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A Study of *Offside*: Clashes between Feminine Desire and Social Imposition

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Abstract

There are some constructed stereotypical notions about the Middle-Eastern countries and it has always been a tendency of the West to project the Middle East in terms of negative archetypes. But each of these Middle Eastern countries has been enriched by their own culture and art. And the cinema of Iran has validated this fact. In the age of Transnational cinema Iranian film has been able to secure a place in the global precincts not only because of the content of the film but also because of the unique cinematography, acting techniques and the acting skills of the actors. One of the pioneer figures in the realm of Iranian cinema is Jafar Panahi. As a Post-Revolutionary realist filmmaker, Panahi has brought to the fore the images of the Iranian society by using his unique skill of cinematography. Each of his films has a deeper meaning hidden under the veneer of its superficial presentation. And *Offside*, one of his much acclaimed films, does not fail to bear this characteristic. Under the garb of a comedy, *Offside* highlights how gender discrimination is still at work in Iran. It is this gender discrimination which leads to the banality of women in watching football sitting in the same stadium with men. The study proposes to explore in detail how Panahi has used his artwork as a tool to raise questions against the prejudiced norms that separate women from men.

Keywords

Offside, Jafar Panahi, marginalization, imposition, resistance

In the contemporary phenomenon of the film discourse, Iranian cinema has gained international prominence and some critics have not hesitated to rank Iranian cinema as the world's most important national cinema. The eminent Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke, and the German filmmaker Werner Herzog praised the cinema of Iran for its artistic richness. It is mainly after the Revolution in 1979 that the Iranian cinema started to be celebrated in different international forums and festivals. The honours that are bestowed upon Iranian cinema include a number of conspicuous awards which act to glorify the arena of Iranian films. For example, Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* got the Palm d'Or in Cannes 1997, Jafar Panahi received the Golden Lion award in 2000 for his *The Circle* in Venice Film Festival, in 2006 Panahi was felicitated with the Silver Bear award in Berlin for one of his masterpieces, *Offside*. Apart from these few examples there are a lot of other Iranian films which also have achieved international felicitation. In this paper I propose to explore how the phallogocentric society of Iran has pushed women to the periphery of the social structure and how Panahi has treated this seminal issue in his film *Offside* under the veneer of pungent satire. The film is the manifestation of how the social impositions on women clashes with female desires and dreams. The film also expresses how the excitement and joy of women stands in stark contrast with the grave faces of men and finally it projects that failure is not analogous to defeat but sometimes it is failure which leads to the way of achievement.

As an Iranian Post-Revolutionary filmmaker Panahi has beautifully ornamented each of his film with humane qualities which are very craftily blended with a social issue. The socio-political issue is the nucleus of his film to which the humane qualities are adhered. They are connected to each other in a synchrony. This feature can also be recognizable in *Offside*. However, the idea of making a film like *Offside* has not come out of a void. A very personal experience of Panahi is associated with the production of this film. Some four or five years before the making of the film *Offside* (2006) Panahi was once going to a stadium to watch a football match and his daughter persuaded him to take her along with him. Panahi told her that she cannot enter the stadium as it is prohibited by Iranian law. But his daughter insisted him and told him that if she fails to enter the stadium, she would come back home on her own. When they reached the playground Panahi almost begged for permission from the authority to allow her to enter the stadium but the proposal was declined. While he was trying hard to get her permission granted, his daughter resisted him from bowing down to the officials and told him to go in and enjoy the match. After some time Panahi saw her daughter coming into the stadium. When he asked her how did she manage to do this, she answered that there is always a way. After this incident he started to ruminate if there is any other way

with the help of which a woman can enter the stadium. And this idea leads him to fabricate a film and Panahi came with his much acclaimed *Offside*.

Making a film in Iran at a time when the society was undergoing a process of tumultuous change, is not a child's play especially when the subject is a debatable topic and against convention. But Panahi has his own stratagem to overcome all those huddles. In his interview with Maryam Maruf, the Commissioning Editor of the website openDemocracy, Panahi enunciated:

For each film that we make we have to think of creative ways of doing it [. . .]
So this is what we have to do to find a way of achieving our aims. For each film this method can only be used once, and for the next one obviously we have to find an alternative way of doing it. (n.pag.)

