

ASGHAR FARHADI'S THE PAST FROM A POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Iranian filmmaker, Asghar Farhadi, has contributed to national cinema of Iran which is indicative of people with a rich cultural and socio-political history. The iconography of Iranian cinema represents a thought provoking portrait of socio-ethical backdrop. Farhadi's fame is indebted to his universal film *A Separation* which won the best academy award 2012. One year later, he directed *The Past* which nominated for 2013 the best foreign film in Cannes film festival. *The Past*, is an intricate drama which portrays the nostalgia for the lost wholeness of the past. This film tries to indicate that how man tries to justify his past that is stemmed from disappointment and failure by incorrect choices in life. By borrowing insights from Lyotard's question of postmodernism, this paper attempts to study the working of postmodernism's characteristics in Asghar Farhadi's *The Past*. This paper concludes that all those features and characteristics of postmodern features together have been the real key to the sense of relativism in terms of recognition, truth, narrations, and culture on the cornerstone which postmodernism is built upon.

KEYWORDS: Iran's Cinema, Asghar Farhadi, *The Past*, Postmodernism, Relativism

INTRODUCTION

Iranian cinema sometimes seems to draw more from documentaries and poetry than conventional narrative sources. Farhadi's plots, with their chains of consequences and flawed characters, often suggest the influence of European dramatists such as Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, whose work he has directed for the stage. Before breaking out with his Golden Globe and Oscar-winning marital drama *A Separation*, Asghar Farhadi was already the director of four previous films that offer an equally acute, perceptive gaze into the realities of contemporary domestic life in Iran, from the margins of the working class to the relative comforts of the bourgeoisie. Saeed Dehghan on his review for *The Guardian* states, "Asghar Farhadi has proved able to make good films – and even obtain the government approval as well as international admiration after winning the Golden Bear."

Farhadi's style is unique, and he has a microscopic vision on everything. Dave Calhoun, a film critic, explains about Farhadi's style, says, "He employs an unadorned realism to tease quiet, important themes from in-the-moment stories. That same style is very much present in his first French film, *The Past*, a story of a Parisian family in emotional flux and touched by tragedy. When an interviewer, Mary Kaye Schilling, asks Farhadi that how he has come up with the idea for *The Past*, he says, "I heard a story about a man who was going back to a woman after many years, to live under the same roof in order to get a divorce. It stayed with me and I finally realized that in order to get rid of it, I'd have to make it into a film.

From there, I have to ask myself why he left four years ago, what is going to happen here? The process of writing is like creating a game of dominoes: The first domino creates the second incident, and so forth until the end." Tina

Hassannia in her book, *Asghar farhadi: Life and Cinema*, shed light on Farhadi cinematography by saying that he is a modern and real dramatist. It means that he has learned from major dramatists of the twentieth century and turned his gained knowledge into plots which are presenting morality in acute and deftly manner. Accordingly, Farhadi is able to create stories which are identical with Iranian culture and at the same time they are universal. Above all, he shows what are the motives and logic hidden behind man's action and reaction. He never tries to compel the spectators to decide whether the action is true or justified, but he tries to emphasize on the action and decision occurred in the specific moment (15).

In *The Past* Marie (B er enice Bejo) has asked Ahmad (Ali Mosaffa) to return to Paris from Teheran after some years, to be present for the long-delayed and contentious divorce. He is not legally required to be there, but Marie wants closure, to bid a civilized farewell to their failed marriage, and also for him to say a considerate goodbye to her children. But on his arrival he notices many changes. Ahmad finds out that Marie has not booked him a hotel, but for complex and unexamined motives expects him to stay in her small, chaotic house, putting him right in the middle of her current difficulties. Ahmad learns that Marie has started a new life with her live-in partner, Samir (Tahar Rahim), who has moved in with his little boy, Fouad (Elyes Aguis) whose wife is in a coma. Marie tries to involve Ahmad in domestic issues and asks him to discover about her daughter's isolation, Lucie (Pauline Burlet), who is not happy with Marie's intended third marriage.

