

Analysis of Contemporary Iranian films through mise-en-scene elements

Author 1: TANVEEN ASLAM KAWOOSA, Ph. D, Mass Communication, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU)Aligarh.

Author 2: PROF.AFRINA RIZVI, MASS COMMUNICATION, AMU.Aligarh.

Abstract

Although European and American cinema has remained the centre of attention for both scholars and theorists, only a few of them have theorized history and theory of cinema from the Middle East. Nevertheless, in recent years, the international fame of Iranian cinema has invited the world's attention to a new film tradition based on simple yet powerful themes.

The post-Revolutionary film tradition of Iran has gained respect and admiration globally for its subtle exploration of socio-political issues while avoiding artificiality.

Due to censorship and regulations, the majority of actors have to leave the film industry. The imposition of ban on showcasing romantic relationships, songs, and dance sequences facilitated children to come to the forefront of the Iranian cinema after the revolution. These regulations and limitations also opened up new creative opportunities for filmmakers to use the innocence of children to give powerful messages to the world.

In the study, semiotic analysis of mise-en-scene elements has been done in selected films addressing the themes of marginalized sections of society. Further, the researcher has also

borrowed an ideas from noted French semiotician Roland Barthes concept of connotation and denotation of images and American Philosopher C.S pierces, indexical and symbolic signs in the analysis of film text.

Key words: *Mise-en-scene, Iranian cinema, realism, Children, semiotics.*

Introduction:

The Post-Revolutionary film tradition of Iran has gained respect and admiration globally for its subtle exploration of socio-political issues while avoiding artificiality. Due to censorship and regulations, the majority of Iranian actors have to leave the film industry. The imposition of ban on showcasing romantic relationships, songs, and dance sequences facilitated children to come to the forefront of the Iranian cinema after the Islamic revolution. These regulations and limitations also opened up new creative opportunities for filmmakers to use the innocence of children to give powerful messages to the world. Nevertheless, Iranian cinema contributed significantly to the debate of cinematic realism with the production of realistic films by noted filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Jaffar Panahi and Samira Makhmalbaf.

One of the most interesting aspects of Iranian films is the use of real places, away from studio settings. An audience's relationship with the film is often conditioned by its expectations and interpretations of the Iranian settings. For the filmmaker, location plays a key role in defining narrative spaces. The low-budget Iranian films based on simple storylines are highly acclaimed in international film festivals. These films are the products of the artistic potential of filmmakers and not sophisticated technology.

Methodology

The study "Analysis of Contemporary Iranian films through mise-en-scene elements" is a qualitative study using film semiotics in the analysis of the films. In the study, semiotic analysis of mise-en-scene elements has been done in selected Iranian. The researcher has also borrowed ideas from noted French semiotician Roland Barth's concept of connotation and denotation of images. The researcher has also used indexical metaphors suggested by Peter Wollen while quoting C.S Peirce in his famous work 'Signs and meaning in the cinema'.

Findings

6.4 Semiotic analysis of the film *The Apple*

Film: Apple (1998)

Direction: Samira Makhmalbaf

Script: Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Duration time: 1h 26 m

Year of Release.1998

Place: Iran.

Summary of Film:

The film "Apple" recreates the true story of two sisters confined in their prison-house for eleven years by their overprotective father. The film is a skillful blend of fiction and reality revealing the true story of Zahra and Massoumeh Naderi, twin girls who were locked up at home until the age of 12 by their 65-year old father, Ghorban Ali.

The father locks the girls inside the sparse, dimly lit room with their sightless mother. The audience watches father locking and unlocking these entrance doors as he comes and goes to work, food, and other essential items. Zahra and Massoumeh are above 12 years old but look like mentally disabled children because of acute social deprivation.

The social worker peacefully facilitated the release of the girls from their home after receiving complaints from the neighbours. Moreso, the blind mother of twins, remains blind to the idea of women's freedom. She protects the patriarchy and even verbally abuses social worker who calmly but heroically frees her daughters.

The story for *apple* is taken straight from the Tehran television news and uses the family members concerned to act directly, but the director uses apple, mirror, and other symbolic props to narrate deeper meanings.

Filmed in chronological order over 11 days first on video and then film, the apple configures curiosity of twins about the world and the subtle changes that occur in them in the process of socialization.

In the end, the mother of twins wanders out of the house in search of Zahra and Massoumeh. She grabs the apple dangled by the same boy from the same apartment window.

