NEW WAVE IRANIAN CINEMA: ORIGINS AND THE GENRE’S ARTICULATION OF POLTICAL AND SOCIAL THEMES

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This paper delves into the multiple ways pre-revolutionary New Wave Iranian cinema addressed cultural, social, political, and economic themes leading up the 1979 revolution, with a focus on themes of socioeconomic status and poverty, government critique, and family and gender dynamics. Through understanding the rise of New Wave cinema, and the cultural and social themes the film genre portrayed, an insightful look into the years leading up to the 1979 revolution can be made.

To identify these themes, the paper utilizes three prominent Iranian New Wave films from the years 1969 to 1974. *Qeysar* (1969) by Masud Kimiaie, *The Cow* (1969) by Dariush Mehrjui, and *A Simple Event* (1974) by Sohrab Shahid-Saless. These films are commonly referred by scholars as some of the most notable and influential films of the first wave of new Iranian cinema.[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact, the year 1969 is generally agreed to mark the birth of New Wave Iranian Cinema, with *Qeysar* and *The Cow* as the genre’s initial roots.[[2]](#footnote-2) The paper focuses on these films for three primary reasons. First, the films have gained significant praise from critics for their political and social impact, and their significance towards the New Wave genre. Even after the 1979 revolution, and still to this day, Iranian film-makers continue to call upon the artistic and realist aspects these directors employed to articulate socio-political themes. Secondly, the films have international recognition as important artistic films. *Qeysa*r(1969) won best-feature award in the Film Festival of Iran and in the Sepas International Film Festival in 1970.[[3]](#footnote-3) *The Cow* (1969) won multiple awards throughout the early 1970s at the Venice International Film Festival and the Chicago International Film Festival.[[4]](#footnote-4) *A Simple Event* (1974) was highly praised, and won Best Director Award at the International Film Festival of Tehran in 1973, along with other recognition from International Film Festivals in London, Berlin, and Sydney.[[5]](#footnote-5) Finally, because the films have such high recognition and importance, they are widely accessible online with accurate English subtitle translations. There are countless New Wave Iranian films produced in the same decade, but are scarcely available online. In a 2013 interview, prominent Asia Society Film Curator, La Frances Hui describes this problem:

The country went through a tumultuous revolution. Some filmmakers were exiled. Many films, if not lost or destroyed, were locked up. Several filmmakers I contacted directly told me they didn’t know where their films even went.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This issue of access to Iranian films, and film from previous decades in general, has serious implications for research towards cinema, and often limits the study. With this in mind, the paper focuses on the three previously stated films, partly for their accessibility.

The approach of this paper’s analysis is focused around the rise of New Wave cinema, the genre’s characteristics, and the common critical themes of socioeconomic status, government, and gender dynamics these three films display in the decade leading up to 1979. To give context to the three New Wave films, it is important to highlight the birth of New Wave cinema in Iran, and the accompanying political and social climate of the decade, along with the common characteristics of the genre. The history and nature of the New Wave genre is key in connecting the three films into a wholistic assessment of political, social, and economic themes. Although each film focuses on different themes and aspects of Iranian life, the films as a collective take part in exemplifying an overarching theme of political and social critiques, similar to other collections of art like poetry. For instance, *Qeysar’s* director, Kimiaei, gives a stronger focus on political themes and critique of the Pahlavi regime, while Saless, in *A Simple Event* (1974) strives to articulate socioeconomic themes and poverty. Although the two films primarily focus on two different themes, they both utilize the same New Wave characteristics to articulate these themes.

The paper is organized into three sections as follows: The first section identifies the birth of New Wave cinema and the cultural and political climate of the decade. The second section looks into the characteristics of New Wave films, and their connection to Italian Neo-Realism. Finally, the third section is divided into three subsections for each film, and analyzes how each film articulates socioeconomic, political, and gender themes in the decade before the 1979 revolution.

The thesis of the paper is that through examining the origins and analyzing significant films from the New Wave genre, we are given a glimpse into the country’s cultural, social, economic, and political climate in the decade leading up to the revolution. When analyzing the political history of Iran, and especially the 1979 revolution and the rise of the Islamic Republic, Iranian New Wave films are another valuable primary source for this analysis. Cinema, similar to other primary sources such as memoirs, government documents, and newspapers, give historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and other social scientists a window into historic events of the past. The three New Wave films, *Qeysar* (1969), *The Cow* (1969), and *A Simple Event* (1974), do just that, giving social scientists a window into the political, social, and economic climate of 1970s Iran.

