

Why are children used as protagonists in Iranian cinema?

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i SAE Institute London Written Assignment WHY ARE CHILDREN USED AS PROTAGONISTS IN IRANIAN CINEMA : A LOOK INTO MAJID MAJIDI'S ' THE CHILDREN OF HEAVEN ' (1997)? Iman Yusufali 15346 FF1011 20 August 2012

Word count: 3300 approx. ii DECLARATION: I hereby declare that I wrote this written assignment on my own and without the use of any other than the cited sources and tools and all explanations that I copied directly or in their sense are marked as such, as well as that the dissertation has not yet been handed in neither in this nor in equal form at any other official commission.

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K. Signature: IMAN YUSUFALI iii Table of Content Title Page Declaration Page Table of content Essay Reference List i ii iii 1 7 1 WHY ARE CHILDREN USED AS PROTAGONISTS IN IRANIAN CINEMA : A LOOK INTO MAJID MAJIDI'S ' THE CHILDREN OF HEAVEN ' (1997)? Iranian cinema has numerous successful movies that have been viewed internationally, that use children as protagonists and child heroes who have to go through daily life struggles. These films include ' Children of Heaven', ' Colour of God' by Majid Majidi, ' The White Balloon', ' Mashq-e Shab' (homework) by Kiarostami and Ab Bad Khak (water, wind, dust) by Amir Naderi.

The innocence of a child and the impromptu acting is sure to affect the way the story is told and witnessed by the viewers. Therefore what we are going to explore in this essay is what children could possibly represent and symbolise in films, why Iranian cinema in particular has used this notion of child-hero and we will also be analysing Majid Majidi's film ' The Children of

heaven' (1997) step by step, how he uses children as protagonists and what they represent in film.

Ultimately, we will understand the effect of using the child-hero in films and how the audiences interpret the film. Moreover, we shall be considering what children symbolize and represent in films and what they convey through their naturalistic performances. Additionally, we examine how the Iranian cinema changed post revolution and in what ways the filmmakers were forced to conform to the censorship prohibitions laid down by the strict government of Iran.

Likewise, we will be analysing Majid Majidi's Oscar nominated film from 1997; 'The Children of Heaven' and how it conforms to these censorship laws, as well as its success in being able to attract a large international audience simultaneously, who could relate and sympathise with its child-hero, Ali. Using sources and references such as the World Wide Web, journals, books and reviews we arrive at our conclusion.

It might not make sense why these questions in particular need to be answered, however my personal experiences living in Iran, my interest in Iranian cinema and my knowledge of the Persian language would be the first reason as to why this topic was chosen. Secondly, I strongly believe these are questions that one needs to consider and research whilst studying digital filmmaking, since using a child hero instead of an adult hero could have a major impact on the way a message of a film and the emotions within it, are communicated and perceived.

This will result in the realization that a tainted adult cannot communicate the same messages and performances, as a pure child is able to. 2 Many films worldwide use children as lead roles in their stories; as has been seen in Hollywood, Bollywood, Iranian and Italian cinema in films such as, 'Hugo' (2011), 'Tare zameen par' (2007), 'Children of Heaven' (1997) and 'Bicycle Thieves' (1948). Why use children as protagonists? Is it not possible for adults to play the hero instead?

Children have a sense of realness about them, a world of their own not yet tainted by adult distrust, dishonesty and disbelief. Children symbolise an untouched reality not influenced by the world as yet. (Marco Grosoli, 2011) Children have an independent life off set that gives them a feel of realism thus allowing audiences to trust their performances and actually believe and empathize with them. (Richard Tapper, 2002) This trueness gives children a sense of being 'real' and part of the common people thus portraying how people are or what people should really be like. (Richard Tapper, 2002) Children are frequently used to scrutinize the grown-up world in addition to a world of their own. (David Morrison, n. d.) Thus, it seems that children are not always valued for their child like ways but sometimes for their prospective great future in the mature world. (Iris Shepard, 2010) Kathy Jackson author of Representations of the Child in American Film also suggests that a child generally represents a hopeful future while an evil or demonic child would represent the evils of a society at large. (Iris Shepard, 2010) The pureness of a child is a mere reflection of a tainted grown up person. (Marco Grosoli, 2011) Perhaps it is the fact that they are so impulsive in their ways and are more adaptable and less self-aware in front of the

camera that children are a means in films to show reality. To put things into perspective, children are “naturals at being natural.” (Jonathon Jones, 2000) hence these ‘real people’ enlighten audiences with real messages. Their own past life experiences affect their performances in being even more credible.