Semiotic analysis of mise-en-scene elements

A variety of signs employed by filmmakers in the construction of media text can be categorized as:

Table:6.4.1

Location as Signs

Signs	meanings
Locked house	<p>The arm of one of the girls stretches out through the bars of the gate to pour water on the plant (visual representation/treatment). (see fig:4)</p> <p>Denotation: Confinement</p> <p>Connotation: 'Water' is what Zahara and Massoumah, require to grow and survive, which is metaphorically revealed in the image.</p>
The dingy, dark interior of the house	Denotation: poverty
Playground	<p>Denotation: Vast field where children play.</p> <p>Connotation: It signifies a place of freedom for children.</p>
Rocky Field	<p>Denotation: Field filled with stones. Zahra and Massoumeh lay down on rocks along with other girls and eat apples.</p> <p>Connotation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social integration after long

	<p>confinement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rocks signify upheavals in the world • The unpleasant moments in the life of girls. • Apple is the fruit of the world. <p>(signify pain and pleasure the life offers for women in the patriarchal society.)</p>
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Fig:01(Rocks as important signs)

Discussion:

The film “*apple*” is a fictional reconstruction of actual events focusing on the life of the people having a poor socio-economic condition. The filmmaker narrates the tragic story of girls within the parameters of realistic narratives without judging or condemning the characters.

The location shown at the beginning of the film has symbolic characteristics. The film opens with an image of the girl’s outstretched hand watering the withered flower through the bars of a door. It raises possible symbolic meanings relating to the narrative. The plant is metaphorically equated with the life of Zahara and Massoumah, which needs water to grow and survive. Samira has used real locations in such a way that, at times, they generate symbolic meanings and become part of the story.

The girls make their first step from their locked dark house towards open spaces. The first person they encounter is a boy who tempts girls by dangling fishing pole, at the end of which is attached apple, from the window. As the girls fail to catch the apple, the boy shows them the way where they can buy their apples. However, they have to go back to their perpetrator-their father for money, showcasing the dependency of girls in a patriarchal society.

The girls walk on the streets for the first time while holding the mirror in hand. Their inability to behave generally like their fellow children signifies acute social deprivation. The mirror in hand signifies that these girls have undergone a delayed “mirror stage.” They are unable to recognize their selves. Now they have moved out of imprisonment figuratively their own house, towards open spaces which constitute freedom.

Girls lie down on some rocks and eat the apples. Samira has deliberately used this location to symbolically signify pain and pleasure the life offers for women in the patriarchal society.

Table 6.4.2: Cinematography

(Camera movements, camera angles, heights, freeze-frame shots as signs)

Signs	Meanings
Back view of father and mother of victims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denotation: A back view usually reveals that the character is upset or hiding their emotions or unable to face the audience. • Connotation: Parents in a predicament after social workers exposed them for imprisoning their daughters. • Here the characters are unable to face the society due to their immoral act.
Close-up Shot of apple placed on a legal document that carries thumb impressions of three people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text of the petition of the neighbours forms the background in a composition wherein Apple and thumb impressions are placed across a diagonal line. (visual treatment) <p>Denotation: The text of the petition is addressed to the ‘Director of the welfare organization.’ It reveals that two girls aged 12 has been locked up at home for 11 years.</p> <p>Connotation: Placement of visual elements across diagonal lines indicates tension and dynamism.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The girls will now be released soon. They will explore the world and taste its fruit.
Medium shot of girl peering through the iron grilled door(static shot)(see fig: 2a&b)	Denotation: The static shot reveals that time seems to stand still for her.
High angle shot of father locking the door	<p>Denotation:In high angle shots, the camera looks down on the subject who appears small and vulnerable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (The actual victims are girls in the film and not father. The filmmaker should have used high angle shots for girls instead of the father.) <p>Connotation: Father is a silent oppressor who locked up her daughters.</p>
Fast-paced dolly shot as protagonist Godabi purchases bread and ice for family.	<p>Denotations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directing the audience's attention to the character as it moves inside the frame. Understanding the subject in the context of other objects (people, place, things) inside the frame.
Freeze- frame shot	<p>The freeze-frame shot of a sight-less mother of twins who grabs the fruit dangled by the same boy from the same apartment window(visual treatment)</p> <p>Denotation: Freeze frame shots allow viewers enough time to extricate meanings.</p>

	Connotation: The shot is an ‘open image’ and illustrates a multitude of possible readings. Since the mother of Zahra and Massoumeh has not tasted an apple but only grabbed it.
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Camera movements form a significant element in a film. The shot composition of the hand of a girl pouring water through the metal barred window on to the plant is austere, almost abstract-flat with the camera axis perpendicular to the background.