**Birth of New Wave Iranian Cinema**

The roots of New Wave Iranian cinema emerged in the late 1960s and began to flourish into the 1970s. However, to fully access the birth of the New Wave genre, it is imperative to address Iranian cinema before the late 1960s, along with the political and social climate leading up to the eventual 1979 revolution. Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi states, regarding the origin of Iranian cinema:

Although the origin of cinema in Iran goes back to the earliest years of the twentieth century, it was not until the early 1960s that it emerged as a serious art form. Partaking in the achievements of Persian poetry and fiction, this cinema became the focal point of an entirely new generation of hopes and anxieties, attracting an audience that, aware of the modernity of its condition, crowded the theaters, whether for momentary entertaining and escapism, or for enduring reflection on their predicament.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Dabashi sites this connection between Persian poetry and cinema, along with an eager audience yearning for substance. These two points are critical towards understanding the birth of New Wave, and how the genre develops into the 1970s. By examining Iranian political history, starting back in the early Cold War era, we can see how this eager audience developed from political and social circumstances, and how Iranian cinema became, like Persian poetry, more than just entertainment.

The geological location of Iran created a critical geopolitical importance in the context of the Cold War. The United States and Soviet Russia fought over ideological control and interjection into the Iranian public sphere. A significant way the two Cold War powers executed this was through the sponsoring and funding of various forms of media, such as newspapers, radio stations, periodicals, and cinema.[[8]](#footnote-8) Westernized cinema began to see commercial success and became industrialized. Influences from Hollywood Westerns, and the emergence of Bollywood in India reflected on the Iranian films that were produced in the 1950s and into the 1960s, known as *Filmfarsi*, often crude, melodramatic films filled with lust and entertainment.[[9]](#footnote-9) These commercial films lacked the political and social significance that Iranian poetry was exuding in the 1960s. A political and social climate began to develop that was ripe for the emergence of literary activists, poets, and filmmakers. This tumultuous climate was caused primarily, as one scholar argues, a shift in foreign-educated intellectual thinking and a critical view of westernized modernization, sparked by Jalal-e al-e Ahmad’s Westoxication, along with Resa Shah’s brutal crushing of the 1963 revolt in response to the White Revolution.[[10]](#footnote-10) These two events, coupled with the already popular dissent of the 1953 coup, provided a fetile ground for poets and filmmakers, “charged with political rebellion and existential despair, as well as a skeptical view of progress and development.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This decade’s political and social climate, in turn, gave rise to a new genre of cinema, mirroring the politically charged Persian poetry, and also gave rise to an audience, eager for this Iranian New Wave cinema.

**Characteristics of New Wave Cinema and Its Influences**

The films that filled Iranian theaters before New Wave were rich in indulgence and entertainment. Most of the *filmfarsi* followed a distinct genre narrative. A good-looking macho male protagonist, the *luti*, saves a “damsel in distress”, and a theme of machismo as the “honor of the patriarch is vested in the chastity of his female relations.”[[12]](#footnote-12) With an injection of political and social charge, New Wave directors began to deviate away from this concept of cinema as an indulgence and entertainment, and more towards the idea of cinema as an art, with the same artistic expression of poetry and literature. A new strive for realism, and a true, honest depiction of Iranian society. Poetic language, allegorical messages and plots, and an overall aesthetic of realism emerged on screen. There was a great sense of reflection on reality, and this theme of reflection has roots tracing back to post-World War II Italian Neo-Realism. One scholar articulates this theme of reflection in Neo-Realism:

We are now aware that reality is extremely rich. We simply had to learn how to look at it. The task of the artist does not consist in bringing the audience to tears and indignation by means of transference, but, on the contrary, it consists in bringing them to reflect (and then, if you will, to stir up emotions and indignation) upon what they are doing and upon what others are doing; that is, to think about reality precisely as it is.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This reality is often depicted in New Wave cinema in the working class, the poor, and children. Working class people, the rural countryside, and real depictions of poverty are found abundantly in New Wave Iranian cinema, with a focus how they reflect social reality. The political and social climate of the decade, and an intellectual culture looking to reflect on reality fits well into the cinematic art of New Wave and Neo-realism. The following section thus delves into this socio-political reflection that *Qeysar* (1969), *The Cow* (1969), and *A Simple Event* (1974) articulate, through analysis of the socioeconomic, political, gender dynamics themes within each of the films.

**Examples of New Wave Iranian Films and Their Cultural Significance**

*Qeysar* (1969)

Masud Kimiaie’s *Qeysar* was issentially a precursor towards the later New Wave films that followed the year 1969. It effectively bridged a gap between the filmfarsi entertainment and this new culturally charged cinema brewing within the intellectual writers and filmmakers. By keeping the same *filmfarsi* model, of what Dabashi calls “lumpen machismo”[[14]](#footnote-14), but adding a political charge, Kimiaie introduced the first taste of New Wave cinema. The movie follows Qeysar, the *luti*, and his revenge spree against the three brothers who raped his sister, Fati, and killed his brother, Farmaan. Although the film is littered with *filmfarsi* tropes, a certain political struggle undertone is apperent throughout the movie.