Panahi at first presented to the authorities a slightly different script which explained that the film was about a football match. And once he got permission he started to shoot the film according to the felt necessity of the subject and the plot of the film. Though he faced some problems with the Ministry of Guidance regarding the previous controversial films he made, he finally triumphed to release his film in spite of all the impediments. The success of the film lies in Panahi's fearless attempt to show a group of six women trying to sneak into that space which the patriarchal society thought should remain uncontaminated by any woman's intrusion. What is very distinctive in the film is the way Panahi has projected the hollowness of the chauvinistic male pride. Presented in a simple but sophisticated manner the film never fails to import its deeper implication and forces us to question the banality of those imposed social regulations and customs which are fatally gendered.

Films being a major part of social culture can be intelligently used as the medium of reflecting the society and as Panahi is associated with the New Wave there is no wonder that in his film there should be a reflection of reality. Michael Haneke in response to the title of a documentary made upon himself by Lamos Ignoramous — *24 Realities per Second* — says: "I always say film is 24 lies per second at the service of truth. Or at the service of the attempt to find the truth" (n.pag.). Panahi also has taken resort to this lie which acts as a crucial agent for ferrying the knowledge of the social issues to both the insider and the outsider of the country in order to make them aware of the social complexities.

Norma Claire Morujji in her article "Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" has observed: "[...] film is [...] one of the main vehicles through which the complexities of contemporary Iranian private life has been explored, particularly the complexities of women's lives" (91). A penetrating study of Panahi's *Offside* will obviously

certify her commentary. How the women are estranged from the centre of the society, how they are deprived of their rights of entertainment is very strikingly dealt with here and Panahi has very wittily projected this truth in the garb of a comedy.

To find out the root from where the social marginalization of women in Iran started, we have to trace back to the social history. It was in the Pahlavi era (1925-1979) that women made considerable progress in Iran. There was free access to education for both boys and girls. The women not only had their free access to education they had also enjoyed their right to vote. Family Protection Law, which was passed during this era, gave women their right to petition their divorce and gained the child custody. Men could no longer give women divorce by announcing Triple Talaq and could no longer gain child custody automatically. By 1978, on the event of Iranian Revolution, twenty two women sat in the parliament and three hundred and thirty three women served on elected local councils. One third of the university students were female. Two million women were in work force and more than one lakh and forty six thousand of them were in the civil service.

The 1979 Revolution has much changed this scenario. The entire society of Iran has been “transformed and politicized” (Morujji 89). If any group’s experience in the society has changed, it is of the women of the middle class in Iran. In “Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field”, Morujji has noted: “In this process, no group’s experience has been more drastically altered than that of urban, middle-class Iranian women” (89). Morujji has further pointed out that those women who were at their twenties then were affected the most by this upheaval. Though they were at their twenties then but still they were not adult enough to establish themselves and create their own identity in the society. The basic foundations of life — education, work and family — were reshuffled because of this socio-political furore and those young women found it very difficult to create sufficient space for themselves in the middle of the social structure after the change. The Civil War, the closing of the universities, the Iraq-Iran war, the political domination by using the Islamic ideology and the new repressive state apparatus — all caused a great uproar and complete disorder in the society. Along with these the economic decline and national cultural shifts added fuel to the fire causing a disruption of the whole design of the society.

After the 1979 Revolution, Iran has undergone reformation for several times and those unsuccessful women again started to prepare themselves in order to materialize the unfulfilled dreams. But to re-start from the scratch, all those political and social changes, was not easy. In Iran “political is personal” (Morujji 89) that is why the individual personal choices of the women are manipulated by national events and as any open discussion of those

events are not possible, “the public discussion of women’s lives is peculiarly coded” (Morujji 90). So only an insider can have the knowledge of the social realities, only he/she can understand the sufferings of those people who experienced all the cataclysmic changes of the nation. But for an outsider, even if he/she has some involvement with Iran, it can be difficult for him/her to decipher those codes and these codes may appear “unexpectedly oblique” (Morujji 90) for them. The cinematic representation, therefore, can possibly give the outsiders a scope to witness the socio-political scenario of the country. *Offside*, a cinema by Panahi (the insider), offer us (the outsider) the opportunity to become the eyewitness (though indirectly) of how the laws deprived women of their fundamental privileges. The film is shot in the form of a documentary to make the film appear like a real one so that the audience can understand how the women have become the victims of the process of marginalization by the prevalent patriarchal rule.