The shot raises possible symbolic meanings related to the narrative. While maintaining some of the critical characteristics of cinematic realism, Filmmaker has used allegorical codes to reveal deeper meanings of shots. The plant is in the open, receiving the sun rays and water necessary for its growth. Like the plant, Zahara and Massoumah also need to grow in the open air.

They will not wilt in the sun of men’s gazes. The filmmaker has constructed narratives in which path to fruitful future for non-ideal children in Iran depends both upon the individual child and the society surrounding them. In this case, the social worker supports them to step into the outside world.

The filmmaker focuses on the everyday life of the family by plunging a camera across Tehran street, keeping pace with the father of two girls who return home after purchasing bread and ice. The camera captures these everyday events, which may seem naïve, trivial, yet these form essential elements of realistic cinema.

In certain scenes, the filmmaker has used unnecessary tracking shots that have no significance; for instance, the conversation of a social worker and a girl’s father. No other objects are included in the frame to define the context of shots.

It is a common trend in contemporary Iranian films influenced by Italian neo-realism to use long takes with final freeze-frame shots. Like other post-revolutionary filmmakers, Samira has opted for a mode of storytelling that is open to multiple interpretations.

Freeze- frame constitutes a basic image of the film. The final shot freezes the mother of twins with the apple firmly in her grasp. The last image is static offering readers enough time to provide interpretation. The image is too ambiguous, too strong to be reduced to one level of analysis.

She wanders out of the house into an alleyway and grabs an apple-a symbol of knowledge and life. The shot is also an indication of feminist allegory- a potential of women to seize an opportunity. It also shows the slow march of Iranian women towards a more open society. Nevertheless; the shot has frozen in time and space. There is still a question mark whether she will taste the fruit like her daughters and truly explore the knowledge and world or retreat to her grotto.



Fig:2a



Fig2b

Fig 2(a&b):Image of girls locked inside home

Table 6.4.3 Lighting as Signs

Signs	Meanings
Dimly lit shabby room	Denotation: The living room of characters. Connotation: The house inside appears like a prison. It reveals the unsocialized dark lives of characters.
Sunbeam through the iron wire fence	Denotation: Early morning shot Connotation: Indication of new hope in the life of girls after long impediment.
Character Ghorban Ali is cast against a dark	

background when locked by a social worker. As against this shot, girls are shown in bright light after their liberation.	Denotation: The filmmaker has cast characters in the dark and the bright background to create contrasting images. Connotation: to rebel the patriarchal norms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The liberation of women; Bright future for women
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Discourse: Film lighting serves as an essential signifier that is used to create mood, perception, attention, and illusion. The filmmaker makes use of light to create hidden and deeper meanings. Samira creates a contrast to reveal the true nature of the characters.

Father is cast against a dark background because of his immoral act as he imprisons his daughters for eleven years. As against this girls are shown in bright light when they are set free by the social worker. Furthermore, we also see the shot of sunbeams across the wire fence. These symbolic associations with the image reflected new hopes and the beginning of new life.

Table:6.4.4

Costumes as signs

Signs	Meanings
Girls wearing head scarfs, t-shirts and lowers	Denotation: Traditional as well as contemporary dress code Connotations: It signifies the element of liberalism and modernism. (Social worker asks girls to remove scarfs)
Blind mother of girl draped in chaddar(a sort of veil)	Denotation: Religious outfit for women Connotation: A prohibition that acts as an impediment towards a more open society.
The schoolgirls in uniform	Denotation: Zahara and Massomah meet school girls in the playground. Connotation: Proclaims importance of education for the girl child.

Discussion: The male dress code worn by girls is a radical break with the traditional gender segregation. Two confined sisters move out of their prison-house, signifying slow march of repressed Iranian women towards a

more open society. However, head scarfs worn by almost all the female child characters of Iranian films proclaim the regulations and censorship norms of regime.

The performance of the mother would be difficult to assess. Draped in a *chaddar* throughout the film, she has no gaze to give to the camera that is filming her. It signifies her inner and outer prohibitions. She is also blind connotatively to the plight of girls and considers the life of oppression as normal life. She does not complaints to her husband about the imprisonment of girls. Instead; she curses the social worker who sets these girls free.