Qeysar takes justice into his own hands, having no faith the government will serve it, and effectively embodies “a political struggle between ordinary lower-class people and the establishment” and fighting against both the “tyrant and the Westernized rich while remembering the poor.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Qeysar’s family is less wealthy than the family of Mansour, the man who raped Fati, and Qeysar’s revenge reflects a sense of fighting for the poor. This political struggle and fight against tyranny and the Westernized rich is also articulated in Kimiaie’s choice of where Qeysar kills each brother. He kills the first brother, Karim, in a public bath in the center of town. Then, in a slaughterhouse factory, Qeysar murders the second brother, Rahim. Finally, Qeysar tracks down and kills Mansour at a railway site used to manufacture railways and trains. A public bath, a slaughterhouse, and a railway site articlulate both political struggle and socioeconomic status themes. By killing the brothers in plain sight, even in a government funded public bathouse, Qeysar represents a open form of rebellion and dissent against society and specifically, the government. This alligorical representation of soft rebellion is a theme that permiates into later New Wave films. The sites of the murder also depict a realist take on poverty. The muders could have occurred anywhere, but Kimiaie actively chose to put working class people and their jobs in the forfront of the film. These scenes in the baths, slaughterhouse, and railway, where shot almost as if they were scenes from a documentary on working class people and their life. This true reflection of working class reality and socioeconomic status is at the forfront of the film.

Unfortunately, while *Qeysar* (1969) does a great job of introducing themes of political struggle and working class reality, the film does little to break from the typical use of women in the *filmfarsi* genre. Maryam Ghorbankarimi, in the book “A Colour Presnence: The Evolution of Women’s Representation in Iranian Cinema,” quotes Laura Mulvey’s essay:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, which makes him act the way he does. In hersef the woman has not the slightest importance.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This rings true for *Qeysar* (1969), and for the most part, almost all the Iranian films made before the revolution.[[17]](#footnote-17) The three women in the film, Fati, her mother, and Qeysar’s fiancee Azam, are all major characters in the film, and have a prominent amount of screen time. However, all three’s roles and character plot is completely tied to the *luti* and his honor vested in their relation. There are two other key themes here. First is how the story portrays Fati’s loss of chastity and the family’s reaction to it. At first, all the family knows is that Fati took her own life, but it is later revieled that it was motivated by her loss of chastity. When this knowledge is revieled to the uncle and the mother, his innitial response was “Thank God, it is good she is dead. Otherwise what would she say to Qeysar and Farmaan (her brothers)?”. There’s a sense of relief within the family that she was dead because they could not imagine how Fati could live with the same. The second key gender theme in the film is the use of male gaze is continued on from the *filmfarsi* genre. There are two montage scenes in which this is expressed. First when (Figure 1) Qeysar watches through the window as his lover, Azam is unaware she is being watched, and (Figure 2) when Qeysar watches the cabaret dancer perform on stage. Both scenes display this montage of shifting back and forth between Qeysar’s face and the two women’s bodies. This voyeuristic style of the filmfarsi genre is still apperent in *Qeysar* (1969), but in later New Wave Iranian cinema, this voyeurysm is abandoned. Despite this however, the theme of female characters being tied to the protagonist, with no significant effect on the plot, continues to persist in the later films.

*The Cow* (1969)

*The Cow* (1969) is commonly identified to as the heart of New Wave cinema, and arguably the most internationally recognized Iranian film from this decade.[[18]](#footnote-18) If *Qeysar* (1969) was the stepping stone of introducing New Wave cinema ideals of political struggle and social realism and making it familiar for the audience, Mehrjui fully emerged the audience in these New Wave ideals. Of the three themes, discussed in the paper, The Cow (1969) most promenently depects socioeconomic realism and critique of the government.

The story follows an Iranian villager named Hassan and his cow, that he loves more than anything, even his wife, who plays a minimal role in the story. When his cow mysteriously dies while Hassan is away, he slowly becomes unstable and eventually believes he is the cow. The story is very ambiguous, and leaves much room for allegorical connections. The metempsychosis of Hassan is a good example of this. His mental breakdown could signify his loss of socioeconomic status within the village, with the loss of his only income and livelyhood. In this case, the metempsychosis articulates how Hassan’s life and spirit are soley connected to his economic wellbeing, and with the death of his cow, comes his death as a man. This concept is reinforced at the end of the movie, when the villagers, who originally tried to convince Hassan he was Hassan and not his cow, tie him up like an animal to bring him to the doctor. As they take him, tied up, to the next town, the village leader hits Hassan with a stick, yelling “Move you animal!”. Another connection could be a representation of the government’s relationship and dependency on oil. Reza Shah, being Hassan, is lost and nothing without it’s economic relience of oil. Another political crique can be seen in the villages’ role of covering up the cows death. While Hassan is away, the village decides it is best for Hassan if they tell him the cow has ran off. However, Hassan refuses to believe that his cow would ever leave him, and his anguish alters his mental state. The villages’ role in the film can also be an allegory for the government’s relationship with the Iranian people, and how the regime lies to its people. However, like Hassan, the people refute the lies and see reality. This allegory acts almost as a precursor for the rising political dessent leading up to the revolution.