In his book *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic* Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad has inquired the role of cinema in Iran:

Iranian cinema has been a significant social/political institution, which has caused much debate within the country. In order to explore the role of cinema in Iran, I began with interrelated questions about: the significance of the institution of cinema in contemporary Iran, the negotiation of meaning in the processes of film regulation and reception and finally the implications of the international prominence of Iranian cinema in the discourses of Iranian identity. (5)

It is quite obvious that the international recognition that Iranian cinema has gained has universalized the identity of Iran. For us, who have no idea about the rules and regulations of that society, those films can act as the archive. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a Cultural Revolution took place in Iran for a period of three-years (1980-1983). At that point of time all the universities were closed in order to reject the Western and non-Islamic ways of education. After reopening of the universities, many books were banned and many students and lecturers were rusticated from the educational institutions. Many students and faculty members were killed in this process of Arabisation and Islamisation. Five thousand one hundred and ninety five people were killed in 1983 alone. The effect of this crude revolution is reflected in Tahmineh Milani’s film *Two Women* (1999). It shows how the closing of the universities affected the life of those girls who wanted to continue their study. It is because of this Cultural Revolution it became very difficult for those girls who were brought up in

Westernized environment to adopt those new cultural codes that were forcefully imposed upon them by the society. The society became terribly oppressive and gendered.

The society that we find in *Offside* is also a gendered society. The avenues where men have an easy access have been forbidden for women. Even the rights for entertainment have been gendered. Women are not even allowed to enter the stadium and debarred from watching Iran's national game. The film forecasts the football match between Bahrain and Iran which was held in 2005. And the victory of Iran in this match ensured them the way to the World Cup. Panahi has employed this real incident to make the audience feel that what is happening is true. He has also used the 'Real-time narrative technique'—the events in the film take place exactly within that time frame when the audience watches the film. The film is exactly of ninety minutes like that of the football match and the film shows what happens within the ninety minutes of the football match. This makes the film appear as a documentary truth before us. It is for the same reason that Panahi has not taken any professional actor so that the film doesn't appear a film only. In the garb of a bitter comedy, *Offside* is a direct protest in an indirect way against the vicissitudes of society.

Offside is a trick in football. The rule is that a player who is in a forward position shouldn't run towards the goal before the other team's defence. When he is striking the ball to the goalpost he should be behind the defence. And if he transgresses the law it means he has committed an offence and he should be fined for that. In *Offside*, exactly the same happens. The socially constructed law does not allow the women to enter the stadium and watch the game. The official law that women are not allowed to enter the stadium has been violated by the women we see in the film. They entered the space which was prohibited for them and they had to pay for it. They were arrested and were restricted from watching the game; the women are trapped as if they are in a jail. They knew that the unwritten social law does not permit them but still they came there in order to make the society aware that they exist, that they also like to watch football, they are as crazy as the males are about this national game, that they are in no way inferior to their male counterpart. Panahi in an interview with Maryam Maruf, the Commissioning Editor of the site openDemocracy on 7th June, 2006, a few months after the film was released, has commented:

Of course when you try to restrict something or implement a restriction it has to be based on some sort of law. But there is nothing in the law which has been approved by the Iranian parliament or anybody else which bans women from taking part. It has become a kind of unwritten law. The policemen and

the soldiers too, have to follow this unwritten law and unwritten rules, and they are answerable to their superiors for it. (n.pag.)

From what he has said, it is clear that women has been exploited, they have become the victims of hypocrisy. The unofficial law has become the unwritten official norm. In the film, when one of the girls was seized by the soldier and was taken to be kept in a particular place — which serves as a prison for the girls — she wanted to inform her parents by giving a phone call to her father through her mobile. But the soldier in charge of her said that inside the stadium mobile phones are not allowed and that she cannot call her parents. But paradoxically, in the next moment we see the soldier taking her cell phone and then start talking with his paramour using the same cell phone. After witnessing this when the girl again asked the soldier for permission to call her parents the soldier again declined her proposal. The soldier had made a new law for the girl, for nowhere is it stated that mobile phones are not allowed within the stadium. The soldier — the representative of patriarchy — made an unofficial rule for the girl who represents the marginalized gender in Iranian society, knowing well that the woman cannot defy his self-improvised imposition. She had been exploited even before entering the playground. While she was coming to the stadium by bus a boy wanted to help her to let her in. His offering of help to her is not without a patriarchal overtone — man is the *savoir* of woman. But she denied taking his help suggesting that a woman can go on her own, that she does not always need the help a man in every course of her life and she blatantly protested against his continuous suspecting gaze which he casted at her:

THE GIRL: Stop staring or they'll spot me. It's hard enough as it is. You'll mess up my plan.