From what we have said so far, one can gather that children can represent good and evil but all in a convincing and realistic manner. Children can symbolize society and even people’s alter egos. (Richard Tapper, 2002) We now have a brief idea as to why filmmakers would use children as protagonists, how their performance effect the audience and in what way they understand the story, this would then leads us to our next question why did Iranian cinema use this method?

The evidence to suggest that Iranian cinema had a tendency to use child protagonists comes with the sheer volume of films made with this concept. Amir Naderi’s *Davandeh (the runner)*(1986) and *Ab Bad Khak (water, wind, dust)*(1987), Abbas Kiarostami’s *Khaneh Doust Kojast? (Where is my friend’s house?)*(1986) tells the story of a child who is caught up in a inconsiderate adult world and in his *Mashq-e Shab(homework)*(1987), a documentary about the schooling structure, Kiarostami sat in conversation with the children.

In *Gal(Scabies)*(1987), Abolfazl Jalili tells us about the trials of a young delinquent in prison and, *Raqs-e khak(dance of dust)*(1991), explores into the realm of child labourers, these films are just the films that got international acclaim excluding the many more films made with the concept

of a childhero. (Rosa Issa and Sheila Whitaker, 1999) As to the reason behind this type of story telling, we will have to discuss and explore further into the Iranian society.

Iranian filmmakers, especially post revolution throughout the 1980s, have had a hard time with governmental regulations to be able to make films according to their own visions and directorial style. This is when children became an elemental part of the Iranian film industry. (Rosa Issa and Sheila Whitaker, 1999) 3 One might wonder why a sudden shift came about during and after the revolution, it seems the revolution itself, the occupation of US embassy and the 8 year war between Iraq and Iran had serious implications on the Iranian cinema and what was directed and produced in the country.

Resulting in the Iranian cinema being influenced by Islamic rulings, an anti-western outlook and propaganda. The afore-mentioned incidents created a shift in the world's perception of the Iranian people. The outside world now saw the Iranian people as cruel and barbaric, all this only from the lack of communication with the outside communities. Accordingly, cinema was the only method in which Iran could paint a completely different, more humane, vision of the Iranian people to the rest of the planet. (Hamid Reza Sadr, 2006) Limitations employed on certain topics such as the illustration of love interactions between opposite genders and violence, added to the trend of substituting adults with children as heroes (usually playing the roles of brother and sisters). The children are sometimes were even allowed to sing songs in child hero films, which is still forbidden in Iranian films till today. (Rosa Issa and Sheila Whitaker, 1999) The child-hero movies are to a certain

extent, a channel through which filmmakers sidestep restrictions that they would have had with adult-hero movies. (Jonathon Jones, 2000) Some films like 'The Apple' (1998), are seen by Times magazine as a masked confrontation on the mullahs, with the children signifying the new young Iran's refusal to allow further religious control. (Jonathon Jones, 2000) Thus, children were also used to symbolize the youth of the whole country at large in their political positions. Furthermore, making viewers and audiences relate to the subjection of a child makes them in turn able to engage with the nature of the Iranian society and what it means and feels like, to be as subjected and as helpless as the child in the film. (Jonathon Jones, 2000) Hence, children were not only used to symbolize the young Iran's political and social positions but to actually make the audience understand and identify with the feelings that come by living in such a society. The recurrent hire of kids as actors is double in its implication as Persian filmmakers use the theatrical and melodramatic abilities of kids by showing them as troubled by destitution and unjust policies. Nevertheless, the use of youngsters is likewise a method that permits directors to evade those strict censorship laws that relate explicitly to the depiction of men and women in films.

In movies like Majid Majidi's *Bache-ha-ye Asman* (Children of Heaven, 1997) and *Rang-e Khoda* (The Colour of Paradise, 1999), the relationships featured are often pairs of young brothers and sisters who together must overcome the rigid dictates of their parents. Therefore, the purpose of children in Iranian cinema is inconsistent: they are, in one way used to evade the strict censorship laws and prohibitions that come with making films in Iran but simultaneously these children are shown to be restricted by the same

system. Rosa Holman, 2006) Many films are arranged against a vivid natural setting to add gravity to the storyline (Linda Aronson, 2001), which in turn exaggerates the inner and emotional occurrences of the hero in a film. Likewise children can be used as symbols whose external battles and experiences relate to the broader problems in society. (Rosa Holman, 2006) Another possible reason for the placement of children as protagonists in Iranian cinema, would be that children are less likely to be judged because their performance embodies individual incidents and intimate sentiment.

