of international and cultural regulations'.³⁹ The minister's denial of the agreement provoked Makhmalbaf to publish an open letter in which he asked: 'If he [Mir Salam] doesn't feel any shame towards his conscience and the Day of Judgement, which he believes in, then how could he have the nerve to ever face those witnesses after telling such a lie?'⁴⁰ In the letter to the press it was added that Mir Salim's response to this exposure was the banning of Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996) and *A Moment of Innocence* (1995).

Makhmalbaf's relationship with the Islamic regime in Iran is far from harmonious, and the following perhaps expresses the extent of his disillusion with the government:

A totalitarian regime takes charge of the individual entirely, [including] the privacy of being allowed to think. So no one is permitted freedom of choice. Political or religious totalitarianism deprives us of a sense of responsibility because it deprives us of the

Majidi's Oscar nominated *The Children of Heaven*. See the internet <http://www.irna.com/20th-bahar/farabi/Survey4.htm>.

³⁸ See the internet <http://www.neda.net/film/vol4-1n2/ircinema.html>.

³⁹ Reported by Reuters, see the internet <http://www.farsinet.com/news/jul97.html>.

⁴⁰ Cited on the internet <http://www.iranian.com/Features/Aug97/Film/index.html>.

*freedom of imagination. The spirit of women is veiled, just like her body beneath regulatory clothes. I believe sincerely that our liberty will triumph through the voice of art, and not by the bias of an ideology for the simple reason that it is art, and art alone, that permits freedom of imagination and originality.*⁴¹

The West has also become aware of the significance of Makhmalbaf's work, for he has been the subject of several major retrospectives. One was held in New York at the Museum of Modern Art in 1997, another at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts where six of Makhmalbaf's films were screened in July in the same year. The British finally recognised the importance of Makhmalbaf's films in the 1999 summer season of the National Film Theatre, which was named 'Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema'. During this festival, four of Makhmalbaf's films were screened out of a total of fifty films made by Iranian directors.⁴² Makhmalbaf was also recognised by the Vatican, for his 1997 film, *The Silence*, was included among twenty films that were screened in the Millennium Spiritual Film Festival that ran until 9 December 1999. These films were selected by a Vatican committee from over three hundred films, following a papal order to harness the mass media.⁴³

Aside from being one of Iran's greatest film-directors, Makhmalbaf is also well known for being an accomplished writer of short stories. Indeed, Dr Ghobadi (who teaches modern Persian literature at the University of Teacher Training in Tehran) believes that Makhmalbaf should be included among the most talented writers of short stories in post-revolutionary Iran. His short stories include *Bag-i bolur* [The crystal garden], *Mara bebus* [Kiss me!], *Jerahi-ye ruh* [Operation of the soul],⁴⁴ and *Haws-e sultan* [The Sultan's Pond].⁴⁵ In addition, Makhmalbaf has published a series of articles in which,

⁴¹ Makhmalbaf in F. Rava, "L'Individu, L'Art et L'Avenir Démocratique: Un Entretien avec le Cinéaste Mohsen Makhmalbaf" [The Individual, Art, and the Democratic Future: A Talk with the Film Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf], *op. cit.*, pp. 216.

⁴² For a full list of Makhmalbaf's films and documentaries see the appendix.

⁴³ R. Carroll, "Vatican Assembles its Vision of Celluloid Heaven", *The Guardian*, 17 November 1999. The judges summarised *The Silence* by stating: 'An Iranian boy overcomes disability in an extraordinary, uplifting way.'

⁴⁴ An English version of this story appears on the web, see <http://www.neda.net/film/>.

⁴⁵ These short stories are included in volume 1 of *Gong-e Khabdideh*, (Tehran: Nashrani, 1375).

among other topics, he discusses the cinema, art, realism,⁴⁶ and the female poet/film-maker Forugh Farrokhzad.⁴⁷

It is hoped that more research on Makhmalbaf's films and writings will be undertaken. With the publication of *Gong-e Khabdideh* [Stardust Stricken],⁴⁸ which comprises three volumes of Makhmalbaf's screenplays, short stories and articles, the task of the researcher has been made that much easier. Other works worthy of note are *Mo'arefi va naqd-e filmha-ye Mohsen Makhmalbaf*, a collection of over forty articles on Makhmalbaf's films, edited by Gholam Haydari.⁴⁹ Moreover, Makhmalbaf's individual films have resulted in much commentary, none perhaps more so than *Salaam Cinema*, which is the subject of *Salaam Sinema, chand goftagu*, edited by Amir Khosravi.⁵⁰

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⁴⁶ See volumes 2 and 3 of *Gong-e Khabdideh*.

⁴⁷ See M. Makhmalbaf, *Zendegi rang ast* [Life is colour], (Tehran: Nashrani, 1377), pp. 77-95.

⁴⁸ *Gong-e Khabdideh, op. cit.*, "Stardust Stricken" is the English name given to the 1995 film-documentary by Hushang Golmakani, (the original name in Persian is *Gong-e Khabdideh*).

⁴⁹ G. Haydari (ed.), *Mo'arefi va naqd-e filmha-ye Mohsen Makhmalbaf* [An introduction and criticism of the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf], (Tehran: Mo'asseseh Entesharat-e Negah, 1376).

⁵⁰ *Salaam Sinema, chand goftagu* [Salaam Cinema: several discussions], *op. cit.*

THE BROKEN MIRROR

(a) The Absolute and the Relative

In the previous section, it was noted that Makhmalbaf displayed revolutionary tendencies in the years prior to the Islamic revolution, and his early films are an indication of his attachment to Islamic values. However, his films of the 1990s pay greater attention to psychological analysis of the human condition, to absolute and relative truths, and to freedom of expression and censorship, and it is these films that provide a basis for this study on Makhmalbaf.