Table:6.4.5

Colour as signs

Signs	Meanings/Connotations
Green plant	Growth
The black colour of scarfs	Black signifies darkness in the life of girls.
Bright faces of girls as they eat the apple	Signifies happiness

Discussion: In Islamic culture, green stands for freshness, purity. It is also considered to be the highest level of mysticism, while the colour black stands for lost and absence. The colour stands as a symbol that varies regionally and culturally. In Iran black is the colour of mourning, while in India, white is worn by Hindus during cremation. The white signifies purity, peace, happiness as it has divine attributions in Islamic culture. Therefore colours are open to varied interpretations and are also studied in context. In the context of given film these colours signify the life of characters, their personalities, and relationships. These girls are now experiencing freedom from the shackles of patriarchal society. This experience is reflected through the brightness of their faces. The dark colour of scarf proclaims that girls still carry signs of patriarchal society while marching towards liberal societies.

Table 6.4.6

Characters and their acting as Signs

Signs	Meanings
Massoumah and Zahra	Denotation: Leading characters of film who were locked up by their father for 11 years. Connotations: Victims, oppressed, needs support for growth
Ghorban Ali.	Denotation: Overprotective father

	Connotation: Oppressor
Social worker	Woman of heroic character
Massoumah innocently smacks one of the girl's faces with apple.	Narrativizing an apple to bring two confined sisters out of their prison-house and into human-companionship
The school girl kisses Massoumah	After massoumah hands over an apple to schoolgirl, she, in return, kisses her. The symbolic apple brings forth happiness and love for girls.
Instead of talking, girls used whimpers and whines.	Girls speak in an unintelligible language because they have undergone acute social deprivation.

According to James Monaco, famous film critic, "Gesture is one of the most communicative facets of film signification." The gestures can beautifully judge the actor's performances. After purchasing apples, girls, for the first time, communicate with other school girls. Massoumah innocently smacks one of the girl's faces with apple and then hands over her fruit.

She, in return, kisses her. These gestures proclaim that the symbolic apple brings two confined sisters out of their prison-house and into human-companionship.

These girls suffered from acute social deprivation, and hence they did not possess any knowledge of conventions of social behaviour. The social worker who calmly but resolutely frees these girls represent the power of Iranian women who can break off their constraints without violence.

Table:6.4.7

Props as Signs(here props act as metaphors as well)

Mirror	<p>Girls look into to mirror provided by a social worker.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literally and figuratively, girls are identifying themselves for the first time. They have undergone a delayed “mirror stage.” <p>The mirror can also be metaphorically equated with the film that mirrors the private life of performers re-enacting events from their own lives for the world to see. (see fig:3)</p>
Plant pot	<p>The arm of one of the girls stretches out through the bars of the gate to pour water on the plant. (visual representation)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggle to cultivate life. • They need not be as their overprotective father believes flowers that will wilt in the sun of men’s gazes.



Fig 3(Connotative sign for delayed mirror-stage)

Discussion: Samira Makhmalbaf introduces symbolic props (mirror and flowerpot) to improvise scenes of *the Apple* indicating a willingness to tamper with the onscreen representation of the reality. Nevertheless, the use of a mirror, scruffy potted flowering plant, hand mark on the wall, and many other symbolic props into the improvised scenes suggest multiple layers of meanings.

The use of shots replete with the symbolism adds poetic meaning to the reality depicted. The viewer thus ascribes their meanings to them. In this context new Iranian cinema films transcend traditional realism mixing the ordinary with the extraordinary, real with the fantastical elements.

Table:6.4.8

Indexical metaphors used in the film

Signs	Meanings
Apple	<p>A boy tempts girls by dangling fishing pole, at the end of which is attached apple, from window-(visual representation)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apple is a recurring motif in the film. Connotatively it is a symbol of knowledge and life. • Apple is a complex metaphor both for perils and pleasures of the world. Apple is meant to recall the temptation of Adam in the garden of heaven. • The girls try to grab the apple but fail. Later the boy shows them the way where they can

	buy their apples.
Water	<p>The arm of one of the girls stretches out through the bars of the gate to pour water on the plant (visual representation/treatment). (see fig:4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Water’ is what Zahara and Massoumah, require to grow and survive, which is metaphorically revealed in the image.
Hand marks of girls on the wall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once the father has left, girls come behind the iron bars of the corridor to see sunbeams shining through the iron wire fence. (treatment of shot) • In excitement, girls try to imprint a picture of the sun in black on the wall. • It also signifies human life, destiny, hope in the darkness. • Their destiny is now going to change for the better.
Hacksaw	<p>A social worker provides a hack saw blade to the father of twins to cut away iron bars of the gate. (visual representation/treatment of shot)</p> <p>The symbolic prop ‘hacksaw’ stands for the liberation of women</p>

Rocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All the girls lie down on some rocks and eat the apples. The stones and apples metaphorically signify pain and pleasure the life offers. (see fig 3)
Watches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indication of time in the life of Zahara and Massoumah. Time has changed now; the twins will no longer remain locked. Both girls are experiencing the essence of freedom.
Blind mother of girls grasped apple firmly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A slow march of Iranian women towards a more open society. Symbolically by leaving the house, she takes the first step to shun patriarchal norms deeply imbibed by her.