Perspective of Iranian Cinema

The pioneers of the Iranian New Wave were directors like Feroz Farrokhzad and Khosrow Sinai. They made innovative art films with highly political and philosophical tones and poetic language. Subsequent films of this type have become known as the New Iranian cinema to distinguish them from their earlier roots. The most notable figures of the Iranian New Wave are Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi, Bahram Beizai, Darius Mehrjui, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Iranian New Wave films shared some characteristics with the European art films of the period, in particular Italian Neo-realism. Parallel to the Iranian New Wave, with its neorealist and minimalist art cinema, there exists a so-called "popular art cinema" in Iran. Filmmakers who belong to this circle make films with a broader range of audience than the narrow spectrum of highly educated people who admire the 'New Wave', but believe that their movies are also artistically sound. Filmmakers such as Nasser Taghvaei and Ali Hatami are the best examples of this cinematic movement.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini explains about circumstances of Iranian cinema in pre-and-post revolution, says "Before the 1979 revolution, the priests in Iran rejected cinema, or at best ignored it. Films were among the forms of art considered forbidden, and going to cinema was supposed as committing sin.. The post-revolution cinema was thus faced with a dilemma. Aware of cinema's power, the Islamic authorities could neither reject nor ignore the medium as the priests had done before. On the other hand, jurisprudence had nothing to say about film, apart from imposing its rules of *halal* and *haram* on cinematic images and themes. New government made a concerted attempt to bring cinema under the domination of state ideology and subject it to a process of Islamization. But the Islamization process has failed, as filmmakers, like other artists, have gradually managed to free their art from jurisprudence injunctions and state ideology" (26-27). Ultimately, there was a kind of reconciliation between the state and Iranian filmmakers in order to continue cinematic art under the interest of the state. Filmmakers knew the state red lines and they tried to address and tackle the concerned themes metaphorically.

Hamid Dabashi in his book *Close Up: Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future* argues that the power of cinema has proceeded that of literature in that it has become an international art, with wide global viewing. Accordingly the Iranian cinema is so powerful because Iranians have watched and assimilated the world through film. Now the cinema is reflecting back to the world what it has seen, adding its own cultural color. Additionally its power stems from the fact that the world had made up its mind about Iran through images and news reports following the revolution, and was therefore perhaps a little surprised by what it saw on the screen. Dabashi goes further to say: "In the cinema we were re-born as global citizens in defiance of the tyranny of the time and the isolation of the space that sought to confine us" (175). In a sense cinema is a glimpse into the hopes and desires of a nation. Therefore, the cinematic devices pioneered, partly due to censorship at first, have sharpened the filmmakers of the New Iranian Cinema to produce a stream of innovative, incredibly rich and symbolic national cinema indicative of a people with a rich cultural, socio-political and artistic history.

DISCUSSIONS

Gonarkar and Dhage in the paper on "Postmodernism and Film" state that, "Postmodernism, as a discursive stylistic grid has enriched film theory and its analysis by calling attention to a stylistic shift toward a media conscious cinema" (520). Much of the work on postmodernism in film has the feature of post-modernity and the symbol of a postmodern aesthetic. Some consider postmodernism as the continuation of modernism and some see it as a breaking part of modern period. According to Lyotard, both modernism and post modernism exist by shattering the tradition. Postmodernism is defined according to Lyotard as taking the rules of modernism and using them as guidelines for postmodernism. Most of Lyotard's theory can be summed with one quotation which states, "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art are looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have done" (Postmodern Condition 79).

Postmodernism is our condition today. The situation we live in now. The main question is that how we identify, confront and deal with this situation. This question can be asked in various areas of science, knowledge and art. And in each area to what extent we are influenced by postmodernism and what are its consequences. This paper tries to study Asghar Farhadi's *The Past* from lens of postmodernism and examines its characteristics from socio-cultural perspectives. *The Past*, too, emphasizes on fragmented relationship of the man who seek to forget the failure of the past. However, the postmodern characteristic of this film is centered on the representation of relativism.