By his own admission, Makhmalbaf remains true to his faith in God, yet he claims that he no longer considers political reform as the answer to Iran's problems. He states: 'I see the roots of our political problems in our cultural problems ... instead of looking at things politically, I look at them culturally.'⁵¹ Makhmalbaf is not particularly enamoured with contemporary Iranian culture that he views as 'a culture that closes doors'.⁵² An analysis of his films and comments regarding contemporary Iranian culture reveals that he considers that the doors are being shut by patriarchal power, and absolutist worldviews that have become reified in certain political and religious structures. The culture for which Makhmalbaf yearns is the old Persian culture, and he discovered it in Tajikistan, 'a country where the Persian language is spoken, a place full of colours and poetry which seems to me to capture what Iran has lost'.⁵³ The mention of poets offers a hint as to where Makhmalbaf derives his inspiration, for the great majority of Persian poets were themselves deeply committed to Sufism, the mystical movement in Islam that tended to embrace all manifestations of truth, and rejected absolutism. Makhmalbaf is fond of citing the thirteenth century Persian mystic, Rumi:

*Truth is a mirror that falls from the hand of God and shatters into pieces. Everyone picks up a piece and believes that that piece contains the whole truth, even though the truth is left sown about in each fragment.*⁵⁴

⁵¹ "Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf", *op. cit.*, pp. 76.

⁵² *Ibid*, pp. 79.

⁵³ Cited on the internet <http://www.nima3.com/IranMedia/Silence.html>.

⁵⁴ Lines from Rumi, the thirteenth century Persian mystical poet, which Makhmalbaf is fond of reciting. See the internet <http://www.torinofilmfest.org/e1996/spotlie.html>. Rumi is well known for

Rumi frequently oscillates between the absolute truth of God, and the relative truth of human endeavours to perceive God. Likewise, in *Once Upon a Time Cinema* (1991), Makhmalbaf has the protagonist, Mirza Ibrahim Khan 'Akkasbashi',⁵⁵ explain the nature of the cinema to the Shah, Nasir al-Din: 'Cinematography shows fancy as the truth, and shows truth as a fancy'. Makhmalbaf's awareness of the Sufi tradition manifests itself in many forms, such as his use of language and terms that are loaded with Sufi meanings. For example, in *Once Upon a Time Cinema*, Mirza Ibrahim Khan is accused of being an artist, who as a group generally pretend to be gnostics ('arif), whereas Ibrahim Khan seems to be no more than an ascetic hermit (*zahid*). In response, Ibrahim Khan protests: 'I am not an ascetic hermit, but a lover ('*ashiq*)'. Ibrahim Khan, is of course a lover of the cinema, or of truth, the truth that can be reflected in the mirror of the cinematic screen.

Makhmalbaf's love of Persian poetry, and the tendency of poets to disdain absolutes and enjoy the beauty present in life is evident in his comments about his 1997 film, *The Silence*, filmed in Tajikistan and which was inspired by the great poet Omar Khayyam:⁵⁶

It's a film about music and the inner-voice that each of us should follow. [The protagonist] Khorshid lives for the moment without thinking about the past or the future. I was inspired by Khayyam, a famous Persian poet who said: 'On Earth life is the most important

his acceptance of a multiplicity of 'truths', as opposed to a single, absolute truth. The difficulty, or impossibility, of attaining the absolute, or God, is expressed by Rumi in the following:

*Grab the garment of His grace, because He will suddenly flee
But do not draw him like an arrow, since He will fly from the bow ...
If you seek Him in the sky, He shines in the water, like the moon.
But when you look in the water, He flees to the sky ...
When you seek Him in a location, He will flee to the placeless,
As an arrow flies from the bow, just like the bird of your imagination.*

Rumi, *Diwan-i Shams*, no. 900, Furuzanfar (ed.), (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1957-66).

⁵⁵ Mirza Ibrahim Khan was a real individual who was responsible for bringing the cinema to Iran. See H. Naficy, "Iranian Cinema", in G. Nowell-Smith (ed.), *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 672.

⁵⁶ Although Khayyam cannot be considered a Sufi, he had little time for those Islamic theologians or jurists who adhered to absolutist world-views. A. J. Arberry has little doubt about Khayyam's understanding of Sufism: 'Even the most superficial perusal of Omar's poems makes it abundantly clear that he was no friend of the Sufis, whom he both parodies and directly attacks in a number of places.' A. J. Arberry, *Omar Khayyam*, (London: John Murray, 1952), pp. 27.

thing that exists, and life means the present time.' A maxim that was rejected by all the religious philosophies so as to compel us to live our lives in anticipation of the sequel to death.⁵⁷

Makhmalbaf's rejection of absolutes should be taken as a refusal to accept the inalienable right of any one standpoint, whether it is political or religious, at the expense of another. In Golmakani's documentary *Gong-e Khabdideh*, he stated:

Whether leftist or rightist, religious or non-religious, ruler or opposition, they all think the same, that violence solves problems. But why do [people] resort to violence. Firstly, [they say] we are absolutists, and the truth is with us. Secondly, in order to carry out this [they say that] no other way exists except violence.⁵⁸

He himself claims to have moved beyond politics, having criticised left-wing politics in *Two Blind Eyes* (1983) and *Boycott* (1985), and the right wing in *The Peddler* (1986), *The Cyclist* (1987) and *The Marriage of the Blessed* (1988).⁵⁹ And in *Boycott*, Makhmalbaf expresses this very point by having the protagonist ask: 'When I'm dead, what difference will it make whether there is socialism or capitalism?'

It has already been indicated that Makhmalbaf was a strong supporter of the Islamic revolution, and there is little evidence that he has changed his mind about the just cause of the revolution since then. However, it is apparent that he is not prepared to endorse certain policies that restrict his understanding of freedom and justice. Indeed, Makhmalbaf's position is representative of those which have become more public in Iran in the years following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. It appears to be the goal of President Muhammad Khatami, who although in public upholds the absolute political system of the late Ayatollah (the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*), at the same time calls for a more open society. More strident in expressing such an opinion is the well-known Iranian intellectual-dissident, 'Abd al-Karim Soroush (b. 1945). The following is a typical statement from Soroush:

Revealed religion, of course, is divine, but not so for the science of religion, which is a thoroughly human production and construction ... The interpretation [of religion] no doubt may be conjectural, fallible, changeable, partial, fallacious, one-sided, misguided, prejudiced, culture-bound, and incomplete, but this is what the Source of

⁵⁷ Cited on the internet <http://www.nima3.com/IranMedia/Silence.html>.