Fig: 4 (Girl watering the plant: Important indexical metaphor)

Discussion:

The film “*apple*” denotatively is a fictional reconstruction of real events in docu-drama format with grainy pictures and chaotic sounds. Nevertheless, the use of a mirror, scruffy potted flowering plant, handmark on the wall, and many other elements into the improvised scenes suggest multiple layers of meanings.

The film opens with an image of the girl’s outstretched hand watering the withered flower through the bars of a door. It raises possible symbolic meanings relating to the narrative. The plant is metaphorically equated with the life of Zahara and Massoumah, which needs water to grow and survive.

Girls asking the social worker to bring them apple reinstates this notion that they want to taste the life and knowledge but need help for the same. The symbolic ‘apple’ is a complex metaphor both for perils and pleasures of the world.

The quest for apple configures the girl’s curiosity about the world. They desire to venture beyond the home gate to explore new experiences in life.

The filmmaker has used the symbolic prop like “mirror” to indicate that girls had undergone delayed ‘mirror stage.’ French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan introduced the theory of the ‘mirror stage.’ According to him, the mirror stage occurs between six and eighteen months in an infant’s development and marks the occasion when an infant first recognizes their reflection in a mirror as their own.

Twin girls who were locked up at home until the age of 12 by their overprotective father have no grasps of the conventions of social behaviour. Barely able to communicate, girls used primitive whimpers and whines upon their release from the house. They identify themselves for the first time in the mirror offered to them by the social worker.

The filmmaker has also carefully equated Film with a symbolic mirror that mirrors the private life of performers re-enacting events from their own lives for the world to see.

A social worker provides a hack saw blade to the father of twins to cut away iron bars of the gate. It is an important signification of the liberation of women. If there is oppression on women on one side, on the other, there also exist ideal Iranian citizens who fight against the injustice and malpractices in Iranian society.

As is evident in fig: 01, all the girls lie down on some rocks and eat the apples. Samira has deliberately used this composition to symbolically signify pain and pleasure the life offers, as it was for Adam and everyone else in this world.

After leaving the playground, Zahara and Massoumah find watches for sale. ‘Watch’ is an important metaphor that reveals that time has changed now as the girls have gained consciousness and liberation of self. However, the girls return to their captive father for money indicating that independence does not mean freedom from interdependence.

Father agrees to take the girls out on errands with him, and they set off to explore the streets together. They leave the blind mother behind, who too, later on, comes out of her cavern.

The director refuses to judge her subjects. Father is not shown overtly cruel but overprotective. The recurring new Iranian cinema motif of blending fact with fiction appears in this work of Samira makhmalbaf. The film is shot in the real location instead of the studio setting. The Filmmaker has used non-professional actors, long takes, and a freeze-frame shot.

Samira's film constitutes minimalistic de-dramatized narratives based on original or even real-life stories. Her films put into practice Cesare Zavattini's neo-realist motto: "Time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life" (Cesare Zavattini, a proponent of neo-realist movement.) However, like her predecessors, Samira has also used symbolic imagery and metaphors in the construction of film narratives.



(Girls lying on rocks which serve as important metaphor)

6.3 The Semiotic analysis of film 'White Balloon.'

Film: The White Balloon

Direction: Jafar Panahi

Duration: 1hr 25 m

Year of release: 1995

Genre: Drama

Language: Persian

Summary of the Film:

The story revolves around a seven-year-old girl Razieh played by Aida Mohammad Khani, who desperately wants her mother to purchase new goldfish on the occasion of the new year. The story is set on the day before

the Iranian new year “*Nowruz*.” The Iranian *Nowruz* takes place on the first day of spring and is considered to be the important holiday period in Iran. New Year takes place at any time of the day on the eve of *Nowruz*. In the film, the viewer is informed that the New Year will begin in less than two hours that afternoon. Among the various object used in the celebration of New Year is goldfish, which symbolizes life.

Even though the pond in the courtyard of her home is already filled with fishes, Razieh did not like the fishes in her pond and is adamant about bringing the one being sold in the store. Razieh is seen tagging along after her mother and nagging her about getting a beautiful goldfish for *Nowruz*). Her elder brother Ali (played by Mohsen Kalifi) somehow convinces the mother to give 500 toman note to Razia in order to buy prized fish. It is just not a simple tale of a young girl’s quest to recover the money she lost, but beneath the text, there is sub-text.