THE BOY: I hope you get in. Honestly.

THE GIRL: Keep down your voice.

THE BOY: Don't worry. I'll help you if there's any trouble.

THE GIRL: Stop acting the hero. I know how to get in.

Again she is exploited by the man who was selling tickets in black outside the stadium. The man sold a ticket to another man at five thousand tomans — Iranian currency, and a poster at three hundred tomans. But the same ticket he sold to the girl at the rate of eight thousand tomans and again to some extent forced her to buy the poster, not at the earlier rate of three hundred but of five hundred just because she is a woman.

Even the girl with the *chador* is denied entry into the stadium which reiterates the fact that even if you are religious, your religiosity will not help you to enter the male domain because of the fact that your biological identity, i.e. you are a woman, remains unchanged. A woman will remain a woman throughout her life and, therefore, she will always be deprived of taking part in the national game and hence be deprived of given any access to the stadium. By setting foot in the stadium the women are metaphorically crossing the threshold of patriarchy and invading the male world from where women have so long been casted off. But a male centred society will not allow this and in the film it is clearly evident that no effort remained unattempted to set a resistance against the women.

There is a girl in the film who smokes cigarette. When she is smoking everyone is looking at her with surprise. Again there is gender discrimination. Smoking cigarette is a privilege given only to the male folk of the society. So when the girl smokes the cigarette it acts as revolt on the part of the women folk against the prevalent gender discrimination. Then when she asked the soldier who is called as “Samandar” by his lower rank of officials, why they are not allowed to watch the match sitting inside the stadium while the Japanese women were allowed to do so when there was a game between Japan and Iran before, the soldier replied that because they were Japanese women they were allowed to watch. It is as if being born in Iran as woman is their main fault. When the soldier was further questioned by her and failed to give suitable answer, he stopped her by yelling at her. The implication is that if the women raise questions their voice will be muted by the repressive forces of the patriarchy. They have to bow down before those rules imposed upon them by the male government.

Panahi has incorporated another character, the girl who plays football. We came to know about her playing football from her little conversation with the soldier with whom she was going to the washroom. She is a good sticker and people love her playing. It challenges the prejudiced claim that football is a men’s game. Having been asked by the soldier if they allow any man to enter the playground to watch their game, she answers with an emphatic no. Then she adjoins the fact that men don’t possess that courage to enter women’s playground and watch the second sex to play the game. But contrary to their male counterpart these women have summoned the courage to enter men’s playground and in this aspect they have proved themselves more courageous than the men.

Another quality of the Teharani women is that they are very loyal. The girl who smokes cigarette says this when the “Samandar” shows his anxiety regarding the girl’s coming back from the washroom. A little later only the soldier, who was with that girl, came back and informed that the girl had ran away. This primarily acts as an antithesis of what the

girl who smokes said. But a moment later we see that the girl came back because she didn't want any soldier to fall in trouble for her. This emphasises the claim that Teherani women are loyal and good at heart. This opposes the notion that women are the master in deceiving and coquetry. Again it is not an exhibition of her loyalty only, this act of hers also exhibits her courage. She came back knowing well that she can be punished much more severely. And what is most noteworthy is that she came back for someone who is not her friend but someone who wants to thwart her dream — the dream of watching the football sitting inside the stadium. For this action one must possess tremendous courage otherwise it is not possible for one to demonstrate such fearless activity. What this girl has done exhibits not only her loyalty but also her moral integrity and her strength of character.