⁵⁸ See the documentary by Golmakani.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

*Revelation has ordained it to be. We are fallible human beings and that is our lot from the Truth.*⁶⁰

Makhmalbaf admits: 'I no longer believe in absolutes and have accepted that I don't have all the right answers ... What we and our society need is an open mind which can free us from the darkness of the predominant ignorance.'⁶¹ This rejection of absolutes is reflected in Makhmalbaf's refusal to label his films 'realistic' since reality changes once it is perceived from a different angle.

*My principles of mind and vision [are] based on [the] relativity of reality. This means I am correcting myself to the realities that God has created. I mean I don't take my own mind as a base, since I believe we are too little compared to reality. I try all the time to change my angles so I can see different views of reality. I never close the door on various aspects of reality.*⁶²

Makhmalbaf's views of reality are apparent in his comments on madness, a theme that surfaces in several of his films, including *The Peddler* and *The Marriage of the Blessed*:

*What is madness? There is nothing external from the mad person in madness. It is the rapid transformation of the personality in one moment, and we all have several personalities that have appeared under certain conditions.*⁶³

(b) The Unattainable Nature of Reality

The analysis of the absolute and the relative may also be extended into the psycho-analytical field, a study that Makhmalbaf himself accepts has had a great impact on world cinema.⁶⁴ Many of his films of the 1990s are a search into the self, or the nature of subjectivity. One example is *Salaam Cinema*, a film that was shot to celebrate the centenary of cinema in Iran. In this film, Makhmalbaf invited Iranians to audition for parts in his new film, and he commanded the few (out of the thousands that attempted to audition) to act in a line in front of him. He ordered the aspiring actors to cry one minute and

⁶⁰ Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge", in C. Kurtzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 250-251.

⁶¹ "Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf", *op. cit.*, pp. 78.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 67.

⁶³ See the documentary by Hushang Golmakani (*Gong-e Khabdideh*).

⁶⁴ "Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf", *op. cit.*, pp. 71.

then laugh the next. In addition to this, Makhmalbaf tested their determination to become actors by stating that they could have a place in the film only at the expense of the person who had been auditioning in the same line. In this way, he attempted to make each individual think about the consequence of becoming an actor, and whether or not there is a conflict between a ruthless actor and a compassionate human being. After reducing some of the actors to tears, Makhmalbaf was challenged by two young girls that it is possible to be an actor and compassionate at the same time. However, Makhmalbaf's power games took a sudden twist when he invited the two girls to become film directors themselves, and take charge of the auditions. From being two aspiring, humane actors, the two girls were suddenly transformed into ruthless, power-mongering despots who behaved identically to Makhmalbaf.

This episode can be understood in a variety of ways, and perhaps the most obvious is that it is a critique of certain aspects of cinema culture. However, if one digs beneath the surface, the scene provokes a multitude of questions, including speculations about whether or not Makhmalbaf was expressing a general statement on the nature of power and how it is liable to cause corruption. If so, was Makhmalbaf attempting to pass a message to those in authority, whether in the MCIG or a higher organisation, council or individual? Or was he suggesting that the citizens of Iran should be more patient with the politics of the country, given the corrupting nature of power?

Although Makhmalbaf has been severely criticised for his role in *Salaam Cinema*, it is important to bear in mind that he was playing the part of a film-director, or power broker. His 'bullying' role was not devoid of positive elements, since he resembled somewhat a Sufi *shaykh* attempting to shock his disciples, in the same way that a Zen monk performs what appear to be outrageous acts to enlighten his students, enabling them to perceive the truth in different ways. In its efforts to sweep away the cobwebs of shallow and stale thinking, the Sufi tradition presents us with stories of humiliating experiences encountered by Sufi aspirants,⁶⁵ and poems containing words, phrases or images of an antinomian nature (some erotic,⁶⁶ and others verging on the 'heretical'⁶⁷).

Another example of Makhmalbaf's portrayal of subjectivity appears in *Gabbeh* (1995), a film which follows the troubles a young woman, of the Qashqa'i tribe, has in persuading her father to let her marry a horseman.

⁶⁵ For an example of the humiliating experiences of Sufis see R. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 34-35.

⁶⁶ A. Schimmel, "Eros - Heavenly and not so Heavenly in Sufi Literature and Life", *Sufi*, issue 29, spring 1996, pp. 30-42.

⁶⁷ For the concept of heresy and its relationship with Sufism, see C. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).

Gabbeh, the name of the young woman (and the name of a certain type of rug, each depicting a unique event or story) wears the same brilliant blue clothes as an old woman who listens to the tale of the young Gabbeh. The old woman herself is married to an old man, who in turn claims to have fallen in love with the young Gabbeh. The old woman is the young Gabbeh grown old, and the old man is the horseman. Allowing Gabbeh to appear in the same scene in a dual manner allows Makhmalbaf to muse on different perspectives of love. On the one hand is the romantic and impatient love of the young Gabbeh, while the older Gabbeh, although not unromantic, reveals a more mature side of love that has witnessed the vicissitudes of time.

Makhmalbaf employs a similar method in *Noon va Goltoon* (1995) [A Moment of Innocence]. This film re-enacts the youthful Makhmalbaf's attempts to disarm a police officer and use the gun to rob a bank and bomb the Pahlavi regime. The film also tells the tale of the same police officer, who some twenty years later turns up at Makhmalbaf's house and asks for a role in a film. Makhmalbaf refuses, but agrees to find two youths to act out the roles of the revolutionary Makhmalbaf and the young policeman. The youth that Makhmalbaf chooses to play himself at seventeen holds the same burning desire to 'save the world'; however, at the end of the film when the youth is supposed to stab the policeman, the youth breaks-down in tears and clearly does not want to commit any act of violence. The film serves as an explicit statement that violent political action is to be rejected: the youth, who changes his mind and is reluctant to stab the policeman, is the youth that the middle-aged Makhmalbaf wishes he could have been. Politics turns to poetics, as Makhmalbaf seeks redemption.