Raziah’s difficulties in reaching her goldfish bring her into contact with a range of Tehran’s permanent and transient residents, providing Panahi the opportunity to show different shades of Tehran. In the first place bunch of snake charmers gives her some stressful moments after taking her money as a part of their act.

She eventually gets it back, only to drop it on her way to the fish store. Her adventure turns into a nightmare when she drops money beneath the iron grate. The whole bunch of characters gets involved as the Raziah search for the cash. Her brother Ali, the Iranian soldier, Afghan vendour selling balloons, Afghan boy offers a trick to pick up the money from the drain. All of them stick chewing gums to the one end of the pole to retrieve the money from the grate. They all work together with the Afghan boys’ balloon stick. The whole incident happens during a real-time countdown to the New Year. In the end, they retrieve the money and run off to get their goldfish.

All these characters were shown in the beginning sequence of the film. In the end, they all come to meet at the same point as the circle of life. In the end, the film shows a freeze frame shot of Afghan vendour holding the remaining white balloon. He too is about to leave the frame.

Semiotic analysis of mise-en-scene elements

Table:6.3.1

Location as Signs

Signs	Meanings
Shops, passing vehicles, vendours, and crowd gathered around snake charmers.	Denotation: Busy streets of urban Tehran. Connotatively filmmaker selects the real location for the action of his characters.
Narrow alleys, dilapidated houses	Denotation: Portrait of an old city of Tehran, wherein mainly lower-middle-class families lives. Connotatively , the portrayal of living space

	of poor people.
Courtyard of the house	Denotation: The site wherein Razieh main action between characters takes place.
Iron grate at the entrance of some shop	Denotation: It is the point where all of Panahi's characters meet. At this point, Razieh first lost the money in the drain and later on found with the help of other characters.

Discussion:

Panahi's film is charged with urban vitality, a love of the streets, and of the people that inhabit them. The portrait of Tehran is one of the incidental pleasures of all of Panahi's films. The filmmaker has used natural sound effects, thereby embedding his movie in an aural landscape of city noises, for instance, the honking of cars, passing vehicles, the snake charmers as street performers, etc.

The main location of the film is streets and back alleys of Tehran which acts as important signs. The film revolves around the main protagonist's desire rather than the need for goldfish. The film opens in a Tehran market where seven- year old Razieh and her mother are doing shopping. Razieh is carrying a blue balloon connotatively signifying dream or desire. She is firmly holding her desire. In the subsequent scenes, the audience comes to know that her desire is goldfish. The Jafar Panahi seems to belong to a group of directors from neo-realistic schools like *Vitoria- di- sica*, *Griffith* and *Stroheim*. These directors believed in authenticity and preferred location shooting. The filmmaker selects the real location for action convincing viewers whatever they are watching can exist and happen.

Panahi places his characters in urban settings. Panahi examines social problems and wants to present an audience with realistic scenes and accurate aesthetics of the situation. He purposefully uses simple events that are very deep and suggestive in life. On their way home, both mother and daughter pass an alley where a crowd of men has gathered around a group of snake charmers. Razieh's mother warns her daughter to stay away from them as it is not suitable for little girls to watch them.

The film offer the possibilities of explorations of the city not only through aural, visual, and architectural signs of Tehran but also through the figure of a female. The use of space, specifically by women, is conventionally marked by an anxious limitation imposed by repressive regimes that are patriarchal. In the context of film being girl, Razieh is not allowed to watch street snake charmers as warned her mother.

The next location shows the courtyard of the house. It is shown as an abode of struggling people with things scattered randomly here and there. The unpainted door and dilapidated walls signify the financial status of the family.

There is a pond in a courtyard. Razieh did not like skinny fishes in the pond and pleaded her mother to purchase a goldfish she has seen at the store. The father of Razieh (off the screen) shouts at Ali (Razieh's brother) for bringing soap instead of shampoo as demanded by him. After Ali comes back again with shampoo, Razieh enlists his help in changing her mother's mind for goldfish, bribing him with a blue balloon.

Like Majidi, Panahi also portrays various narration elements of the city environment inclose relationship with nature. Panahi has taken a story from daily life and treated through untrained actors, particularly children with simple cinematography and poetic language.