In *The Past*, Farhadi says about the title of the film and its concept, "We cannot break with the past even if we try to move from past to future. After reading the film script Jean-Claude Carrière told me that there is no past but only its memory. You are censoring past in your memories or look into it bitterly or you paint it according to your interest" (Youtube DP/30).

Kara Abdolmaleki, a film critic for *The Guardian* at Tehran Bureau, says, "*The Past* is neither a morality tale, nor a political allegory, nor a philosophical expose" but Farhadi's *The Past* makes profound relation with features of postmodernism. In fact, Farhadi confirms these features and in his film displays these premises. Postmodernism is generally consisted of three main elements. First is man's inability in recognition of truth. Second is emphasis on meta-narratives in understanding meanings and recreation of truth by individuals. And third, rejection of totality and

acknowledgement of “others”.

First characteristic of postmodernism is to emit Hegelian, Cartesian, and Kantian doer from its center. It means that man is unable to identify the truth. However, in this situation man’s decision is not based upon freedom, rationality, recognition and awareness, but it is mainly based on emotions, suppressed obsession, unconscious and deprivation of life.

In *The Past*, Marie is intended to get married for the third time. So, her decision is questioned in the entire film. In the opening scene, where the photograph of Ahmad is seen in car dash-board, a kind of propensity is still felt inside Marie towards Ahmad. Later, she denies it and it is found out that she lives with a new partner, Samir. Marie tries to justify her act with declaration of her pregnancy. Marie’s daughter, Lucie, from her first marriage says to Ahmad that her mother decided to live with Samir just because he does resemblance to Ahmad.

In the last part of the film, Marie and Samir speak about their relationship and they doubt that they love each other. Samir do not look into her pregnancy as a sign of love but as an accident and Marie accuses him that he is uncertain to choose between her and his wife who committed suicide and is in coma for a long time. Ahmad also never tries to explain his abandon and once he tries to speak on this matter, Marie interrupts him. Perhaps there is no rational explanation for his act and if there is, it is of no significance. The process of the film is that no characters takes decision based on reason, but it is all transitory feelings or mental pressures which lead them to make decision.

The second characteristic of postmodernism is the focus on language. Because language replaces by reason and gives meaning to everything. However, language in different contexts has different meanings. The point is that different narrations of an event are different interpretations. It means that no narration is superior than other narrations are. So, there is no meta-narrative and meta-fiction. Different discourses have different stories. However, there is pluralism in truth in which diversity and transformation have given importance. Therefore, the task of our mind is not to decode the truth but recreate it as it takes new shape and meaning from world by every individual. This characteristic of postmodernism is notably seen in this film. In fact, *The Past* is the story that has variety of narrations. The specific incident takes different meanings by developing the plot. The woman’s suicide is interpreted in different ways. The narration of Lucie is that when Samir’s wife learns about illicit affairs of her husband, she commits suicide. Marie has different narration; she claims that Samir’s wife was really in depression. In developing course of plot, it is revealed that a day before suicide, Lucie forwarded her mother’s love-letters to Samir’s wife. Another narration of this incident is that of the female worker, who works in Samir’s dry-cleaning store. She shared the wife’s email with Lucie and she believes that Samir’s wife committed suicide because she would have suspected to her relation with her husband. The other narration of this story is basically that the wife has not read the emails before her suicide and the incident happened just because she doubted upon the relationship between her husband and the female worker.

However, to some extent all different narrations from a specific incident can be true. The spectator can choose any of the narrations as the film director seems has not intended to discover the truth. No truth in the film. The fact which seems simple, it gets converted through the process of different narration which none of narrations has superiority over the others as all narrations are the expression of the truth. According to Dave Calhoun, “Farhadi is at pains to stress how we’re all constrained by our own perspectives on our lives: something he pushes to extremes with the film’s final, terribly overwrought moment. In the end, there’s just so much of ‘The Past’ that doesn’t have that crucial ring of truth to it.”