In this discussion about the unattainable nature of reality, it is also worth noting Makhmalbaf's use of mirror imagery. The mirror is of course a symbol of truth, since mirrors, like cameras do not lie; it is only the interpretation of what is seen that can deceive.⁶⁸ The mirror enables the viewer to see what he wants to see, and this is shown in *Salaam Cinema*, where the action takes place around two squares (one being that of the director's table - representing

⁶⁸ This was a theme, inspired by the Qur'an that the Sufis discussed in much detail. Rumi stated:

*The body of the [saint] passes away and he has become a mirror
within it are reflected the faces of others.
If you spit in it, you spit in your own face
and if you strike the mirror, you strike yourself.
If you see an ugly face it is you! And if you witness Jesus and Mary it is you!
The mirror is neither this nor that. It is simple. It sets your own image before
you.*

Rumi, *Mathnawi-yi Ma'nawi*, IV: 2140-3, R. A. Nicholson (ed.), (London: Luzac & Co, 1925-40).

power - and another where the aspiring actors perform), and a mirror which represents the cinema. Godfrey Cheshire speculates that the mirror serves to capture the image of a world in search of justice, or a filmmaker seeking self-definition.⁶⁹ Yet, the cinema screen is also a mirror for each individual, since it enables the viewer to reflect upon himself and others, and also project ideas and hopes into the future. In this way, the mirror/cinema screen can be a creative and productive tool: it is a means by which the potential becomes actual. It is interesting to note that in the very beginning of *Once Upon a Time Cinema*, the protagonist Ibrahim Khan is seen loading various items upon a wagon before his trip to Europe to acquire the equipment and skills necessary for cinematography. On the side of the wagon is a mirror, reflecting the image of a lady named Atiyeh (good-fortune/future), who is Ibrahim's beloved.⁷⁰ She asks him when they will re-unite, in other words, when will Ibrahim's hopes be attainable, or when will the limits of censorship be lifted? Ibrahim replies that they will meet again when the snow melts. Thus, Makhmalbaf and the viewer identify with Ibrahim Khan, longing for freedom from censorship, yearning to see the self, or the truth, as far as it can be witnessed as it is.

Yet, the mirror of the cinema screen can also be damaging to the growth of the individual, especially in cases where the viewer is in the thrall of the illusion cast on the screen, in other words, the piece of the broken mirror should not be regarded as reality itself. The misuse of the meanings portrayed in film are shown in an exaggerated and comical manner by Makhmalbaf in *Once Upon a Time Cinema* when Nasir al-Din Shah falls in love with Golnar, the leading actress in *The Girl of Luristan*. In his attempt to win her love, the Shah desires to become an actor and commands that Ibrahim Khan trains him. The latter obeys the Shah's command and has the Shah act the part of a cow. The Shah acts so well in this part that he actually thinks he is the cow, and this is in fact the conclusion of Dariush Mehruji's famous film of 1969, *The Cow*.⁷¹ (In Mehruji's film, a farmer loses his cow that has actually died, and he falls insane in identifying with the animal).

⁶⁹ G. Cheshire, "Makhmalbaf: The Figure in the Carpet", *op. cit.*, pp. 63.

⁷⁰ For Atiyeh, see Muhammad Rezairad, "Atiyeh, ya'ni, sinema" [Atiyeh, in other words, the cinema], in Gholam Haydari (ed), *Mo'arefi va naqd-e filmha-ye Mohsen Makhmalbaf* [An introduction and criticism of the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf], *op. cit.*, pp. 421-426.

⁷¹ *The Cow* has been described as 'the most significant turning point in the history of Iranian cinema', because it took cinema into the realm of social realism. J. Akrami, "Sustaining a New Wave for Thirty Years", in R. Issa and S. Whitaker (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 129. This article provides an analysis of the films and thought of Mehruji.

The dangers of misunderstanding film and cinema are evident, and Makhmalbaf regards it as a duty of artists, like himself, to inspire the youth to imaginative interpretation rather than be duped by illusions:

*These last years, the population of Iran has doubled and we have a great proportion of youths ... it is necessary to teach them understanding, toleration and dialogue with those who do not share their inclinations and opinions. It is the task of art, but also the task of the media. It is necessary to give this generation the power of imagination, and not inculcate it with illusion.*⁷²

A Moment of Innocence provides an example of the dangers of living by illusions. The policeman that Makhmalbaf wounded had spent his life believing that the young lady who had befriended him just prior to the attack had fallen in love with him. Little did he realise that she was an accomplice with Makhmalbaf in their efforts to 'save the world'. After the attack and during his convalescence, he failed in his attempts to find the young lady. However, on witnessing the re-constructed attack, during which he saw the young lady with the young Makhmalbaf, the policeman realised that he had spent the majority of his life in self-delusion. As Dabashi has commented, there is 'a quiet erosion of dead certainties'⁷³ in *A Moment of Innocence*; that is, Makhmalbaf's youthful and idealistic faith in revolutionary politics to change the world, and the policeman's blinding love for the girl.

(c) *Censorship*

*I am the mute that dreamed (gong-e khabdideh), and the whole world is deaf.
I am unable to speak, and so people cannot hear.*⁷⁴

Reference has already been made to the problems that Makhmalbaf has had to face in his battle with the Iranian censors, and it is clear that he is not prepared to compromise in this confrontation. Censorship is one of the themes that is investigated in *Once Upon a Time Cinema*, and there are several scenes which make explicit references to censorship and film. One example occurs at the beginning of the film, where the protagonist, Ibrahim Khan, sees his screenplays balanced on a guillotine, but sees them destroyed for they are unsuitable in the eyes of the royal court. These screenplays, according to Ibrahim Khan, depict an officer of justice who pressed taxes on the peasants unjustly (and this is rejected since it would be a 'threat' to the Police

⁷² F. Rava, "L'Individu, L'Art et L'Avenir Démocratique: Un Entretien avec le Cinéaste Mohsen Makhmalbaf" [The Individual, Art, and the Democratic Future: A Talk with the Film Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf], *op. cit.*, pp. 219.

⁷³ Dabashi, "Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Moment of Innocence*", *op. cit.*, pp. 123.

⁷⁴ A couplet from which the term *gong-e khabdideh* is derived.