Razieh gets money from her mother to purchase her prized fish. However, Raziah's difficulties in reaching her goldfish bring her into contact with a range of Tehran's permanent and transient residents, providing Panahi the opportunity to show different shades of Tehran. In the first place bunch of snake charmers gives her some stressful moments after taking her money as a part of their act.(see fig:03 and 04)

The films of Jafar Panahi stand in a unique place with their symbolic and thematic structure and hermeneutic approach to socio-political debates in Iran. In the end, when Razieh lost her note in drain grating in front of a closed-up shop. All the characters meet at this point to help her out. The circle is the Jafar Panahi's visual motif he draws on to explain his work and ideas. Circle means that he started with the final scene or gather in film's first sequence all the relevant characters so that the rest of the narrative's time is spent returning to this original point.



Fig:01(*The main child character moves out of narrow alleys: Narrow alleys, a dilapidated wall of location acts as vital signs*)



fig:02(*water,fish, plants: Elements of nature in close-relationship with characters*)



fig:03(Snake charmers)



Fig:04(Razia pleads before snake charmers to recover her money)

Table:6.3.2

Lighting as signs

Signs	Meanings
Natural lighting	Denotation: Sunlight Connotation: To create a sense of authenticity.
Low Key lighting	Denotation: This lighting scheme employs very little fill light, creating sharp contrasts between the brightest and darkest parts of an image. Connotation: It is often associated with suspense genres such as film noir. The filmmaker has used key light when a girl enters and leaves through alleys connecting her house.

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High key light	<p>Denotation: Images that are bright and contain little shadow.</p> <p>Connotation: It signifies purity, innocence. High key light has been used to produce bright images of the main protagonist, girl child Raziah.</p>

Discussion:

The film relies on natural light to create a sense of authenticity. Nevertheless; filmmaker has used both high and low key lights to feature the different characteristics of characters. Low-key lighting often creates sharp shadows that obscure parts of the principal subjects. Such type of lighting is usually used in noir films.

Table:6.3.3

Important Colour as signs

Signs	Meanings
The white colour of the balloon	Connotations: White signifies purity and humility.
Razieh firmly holds a blue balloon.	Connotations: Razieh is carrying blue balloon connotatively signifying dream or desire. She is firmly holding her desire

Table:6.3.4 Cinematography

(Important Camera movements and shots as Signs)

Signs	Meanings
Long takes	Denotation: Lengthy shots or shots of longer duration.
Point of view shots	Denotation: In this case, the audience sees the situation from the perspective of a character. To reconstruct reality.
Several Tracking shots of character Razieh with different characters. (see fig.05)	<p>Denotation: It is meant to follow the character as they move in the scene.</p> <p>Razieh is the leading child protagonist of the film. The camera follows them on their way</p>

	<p>home.</p> <p>Connotation: Filmmaker draws the audience deeper into the stories of their characters, allowing them to experience their lives.</p> <p>Through tracking shot, filmmaker unfolds her ideal world and real-life gradually.</p>
Freeze frame shot of boy holding the white balloon	<p>Denotation: The freeze-frame constitutes an essential image of the film. This static image is offering readers enough time to provide interpretations.</p>



Fig:05(tracking shot of characters)



Fig:06(Freeze-frame shot)

Panahi uses several long takes like his contemporary Iranian filmmakers. The opening sequence appears documentary like showcasing frenzied neighbourhood market wherein sellers do last-minute business an hour and a half before the arrival of the new year. The construction of time is established by the long opening shot, which cleverly brings in most of the later characters. Shot in real time, the film gains its attention from strict adherence to time. Director uses moving camera tracking shots so skilfully that they compare to studio shots

undertaken on camera tracks. One film theorist, Andre Bazin, made it a major tenet of his aesthetic that cinema records “real-time”.

Through the point of view and tracking shots, spectator like Razieh’s journey, participate in the act of reminiscence, embarking on a journey where traces and essences of Tehran inexplicably stay on and are revealed, triggered and evoked in cinematic spaces. The story narrating technique of cinema from the very beginning of the film history is based on the way ‘looking’ is organised as argued by different theories like feminist theory or suture theory. Spectators identify with the film characters not only by what they express verbally but also by what they look at, which makes and transmits their subjectivity. The Audience watches the world from the perspective of the character. The film reconstructs reality by the creative use of narrative style and point of view shots.

In Panahi’s work, the camera follows each character, and the audience sees the development of narratives through the eyes of characters. In the beginning sequence of the film, the camera follows a group of people who, while playing tambourines, enter the shop. Someone comes out of the shop, and the camera again follows him. Then the camera follows a jeep on the roadside and finally arrives at a woman who approaches the balloon seller. Through the camera- work director wants to emphasize that the lives of these characters are intertwined.