Sexual discrimination is exhibited very craftily and humorously in the film. Women are denied an entry to the stadium. That is why they have to change their outward appearance. The women can't enter the stadium in the womanly style they like and so they have to change their appearance to look like a man. However, this plan didn't work ultimately because they are unable to conceal some biological factor, such as their voice. Everyone can identify them after hearing their voice. Their voice acts as an instrumental to reveal their identity. Again they can't hide the tenderness of their face especially in the case of the first girl. The boy who offered her help in the bus commented that everyone would understand that she is a girl by just looking at her face. She can't avoid the male gaze. Another example of sexual discrimination can be found when the girl who plays football was asked to put on the poster on her face. The poster is of a player named Ali Karimi which is used to cover the sexual identity of female. Female identity is forcefully shrouded by the male identity with the perceived notion that only male identity can be potentially protective. Woman as a single identity is vulnerable to many attacks. But Panahi has presented this in a humorous way. The women laugh at watching this but they can also identify themselves with this situation.

The repressive forces of a male dominated society denied women absolute freedom. The stadium where the Iran-Bahrain game was going on is named as "Azadi Stadium". *Azadi* in English means freedom. The gruesome irony is that instead of granting freedom, this stadium has become a prison for the women where they are captured by the security officials. *Azadi* has been transformed into *gulami* (bondage) for them. The stadium not only checked their physical movement but also restrained them from fulfilling their dreams and aspirations. In this sense "Azadi Stadium" functions as a prison at two levels — the physical prison and the psychological prison.

However, these women have stood up on their own and shown their courage to voice a protest against the society ruled by so many Adams. The women can be interpreted as the modern incarnations of Lilith. Lilith was the first wife of Adam who refused to kneel down before the patriarchal hegemony in the Eden. Lilith was created from the same dust from where Adam was created; then why would she always be the one to kowtow to Adam? Similarly the women in *Offside* retain their ladylike dignity by defying the patriarchal law, and entering into the centre of the paternalistic world which is exhibited in their act of stepping their foot into the stadium. As Lilith showed her courage to protest against the patriarch Adam, similarly these women in the film showed their boldness by going against the dominant social paradigm. They no longer remain the angel in the house but serves as a threat to the patriarchal domination. They have summoned the power to question the unwritten constitutional proclamation. Though they have similarity with Lilith, at one point they are distinct from Lilith. In Lilith both the qualities of revolt and revenge were at work. She took her revenge by polluting the Eden. But these women are the representative of benevolent Lilith. Unlike the mythical Lilith the urge of taking revenge is absent from their mind. They enter the Eden — the stadium — only to revolt not to pollute the space. This is manifested in the behaviour of the girl who plays football. If she really had any intention of taking revenge upon the patriarchal domination she might not have come back after running away. This reveals that she is not an evil Lilith but a helpful Lilith.

However, what Panahi wants to display through this film is the hollowness of the social ideology. It is not the Iranian men who are hollow but the patriarchal norms which have a hollow core. It is these meaningless patriarchal norms which have built pigeon-holes for women. All men are not villainous in society. The soldiers in the film cannot be interpreted as typical villain. They are blocking the way of the women not because they are very much willing to do so but because they are bound to execute the governmental law.

Ursula in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* wanted to do something new by deviating from the traditional laws and create her own identity. She wanted to establish her own individual self-identity but she helter-skelters on how to attain her goal and at a point she questions:

[...] why must one inherit this heavy, numbing responsibility of living an undiscovered life? Out of nothingness and the undifferentiated mass, to make something of herself! But what? In the obscurity and pathlessness to take a direction! But whither? How take even one step? (237)

Likewise, in *Offside* these questions also haunt those Iranian women. They of course do not want to live a veiled and undiscovered life and they long to demonstrate their uniqueness. And they have taken that “one step” (Lawrence 237) by challenging the patriarchal orthodoxy and thereby, asserting their firm footing in the society. The women are not merely contemplating on their failure to see the match but trying very hard to overcome that failure. This is evident while they were shouting loudly hearing the commentary of the two soldiers. They appear much more excited and enthusiastic than the soldiers. Mere social imposition has failed to subjugate their indomitable spirit. They might not be fully successful in their attempt but their success lies in the fact that they at least attempted to break the shackles of patriarchy and establish their identity. Out of nothingness they have created something for themselves, that something which compels the society to rethink about them.

It would not be wrong to conclude by saying that there is a parallel relation between these women and Panahi himself. For both of them governmental laws stand as walls which obstruct their way to achieve their dreams and aspirations. But both Panahi and these women have proved that however strong the official restrictions may be, those restrictions will never be able to stop them from attempting to accomplish their dreams.

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