Department). Another screenplay portrays a sultan who is prone to love and passion, and again this is rejected for such affairs should be restricted to the private chambers of the sultan. Another scene presents one of the Shah's ministers listing those films that the cinematographer must refrain from showing. These include films that show 'discontented remarks directed towards the person of the sultan [shah] in any manner, explicit or indirect, brief or at length, [and] the script may not display signs of insolence, animosity or insensitivity towards the cavalry, the police, the Minister of Justice, the ruling governors or their kin'. Since Makhmalbaf admitted that the film was concerned with censorship, it is probably not too far-fetched to equate the Shah, or his ministers with any ruling regime, even that of contemporary Iran. It is possible to draw this conclusion because the film is not strictly historical. The film is set in the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1848-1896); yet Makhmalbaf plays with history by including famous Iranians such as Amir Kabir²⁵ and Malijak²⁶ (who could never have met since they lived at different times) and by showing the Shah and his court watching films that were made in the twentieth century. Therefore, the viewer is permitted to play hopscotch through various generations, and equate the tyranny of the Shah and his ministers with regimes subsequent to that of the Qajar dynasty. Following the scene that depicts the restrictions imposed upon the cinematographer, Makhmalbaf illustrates the stifling effect that censorship has upon art in a scene where a film, sanctioned by the imperial court, is given a public screening. (The film is *The Girl of Luristan*, which was the first Iranian film to have speech). The version that the Shah permits shows little more than an old woman trying unsuccessfully to thread a needle, and of course all the viewers fall asleep.

²⁵ For Amir Kabir, (Mirza Taqi Khan Farahani) who was executed in 1851, see A. Amanat, *The Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), pp. 89-168. Makhmalbaf, like many Iranians, appears to have great affection for Amir Kabir, who is famed for trying to modernise Iran and stand up to Western attempts to dominate Iranian affairs. Indeed, Makhmalbaf has stated that 'intellectualism' in Iran has two forms. The first is that of Mirza Reza Kirmani, who inspired by Afghani, assassinated Nasir al-Din Shah. The second is that of Amir Kabir. According to Makhmalbaf, 'Intellectualism in its real meaning is the same style of Amir Kabir which means a trend that could make a change, not necessarily via [a] political-military way, but possibly there could be a change in the educational system of the country.' See 'Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf', *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75. His affection for Amir Kabir is plainly expressed in *Once Upon a Time Cinema*, for Amir Kabir is presented in a dignified and authoritative manner, and expresses platitudes such as 'the cinema cultivates people'.

²⁶ Nasir al-Din Shah was infatuated with a succession of young boys from his court. The first Malijak was the son of a Kurdish shepherd and became popular with the Shah in the mid 1860s. In the 1880s, he was replaced in the Shah's affections by his son, Ghulam 'Ali 'Aziz al-Sultan.

It is almost inevitable that any discussion of censorship will involve the role and participation of women since a correct understanding of the female has become highly politicised in modern Islamic Iran. Haleh Afshar writes:

Almost two decades after the Islamic revolution, it is possible to argue that the only visible sign of Islamification that remains in Iran today is the presence of veiled women ... Women have become the major emblem of Islamification and their dress code the most significant identifier of the revolutionary success.⁷⁷

Makhmalbaf has commented on the difficulty that dress codes have created for film-directors. The guidelines, with regard to the portrayal of women, have resulted in a certain unrealistic presentation of the female, for example, in film women must conform to Islamic standards; and this means that viewers cannot be admitted into the privacy of family life. Women are permitted to appear before their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons without a veil; yet, it is impossible to depict this on screen, since spectators are also present.

If the woman covers her face really well because of the presence of spectators, this action would indicate a lack of intimacy or the existence of a dispute [between the husband and wife] and naturally in real life something like this [veiling of intimates] would not occur.⁷⁸

The issue of female clothing has always been controversial in twentieth century Iran, and it has become something of a platitude among Iran observers that two indicators of Islamic fervour in Iranian society are the colour of women's *chadors* and how far back on their head the *hejab* is worn. Ayatollah Azari Qumi has stated that an improper *hejab* includes those that are of a

⁷⁷ H. Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case-study*, (London: MacMillan, 1998), pp. 197. It is interesting to note that the issue of dress may also be studied from the perspective of cultural 'authenticity'. For some women, adopting Islamic clothing is a way of preserving an Islamic-Iranian identity against the perceived onslaught of the decadent Western consumer society. This has resulted in many wide ranging responses from the Iranian state, such as the proposal to produce an Islamic Barbie Doll, named Laila or Sara, that has suitable Islamic clothing, and does not have a boyfriend named Ken, but a brother called Dara. 'Instead of bras and bikini panties, [according to Mr Ibrahim, a representative of the project] she will wear children's underwear. In her Western style clothing, Laila will show more skin than the chador-draped Sara. But by Barbie's standards, she will be an emblem of modesty. "This will be a doll with decent clothes and a brother, not a boyfriend," Mr Ibrahim said.' (J. Douglas, "Muslim World Promotes Its Own 'Decent' Barbie", *International Herald Tribune*, Friday 4 June, 1999).

⁷⁸ Cited in H. Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema", in M. Afkhami, and E. Friedl (eds.), *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 146.

bright colour.⁷⁹ Black is the most common colour for *chadors* and *hejabs* found in Iran,⁸⁰ yet, there have been arguments since the revolution that this restriction is not Islamic. This was the view of Ayatollah Jannati, and other governmental officials have justified wearing black or sombre colours, not on the basis of Islam, but on the practical grounds of wearing a uniform.⁸¹

Given the controversial issue of colour in women's clothing, it is interesting to look at Makhmalbaf's use of colour in *Gabbeh*. The film celebrates the colours of nature, and shows the women and young girls, of the Qashqa'i tribe, dressed in all the colours of the rainbow. Godfrey Cheshire has summarised the significance of colour in *Gabbeh*:

*The cultural forces that would reduce public life - especially that of women - to monochrome and darkness Makhmalbaf brands as enemies not just of colour, but of life. Thus he, in allowing women the brightest of nomadic colours, in giving their faces ample close ups, and especially in narrating this story of romantic desire from a female perspective - all elements that push the bounds of permissibility in Iran - gives his poem the sharpest of polemic points.*⁸²

One of the most significant scenes shows the young *Gabbeh* and the nomadic children chanting 'life is colour', 'love is colour', 'man is colour', 'woman is colour', 'the child is colour'. Several scenes later, *Gabbeh's* uncle is seen lifting a row of coloured threads (used to weave the *Gabbeh* rugs) above his head, and states 'life is colour'. On filling the screen with this spectrum of colour, he then starts to explain 'death is ...', but pauses and fails to complete the sentence. On lowering the row of threads, the screen is filled with utter darkness.