The filmmaker wants us to see the world through the eyes of children who are untouched by the realities of life and live in an idealistic world. The Camera also follows a little girl holding a blue balloon who walks through narrow alleys along with her mother. In this case, the audience see the world through the eyes of the leading child protagonist Razieh.

Table:6.3.5

Costumes as Signs

Signs	Meanings
Black long gown(Abaya)	<p>Denotation: Worn by Muslim religious women. (see figure:09)</p> <p>Connotation: Gender segregation.</p>
Girl child Razeiha in a headscarf	<p>Denotation: Religious codes of modesty.</p> <p>Connotation:gender segregation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitations on women

Razeiha's brother Ali in a contemporary outfit(pant, shirt, jacket)

Connotation: Freedom from any limitations of the dress code.

- Patriarchy.

Discussion: There are limitations on how Iranian women have to appear on the screen. They have to wear long-sleeved clothes and a veil. Even the girl child has to wear a head-scarf. Costumes in the film play a significant role in revealing the gender segregation. In contrast men are often shown in a contemporary outfit.



Fig 07



Fig:08



Fig:09

(Fig:7,8,9: images showing gender segregation)

Table:6.3.6

Acting /Important Characters as signs

Signs	Meanings
Razieh	Connotation: Innocence,
Ali(Razieh's elder brother)	Connotation: He is caught in between the naivety of Razieh and acknowledging the adult world.

Panahi's films redefine the humanitarian themes of contemporary Iranian cinema in an unsentimental, realistic fashion. His film shows that the aesthetics of Iranian cinema is related to the pragmatic, the actual, the humanitarian aspects of things.

The use of non-professional characters makes the film appear more realistic and believable. Razieh's facial expression in the opening sequence shows her longing and small desires. This characteristic can also be compared to her smiling gesture in the climax of the film when her desire gets fulfilled. Another significant aspect of the film is the introduction of different characters (both natives and non-natives) as the story progresses. When the snake charmers took away money from her, the look of Razieh's in a medium close-up portrays disappointment, concern, helplessness all in a single expression. (fig:04)

Table:6.3.7

Props as signs

Signs	Meanings
Goldfish bowl	<p>Denotation: Iranians traditionally mark their new-year festival with a table display known as <i>haft sen</i>(a table decorated with seven food items). Goldfish bowl often features an array of symbolic items on show.</p> <p>Connotation: Fish represents life.</p> <p>Here fish is used as a religious allegory.</p>
Toman note	<p>Denotation: Iranian expresses the prices of goods in toman. Razia gets 500 toman notes to buy goldfish.</p>

	<p>Connotation: Signifies Value, power.</p> <p>Razieh intends to purchase the goldfish, a symbol of new life, happiness with the money.</p>



Fig:10

g:11

(Fig:10 and 11, Images of fishbowl as a cinematic metaphor)

Table:6.3.8

Indexical metaphors as Signs

Signs	Meanings
White balloon	It signifies purity, innocence. It has a positive connotation.
Blue balloon	Razieh is carrying a blue balloon connotatively signifying dream or desire. She is firmly holding her hope. Blue represents the meanings of depth, faith, heaven, and peace.
Fish as a religious allegory	Fish signifies many things like a life force, the beauty of nature, etc.

The metaphorical meanings get created in the process, especially where the elements of nature like fishes, plants around the pond and inanimate objects like balloons have been shown in close relationships with child protagonists. These elements provide a film with an intellectual background. These animated and inanimate objects of nature are preferably used to enhance the values attributed to the characters.

Conclusion:

New Iranian films share a common trait with the works of Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle thieves* (1948), Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) with child characters in prominent roles. Although Iranian films share common traits with films made during neo-realistic era, it cannot be purely called neo-realistic films because of its use of symbolic imagery, religious allegory or metaphors in the construction of film narratives. With the blend of artistic renditions and neo-realistic elements, new Iranian films have found their unique style. While still maintaining a sense of realism, Iranian movies are replete with deep meanings or connotative signs.

The Films in contemporary Iranian cinema are shot on real location instead of the studio setting. Filmmakers make use of non-professional actors, long takes and frequently end with a freeze-frame shot. As the works of both Samira Makhmalbaf (*Apple*-1998), Jafar Panahi's '*White Balloon*' testifies contemporary Iranian cinematic practice very often utilise the idea of restaging lived experiences. Non-professional actors re-perform their 'original' experiences and the director creates narratives from these authenticities.

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