Third characteristic of postmodernism is the rejection of totality and the acknowledgment of “others”. Postmodernists believe that the West culture is not the only superior culture but marginalized and indigenous cultures are of importance. The “others,” that is culture is different from western culture. So, postmodernism is dealt with cultural diversity. In *The Past*, the third characteristic of postmodernism is recreated with juxtaposition of characters of various cultures and lack of superiority of one culture over another. Marie is a French female who married to a Persian guy and is about to divorce, and intends to marry with an Arab now. In the film, the place of French culture has never shown superior than Persian and Arab culture is. Persian husband wants to resolve the problems of French female and her daughter. There is no disdain of cultures in this film as it tries to respect all cultures. There is, in fact, a kind of social solidarity and human relation in this film without dominance of one culture over another. That is why Farhadi's film is absolutely postmodern. Having seen from every angle, the emphasis on relativism is clearly highlighted. Thus, relativism in recognition of truth, narrations, and cultures is the cornerstone that postmodernism is built upon.

According to Abdolmaleki, Farhadi has designed *The Past* so that we are led to roam endlessly in it. It would be naïve to imagine the film as a didactic attempt to persuade us against judging others or to prove to us that morality is relative. The answer *The Past* gives, says Abdolmaleki, can be chaos – the realization that in a world bereft of God, spirituality, love, truth, or moral ideals, humans are doomed to perpetual wandering and wondering in an ocean of complete solitude with no beacon to lead them to the shore of certainty(The Guardian). Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian critic*, believes that Farhadi hasn't appropriate very much to details and has tried to limit the plot. Bradshaw sees past as failure, deplorable and regretful. In his review he says, “with real intellectual sinew, from the bravura opening scene – Marie picks Ahmad up at the airport, driving an unfamiliar car and backing out of her parking spot she almost has some kind of unexplained prang: a disaster which Farhadi cleverly follows with his opening title, *The Past*, with a windscreen-wiper motif.”

CONCLUSIONS

This paper is an investigation to evaluate and interpret the recent film of Asghar Farhadi, the Iranian film director, from socio-cultural perspective of today's Iran. Further, despite the socio-cultural study of this film, this paper examines major characteristics of postmodernism linked with this prospective. *The Past* is also based on the elements of secrecy, guilt, and past. Such elements are the purports that every individual is involved in. Postmodernism's features are merely explicit in *The Past* as the script itself implies on it. However, characteristics of postmodernism have reached to pinnacle in *The Past*, and in fact, marked it as a postmodern film which thereby propagates relativism.

The positive aspect of Farhadi's films is to open our eyes to the relations we are locked in, though we are part of its development. The negative aspect of Farhadi's films is that we are not supposed to see anyone guilty. And this is the situation and the condition themselves that have to blame. We are encountered with the web of relationships in which all people have the same role though in different ways as some are oppressors, some are oppressed, some are rulers, and some are indicted. This is the condition that rules upon relations.

This condition is called imperialistic capitalism as in one hand consolidates the family unit in order to grant man privileges, and on the other hand collapses the family unit because of its impetuses. This is the condition that shatters Maries, marginalizes Naimas, and encourages Selins (Samir's wife) to suicide. This is the condition that scatters lies, crushes the souls, and causes the faults. As much as our perception for the truth remains true and intact, the essential

solution for changing the truth will be accessible. But if this perception remains less and restrained, the solution seems farfetched. Thus, the trail and tribulation prolongs. Farhadi believes that the relationship between man and woman is complex as it based on the frame of love, co-existence, and hatred. *The Past* is a domestic drama in which it portrays the pain that everyone suffers from social interaction. This critical relationship causes a continuous mental depression and leads to collapse the family unit.

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