Gabbeh is also a remarkable film because of the images of the young *Gabbeh* that stand in contrast to those of women in the earlier years of the Islamic regime. Naficy has classified films with regard to women into three stages.⁸³

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 199. On the topic of veiling see also an excellent study by F. Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992).

⁸⁰ Having spent a month in Tehran (September 1999), I observed that a great number of women wear colourful *hejabs*, especially in the north of Tehran, which is the wealthier and, perhaps, more 'Westernised' part of the capital. Many of the women wear their *hejabs* in such a way that the front of the *hejab* rests on the crown of the head, thus covering only the back of the head.

⁸¹ H. Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case-study*, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-207.

⁸² G. Cheshire, "Makhmalbaf: The Figure in the Carpet", *op. cit.*, pp. 69.

⁸³ H. Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema", *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

The first, immediately after the revolution, cut out the image of unveiled women, or else self-censorship resulted in women rarely appearing in major parts in film. During the second period, in the middle of the 1980s, women were seen on the screen at a distance to prevent their bodily contours from showing, close ups of the face were rare, and their gazes were averted. Moreover, their roles demanded that modest behaviour was always a prerequisite. The third phase, beginning from the late 1980s, increased the scope for portraying women, and *Gabbeh* is a fine example of this. One of the first shots of the young Gabbeh has her reclining almost seductively on a rug, revealing the contours of her hips and the curves of her upper body beneath her relatively tight-clinging dress. In addition, the film includes many close ups of the young Gabbeh, during which she expresses her love and desire for the young horseman.

Gabbeh's longing for her horseman would be considered quite natural in the West; however, in some Islamic circles, it would be regarded with concern since

*women's sexuality is so "excessive" and powerful that if it is uncontained or if men are allowed unhampered ... visual access through the gaze, it is supposed to lead inevitably to the wholesale moral corruption of men and society as a whole.*⁸⁴

Gabbeh's father represents the control of female sexuality, and such control has been attacked by Makhmalbaf on many occasions.⁸⁵ Yet, Makhmalbaf's subtle craft allows Gabbeh to express her intimate desire for the horseman even though he is never actually seen in close up. This is because the spectators of the film are surrogate horsemen, for Gabbeh states that the horseman is always following her and the tribe, which is what the spectators of the film are doing. So Gabbeh's longing gaze for the horsemen is directed at us, the spectators, and this, according to the Islamic critique, would render the male viewers 'humiliated' and 'abject'.⁸⁶ Therefore, to permit the public screening of *Gabbeh* reveals the extent to which the Islamic Republic of Iran has opened its artistic gates since the early days of the revolution, or its lack of understanding of the content and message of the film.

The issue of colour and the women's dress is the most obvious feature related to censorship in *Gabbeh*. However, the film also serves as a critique of the

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 141.

⁸⁵ F. Rava, "L'Individu, L'Art et L'Avenir Démocratique: Un Entretien avec le Cinéaste Mohsen Makhmalbaf" [The Individual, Art, and the Democratic Future: A Talk with the Film Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf], *op. cit.*, pp. 216.

⁸⁶ H. Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema", *op. cit.*, pp. 142.

type of culture in Iran, which Makhmalbaf characterises as the culture that closes doors. In other words, patriarchal culture is another censor on women's rights. The young Gabbeh is prevented from pursuing her desires by her father's own self-centred concerns, using various excuses to prevent his daughter from embarking on a new life away from the tribe with the horseman. In his desire to maintain his control over Gabbeh, the father is prepared to kill both the horseman and Gabbeh, and although he ultimately fails in his attempts, the father pretends, to his family, that he has actually shot Gabbeh. His purpose in this is not just to save his own face, but also to warn the younger female members of the tribe not to follow Gabbeh's quest for freedom.

Makhmalbaf's interest to promote actively the cause of women in Iranian society is evident in his choice of the actress to play the part of the young Gabbeh. The actress is Shaghayeh Djodat who first appeared in *Salaam Cinema*, and in her private conversation with Makhmalbaf (included in the film), she stated that she did not really aspire to become an actress. She merely wanted to appear in one of Makhmalbaf's films so that her boyfriend in France would be able to see her.

*The girl who uses the film to get to her love does not disclose who the lover is. She actually represents the love of all young women in our society who can't express themselves in any other way. Her story is the modern Romeo and Juliet.*⁸⁷

Rather than exploiting her desperate situation, Makhmalbaf granted Djodat her wish, and cast her as the young Gabbeh which was subsequently screened around the world.

Salaam Cinema also contains other examples of Makhmalbaf's battle against the culture that closes doors. It is particularly interesting that the individuals who protested most vehemently against Makhmalbaf's bullying tactics were two young girls. Makhmalbaf himself regarded them as the only aspiring actors who came out successfully in the film because they refused to cry just so that they can get a part.⁸⁸ Answering an accusation that he behaved contemptuously towards the aspiring actors and women, Makhmalbaf stated:

I have shown women not just as the ones who can bring tea or gossip but [I] have given them a chance to show their rights in the society and express their feelings accordingly. Who else has put them in that situation? In the West during the festivals, people have told me that

⁸⁷ See Makhmalbaf in *Film International*, autumn 1995, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ "Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf", *op. cit.*, pp. 86.

*those two women were very strong and [asked] are all women in Iran that strong?*⁸⁹

Criticisms that Makhmalbaf had been dictatorial and somehow took advantage of the young girls in the film have been answered to a certain degree in the book *Salaam Sinema, chand goftagu*,⁹⁰ which reports the comments of the girls, in a meeting after the film had been screened and become 'notorious'. All the girls reacted positively to the film and did not believe that Makhmalbaf had insulted them. Their comments, however, are a little suspect in the respect that they may have given positive comments about the film to save their own faces.