This emotional performance brings the audience to believe what they are seeing is the 'real world'. This in turn leads the audience to empathize with the struggles of the child not as the child's but as their own. Consequently, taking out all sorts of social illnesses within the audience and giving them a sense of communal understanding. (Richard Tapper, 2002) 4 The use of children to manipulate the mature audience's feelings is a method that has been long used by Iranian filmmakers. Rosa Issa and Sheila Whitaker, 1999) Also this approach, of a child being a hero, portrays them as greater symbols of men and women and even sometimes as "everyone's alter egos". (Richard Tapper, 2002) However it appears that the filmmakers in Iran did not employ the notion of child hero in their stories, merely to evade censorship prohibitions or to get the children's natural performances on camera. Having children especially in Iranian films let the international viewers delve deep into a child's world, whose lives and lifestyles may be very different from the viewers', but whose concerns is one in the same universally. Hamid Reza Sadr, 2006) Perhaps, in a child's universe time is unlike that of time in an adult's world i. e. the concept of time is not that of the real world it is more

adaptable and more changeable, it can be still entirely or can be fast-forwarded just like a film. It is the quintessence of child's play where even a "boy blowing a bubble" can hold the time in suspense just to enjoy that very moment and not let it pass by. Jonathan Jones, 2000) The comprehension of why the child-hero was used so widely in Iranian cinema leads us to our last point of discussion: An exploration of the use of child protagonists in Majid Majidi's film, 'The Children of Heaven' (1997). After having watched the film, it is apparent that Ali, the child protagonist in 'The Children of Heaven' has represented all that a child should represent in film, from his au-natural acting to his innocent tears we see so very often throughout the film.

In the adult world, we separate children from ourselves as not being able to feel or go through the same emotional and spiritual experiences as we do. Also as grown ups one feels that children have it easy in life and are not as affected by daily problems and issues. However, Majid Majidi in this film illustrates to Iran and the world that children in fact are more receptive to emotions and have a heightened sense of fear and distress than we as adults, realise. (Maria Garcia, n. d. "The young hero of Majid Majidi's "Children of Heaven" is played by Mir Farrokh Hashemian, a desolate-looking boy with huge brown eyes and a way of sending tears suddenly rolling down his cheeks. Those tears well up with some regularity during this film about 9-year-old Ali, his younger sister Zahra (Bahareh Seddiqui) and their scheme for sharing a pair of his tattered sneakers. " (Janet Maslin, 1999) We see such depictions of high emotions every time Ali cries or feels guilt or strives to recompense for his sister's lost shoes.

The first time this is shown in the movie is in the beginning when Ali loses his sister's shoes and goes looking for it under all the wooden vegetable cartons and even though he is shouted at cries and tells the grocer that his sister's shoes were there and now they are not there any more. (Majid Majidi, 4: 50, 5: 19) The second time we see Ali troubled with the burden of losing his sister's shoes is when he comes back home, stops and looks at his sister's smiling face. At first he does not have the heart to tell her but she goes to look at them and he is forced to tell her the truth.

Both children start crying here. Zahra, Ali's sister, cries because she does not know what she will wear to school the next day and Ali cries because he's looked everywhere and feels guilty and knows his father cannot afford to buy a new pair of shoes and pleads with Zahra not to tell their mother and to make up runs back out of the house and goes back to the grocers bravely to look for the shoes even refusing to play with his friends at their request. (Majid Majidi, 6: 48, 6: 50, 7: 10, 7: 15, 7: 21, 7: 26, 7: 45, 7: 50, 8: 00, 8: 20, 8: 40, 9: 15) 5

Yet again we see Ali crying because his father tells him off for running out of the house and not waiting to help his mother. Ali's father tells him he is now 9 years old and grown up that he needs to be more responsible. All Ali can do is cry out of guilt and fear even though he is doing his best. (10: 42, 10: 50) Even when Zahra threatens to tell their father, Ali tries to explain to her that this will cause more damage than her having no shoes as he has no money to buy her new shoes. So he being a loving brother suggests they share shoes and in tries to compensate by giving her a brand new pencil.

Majid Majidi, 14: 30, 15: 08, 15: 30, 15: 49) Ali's emotions get the best of him when he becomes agitated with his sister for coming late and in turn making him late for school. This happens because Ali is afraid of being caught by the principal of the school who always seems to be lurking around to catch late children. (Majid Majidi, 19: 24, 19: 36, 20: 38) When Ali comes back home Zahra expresses her distaste of the dirty shoes and says she just cannot where dirty shoes. Ali who simply says, " We'll wash it", solves this issue making his sister smile.