Again, the problem of the patriarchal nature of Iranian society is portrayed in *Once Upon a Time Cinema* (although it takes the viewer back to the Iran of the late nineteenth century). The Shah complains in one scene that he had eighty-four wives; yet, the only thing he truly loved was his cat Babri.⁹¹ Moreover, the Shah instructs a court attendant, in a curt manner, to include the name of Golnar among his wives, without having consulted her in any way. This culture, that closes doors, is not limited to the mentality of the Shah, however, for it is also manifested in the mind-set of the Shah's own wives. Desiring to preserve their own positions of power within the royal harem, the Shah's wives attack Golnar with scissors and cut off her beautiful long plats of hair. As the plats fall to the ground, they are transformed into discarded (or censored?) scraps of film.

If any other evidence is needed to verify Makhmalbaf's commitment to the women's movement in Iran, it may be worthwhile to mention that in his novel entitled *The Crystal Garden*, he made a dedication to 'the women, the oppressed women of this land'.⁹² The influence of Makhmalbaf in bringing the issue of women's rights in Iran to the attention of Iranians has extended to his immediate family. His seventeen year-old daughter Samira is credited with being the director of *The Apple*, a film that has also won praise from an international audience, for it was shown in Cannes in 1998, and was reviewed in *Time* magazine.⁹³ *The Apple* shows the true drama of twelve year-old twin

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ A. Khosravi (ed.), "Aya be-kasi tawhin shode ast?" [Has anyone been insulted?], in *Salaam Sinema, chand goftagu* [Salaam Cinema, several discussions], *op. cit.*, pp. 137-170.

⁹¹ For the historical background of the Shah and Babri the cat, see A. Amanat, *The Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*, *op. cit.*, pp. 437.

⁹² See A. Naficy, "Images of Women in Classical Persian Literature and the Contemporary Iranian Novel", *op. cit.*, pp. 127.

⁹³ Review in *Time*, 15 March 1999.

girls who are 'imprisoned' at home by their blind mother to 'protect' them from the dangers of the outside world. Mohsen Makhmalbaf was the scriptwriter and editor of the film, but it seems likely that he had a greater hand in the film than this.⁹⁴ He himself admitted that the idea to shoot the film was his own.⁹⁵ In addition to his influence upon his daughter, Makhmalbaf has helped his wife Marzieh Meshkini, who has recently made a film about the 'last three hours of a little girl who can communicate with the boys before she becomes 9 years old, an age that the girls are considered adults and have to follow the religious rules'.⁹⁶

Makhmalbaf's attempt to highlight certain attitudes that serve as an official censor over women in Iran is representative of a general movement that has been gathering momentum, albeit slowly, in Iran since the Islamic revolution. In the field of film, the participation and depiction of women in films has somewhat improved;⁹⁷ and in the political arena, the presence of women has risen in small increments.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Regarding Mohsen Makhmalbaf's influence on *The Apple*, see "Family Affair: But Samira Does It Her Way", *The Boston Phoenix*, 29 April - 6 May 6 1999. The report includes interesting comments by Samira Makhmalbaf:

Have people insinuated that The Apple is really a film by Mohsen Makhmalbaf?

'They said it at the beginning, particularly in Iran. I expected it. I was happy even, because that meant it's a good film. But after a few times, I got tired of hearing it. Of course, there is his presence: he was editor, screenwriter, and father! That's quite an influence.'

But his being the screenwriter, Samira explained, did not mean that her father wrote actual dialogue. 'I didn't dictate what people should say. The film is fiction in that it has a line of a story. It's a documentary in that the people you see are really themselves: father, mother, children, social worker.'

⁹⁵ See Omid Najvan, "Goft: 'begu: gol,' goftam: 'gol'" [He said: 'say: flower.' I said: 'flower.'], in *Film*, 240 (Tehran: 20 Shahrivar, 1378), pp. 16-20.

⁹⁶ *Film International*, summer 1999, *op. cit.*, pp. 14.

⁹⁷ See H. Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema", *op. cit.* See also M. Habibian, "Under Wraps on the Stage: Women in the Performing Arts in Post-revolutionary Iran", paper given at the fourth Nordic conference on Middle Eastern Studies, "The Middle East in Globalizing World", Oslo, 13-16 August, 1998. This paper appears on the internet <http://www.hf-fak.uib.no/Institutter/smi/pao/habibian.html>.

Also worthy of mention is a series of seminars, over two days, entitled the "First Gathering on Women and Cinema in Iran", organised by the Women's Cultural-Social Council, held in Tehran on Sunday 16 January 2000. The participants took part in four round table seminars entitled "Women, Cinema and Cultural Responsibility", "Women, Cinema and Characterisation", "Women, Cinema, and the Criteria for Their Presence", and "Women, Cinema and the Work Force." The aim of these seminars was to address the role of women in cinema from the

Despite his attempts to champion the cause of women in Iran through films, such as *Gabbeh*, Makhmalbaf is aware that the solution to securing a better deal for women in Iranian society is not that easy. He makes this manifest in *Gabbeh*, for even after escaping from the tight patriarchal grip of her father to be with the horseman, the latter as an old man displays several chauvinistic character traits. These include statements such as 'I'm not a woman who makes the food', his observation that he was foolish (*khar budam*) to run away with Gabbeh, and that he would have been free if Gabbeh's father had actually shot her. Perhaps the most damning of all is his accusation that Gabbeh had failed to give him a child. The old horseman does not pause to consider that the fault might in fact rest with him rather than Gabbeh. This scene is interesting, for in place of the child he desires, the young Gabbeh gives the old horseman an egg. Makhmalbaf has commented on the symbolism of this scene:

I believe that our system will stagnate until we have resolved our problem with modernity and democracy. Gabbeh is sterile because she is not able to move towards modernity. She has the courage to flee [from her father] but it is not sufficient.⁹⁷

Breaking old taboos and cultural norms is not an easy task, and Gabbeh is still restricted by the views held by the old horseman. As Makhmalbaf admits, what is needed in such a situation is a complete break with the past, but this

perspective of the *shari'a* and jurisprudence. The chairperson of the event Ms Batoul Mohtashemi, in words that some Western feminists may find depressing, underlined that the seminars aimed to describe the woman's role in the prosperity of the family and their influence at home. See the articles by Mohsen Mohammadi, and the Art and Culture Desk of *Tehran Times*, 17 January 2000.

⁹⁷ In the first parliament (*majles*) of the Islamic Republic of Iran there were two women, this increased to four in the second *majles*, four in the third, nine in the fourth, and thirteen in the fifth. (H. Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case-study*, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55). By the mid 1990s, the female delegates had had some success in changing laws related to divorce rights, and lifted restrictions on female enrolments in university programmes such as law and engineering. In addition, following the victory of Muhammad Khatami in the presidential election of 1997, Mrs Ebtekar was appointed as one of the seven vice-presidents and was given the responsibility of looking after questions relating to the environment, although this post did not have ministerial status. It is claimed that Khatami himself won the election on a pro-women ticket. For a brief comparison of the position of women, pre and post revolution see B. Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth*, (Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 112-119.

⁹⁸ F. Rava, "L'Individu, L'Art et L'Avenir Démocratique: Un Entretien avec le Cinéaste Mohsen Makhmalbaf" [The Individual, Art, and the Democratic Future: A Talk with the Film Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf], *op. cit.*, pp. 218.

does not mean a political revolution. As stated earlier, Makhmalbaf endorses a cultural movement based on education and stimulation of the imagination.

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CONCLUSION

Makhmalbaf's films give an indication of the kind of socio-political problems facing modern Iran. It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that his works have assisted in maintaining the ideals of freedom of expression, and have nurtured a degree of resistance against the forces of censorship. Of course this does not mean that Makhmalbaf's works have been pivotal in the dissent that was manifested against elements of the Islamic regime, such as those that broke out in several Iranian cities in July 1999. These protests were precipitated by the closure of the newspaper *Salam* on 7 July 1999, for the newspaper was considered progressive by some, and a symbol of freedom and reform. Interestingly, *Salam* was run by Abbas Abdi, who in his youth was an Islamic 'radical', just as Makhmalbaf had been, and who had led the take-over of the US embassy in 1979.¹⁰⁰

At the same time as guarding humanitarian ideals in the minds of his viewers, Makhmalbaf's films may have also served the interests of the Islamic government. This is because his works are not slavish imitations of works or a genre of Western origin; and also because many perceive his films as preserving certain standards which do not transgress the codes of Islamic decency. Indeed, Makhmalbaf's works are a source of pride for those Iranians who have been seeking a strong and independent role in the contemporary age, whilst participating with the community of nations on an equal, amicable basis. To express this simplistically, Makhmalbaf is engaged in finding an authentic identity for Iran in the modern age.

Finding such an identity is not an easy task. Makhmalbaf certainly does not advocate blind imitation of Western culture. In *Salaam Cinema*, several scenes feature aspiring Iranian actors who claim to resemble Western stars, including Joe Don Baker, Steve McQueen, Kirk Douglas, Jeff Bridges, Harrison Ford, Alain Delon, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Paul Newman, and only one individual thought that he resembled an Iranian actor. Makhmalbaf has alluded to the problems of maintaining an 'authentic' cultural identity when he commented: 'Power is in the hands of one culture, which is invading other cultures intellectually'.¹⁰¹ It seems that the problem of *Gharbzadegi*

¹⁰⁰ G. Abdo, "Yesterday's Radicals Face Today's Iran", *The Guardian*, London, 23 July 1999, pp. 17.

¹⁰¹ "Goftagu ba Mohsen Makhmalbaf", *op. cit.*, pp. 89.

(Westoxification) is alive and well almost forty years after the term was coined by Jalal Al-e Ahmad.¹⁰²

The question that Iranians such as Makhmalbaf must address, however, concerns the kind of identity that is actually desired. Twenty years after the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran and the implementation of an Islamic moral code these questions are still problematic for Iranians. One Iranian businessman's views were printed in *The Independent*: 'How can we worry about the *hejab* when we don't even know who we are yet? First we have to learn to be individuals.'¹⁰³

Who indeed are the Iranians? Asking for the details of the specific characteristics of an idealised Iranian cultural identity is, perhaps, unfair. Yet, to a degree Makhmalbaf has answered such a question in his films and writings. His idealised, authentic, Iranian culture is one that draws on that heritage found in certain eras of Iranian history, among certain groups, that advocated pluralism, toleration, imaginativeness, and equality among its peoples. Such universal ideals are witnessed by Makhmalbaf in the Persian works of Rumi, and in writings and devotional activities that are so important in Shiite Iran, such as the *Nahj al-Balagha*¹⁰⁴ (attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib), and the Komayl prayers.¹⁰⁵ It is, perhaps, this synthesis of universals and particulars that makes Makhmalbaf's films so popular in both the East and West.

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¹⁰² Jalal Al-e Ahmad died in 1969. His *Gharbzadegi* has been translated into English. See *Occidentosis*, translated by R. Campbell, (Berkeley, California: Mizan Press).

¹⁰³ Report by Justin Huggler, "Iran Learns to Start Loving the Great Satan of the West", *The Independent*, Friday 5 November 1999, pp. 19.

¹⁰⁴ See Golmakani's documentary, *Gong-e Khabdideh*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

APPENDIX

Films by Makhmalbaf

- Tawbeh-ye Nasuh* [Nasuh's Repentance], 1982
Du Cheshm bi su [Two Blind Eyes], 1983
Baycot [The Boycott], 1985
Dasforush [The Peddler], 1986
Baysikalran [The Cyclist], 1987
'Arus-e khuban [The Marriage of the Blessed], 1988
Nawbat-i 'asheqi [A Time for Love], 1990
Shabha-ye Zayandeh Rood [Nights on the Zayandeh River], 1990
Naser al-Din Shah, Akyor-e Sinema [Once Upon a Time Cinema], 1991
Honarpisheh [The Actor], 1992
Salaam Sinema [Salaam Cinema], 1994
Noon va Goldoon [A Moment of Innocence], 1995
Gabbeh [Gabbeh], 1996
Sokoot [The Silence], 1997
Dar [The Door], 1999

Documentaries by Makhmalbaf

- A Selection of Images from the Qajar Era* (1992)
Stone and Glass (1993)

Documentaries about Makhmalbaf

- Gong-e Khabdideh* [Stardust Stricken – Mohsen Makhmalbaf: A Portrait] (1995), Directed by Hushang Golmakani.
Cinema Cinema (1994-96), Directed by Maani Petgar.

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