He knows how to make his sister happy without getting caught by his parents. (Majid Majidi, 21: 15, 21: 31) On the television there is a program informing the viewer's dangers of not wearing the proper type of shoes and this makes Ali worry about his sister. (Majid Majidi, 23: 25, 23: 38) Zahra cannot sleep at night because she is worried the rain might wet their shoes and she wakes Ali up. Ali gets up and gets the shoes right in time. No matter what happens Ali makes sure nothing happens to these shoes a lesson learnt well. Majid Majidi, 23: 57, 24: 05, 24: 25) When one of the shoes slips off her foot into the gutter full of water, she gets fed up of this sharing and tells Ali that she's going to tell their father. Ali tells her he's not afraid of the beating that he might get but he thought she would understand that their father is the one who will get upset for not being able to buy a pair of shoes and that he'll have to take a loan and if he gets in debt, so on and so forth. (Majid Majidi, 29: 45, 29: 58, 30: 21) Ali tries to make his little sister understand the concept of self-sacrifice.

Another scene where Ali's emotional side comes to play is when he says no to his friend's request to come to play in the finals for the football league. He maintains his principals and recognizes his responsibilities when he answers negatively, stating that his mother is ill. (Majid Majidi, 32: 20, 32: 44) If you want a heart-melting scene of kindness to ones sibling look no further. Ali gets one of the highest marks in his Mathematics class and thus receives a pen as a gift. He runs home to find Zahra still not talking to him, to makeup he gives her this pen without thinking twice. Majid Majidi, 34: 00, 34: 21, 34: 40) This is a true example of giving. Respecting his old neighbours, and giving them a bowl of hot soup, Ali is rewarded with a handful of nuts, raisins and sugar balls for which his very thankful. (Majid Majidi, 35: 40, 36: 20, 36: 25, 36: 30) Another crisis that takes place is when the principal catches Ali coming in late for the third time. This time he tells Ali to go back home and come back with his father. Ali tries to explain that his father works all the time and his mother is sick but the principal just thinks the boy is making excuses because he is afraid.

He goes out crying but gets allowed back into the school with the intercession of his teacher. (Majid Majidi, 43: 05 – 43: 55) 6 Ali like his father helps at the local mosque. Ali does the humbling job of putting all the shoes of the worshippers in order with his friends and then later on is called to serve the tea to all of those attending. (Majid Majidi, 46: 40, 46: 43, 47: 40) Ali always listens to his parents never once disrespecting them even though as a child he is burdened with many chores.

Ali's ability to play with a child he's just met who is from a completely different background to him shows Ali's ability to interact without judgment just enjoying the present. (Majid Majidi, 56: 25) When Ali finds out that the third prize of the national race is sports shoes he goes straight to the P. E. teacher's office to put his name down for the race. He insists on this to the point of tears and promises to come first, the teacher cannot say no to Ali's tear stained face. This illustrates that Ali is focused on compensating for a mistake he committed and making his sister happy.

As soon as he reaches home he does not wait a minute in telling her the good news. (Majid Majidi, 1: 07: 50, 1: 08: 12, 1: 09: 05, 1: 10: 08) All through the race Ali has flashbacks of his sister running back home to give him his shoes back for school and he hears her voice asking about the shoes. This motivates him to the point where he even is pushed over but stands right back up and continues to run. (Majid Majidi, 1: 15: 10, 1: 18: 26) In the end Ali wins first prize accidentally, which is good for everyone except him whose soul purpose was to win the shoes for his sister.

He goes back home disappointed and ashamed not knowing in the end that the father bought both them a new pair of shoes each. (Majid Majidi, 1: 21: 10, 1: 22: 03, 1: 23: 00, 1: 23: 30) In the end we see Ali sitting with his blistered feet in the fountain with all the golden fish surrounding his feet (Majid Majidi, 1: 24: 50) as if the good actions and intentions, attracted them to him likewise attracting all those who watched this film. In conclusion, we see that Majid Majidi's child hero character, Ali, makes the audience

empathise with him for his innocence, realness, innate goodness and his naturalness.

He really gets the message across; problems in society, how one should act responsible when they make a mistake, respecting one's family, self sacrifice and so much more. This movie is completely within the regulations Iran has set yet it identifies not only with the Iranian people rather by all of the world.

“ What follows is a beautiful telling of a childhood adventure, a touching portrait of sibling-hood, and among other things, an immersive portrayal of life in poverty. The film is surprisingly poignant, and quietly gives us different perspectives on the lives of others by literally putting us in their shoes.

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