Mehrjui also sets the story in a rural Iranian village, and throughout the film, depicts a realist view of rural poverty and the faces of the villagers. Examples of this rural and poverty realism can be seen in (Figure 3) Hassan walking his cow in a large, open field, and in (Figure 4) the scene with some of the villagers gathered outside a home. Especially with the lack of any technology, these scenes, along with countless others throughout the film, show a realist potrayal of people and poverty.

Similar to *Qeysar* (1969), The Cow (1969) employes the same gender themes as most of the films in this decade.[[19]](#footnote-19) The film has one female character, Hassan’s wife, who has very little significance to the story and is rarly seen on screne, apart from when Hassan is inside his home. One interesting aspect of the story is that his cow was pregnant and there is nothing shown to believe that Hassan has any children of his own. This aspect of the relationship effectively shifts the family dynamic and his wife’s importance to Hassan away from her and to the cow. This can also explain his sorrow and anguish when the cow dies, because the cow is esentially carrying his only offspring. Overrall, the aspects of voyourism and lust found in previous Iranian cinema is absent, but the same gender dynamics appear in the film, with a passive and unsignificant female role.

*A Simple Event* (1974)

My favorite of the three New Wave films, *A Simple Event* (1974), takes social realism and stretches it to its limits on screen. Sohrab Shahid Saless, became known for his unique slow-paced, documentive style films, that focused on the lifestyle of the working class, the first of which being *A Simple Event* (1974). As one scholar describes, “his films are alert to cruelty and injustice but they never judge. They are devoid of sentimentality yet deeply humanist.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In this film, we get a glimpse into the marginalized life of an Iranian boy, in a town on the Caspian sea. The slow-burning story follows the boys repetivie and mundain life of school, helping his fisherman father, and taking care of his sick mother. They all live together in a tiny room with one bed and one table. This documentary style of New Wave cinema illustrates the socioeconomic status and urban poverty in that decade, along with some family dynamics.

One common theme the film shows is the muntainess of workingclass life. An excellent example of this is the boys time in the classroom. Everyday the boy goes to class and does the same work with emotionless expression. In fact, almost every character, including the boy, in the film has a lifeless expression on their face. Thoughout the film, no matter where he goes, the boy has the same lifelessness. Saless articulates this mundain, emiotionless lifestyle of the working class, and reafferms its significance when the boy’s mother dies, and the child has no reaction or sadness (Figure 5). Even the death of his mother does not stir any emotion, illustrating the monotonous, unhuman lifestyle of the working class. This theme of realist depictions of the working class is far more apperent in A Simple Event (1974) than any political or gender related themes. However, at least two can be identified.

A political edge can be drawn from the classroom scenes. One scholar explains his personal experience in school and its relation to Iran as a nation:

The classroom was the picture-perfect image of the nation at large: the teacher was God Almighty, His Imperial Majesty, the father, the policeman on the street, every real and imagined figure of power summond in one man. We were subjects, with no rights, totally at mercy…[[21]](#footnote-21)

These sentiments ring true in the film, as the classroom is run by a strict, and serious teacher. In all the classroom scenes, there’s a sense of axiety among the children in their relation with the teacher.

For gender themes, there are a few that can be picked up on. First is the lack of any female character overrall. There are no girls in the classroom, and only three females in the film are a brief visit of two nurses to the classroom to administer shots, and the boy’s mother. However, its argueable the mother does have a significant role in the plot compared to *Qeysar* (1969) and The Cow (1969). In *Qeysar* (1969), the mother’s death from grief does little to move the plot, and her role in the movie has little to no significance outside of her connection to the *luti*. In *The Cow* (1969), Hassan’s wife again has little impact, with most of the significance placed on Hassans relationship between the cow and the village. In *A Simple Event* (1974) however, the mother’s death from sickness and poverty not only articulates the other themes of socioeconomic poverty, but her death is used by Saless to further the plot, showing that the boy has no reaction to his own mother dying. Although she has no dialogue and dies at the midpoint of the movie, her role and representation had a much greater impact than the other two New Wave films.

This paper looked to analysis multiple aspects of New Wave Iranian cinema. By identiying the rising political and cultural dissent of the decade and the history of *filmfarsi*, a foundation was made to better understand the context of how and why New Wave cinema began to emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A new intellectual culture, sharing ideologies with Iranian poets of the same decade, utilized common methods of New Wave cinema to articulate certain socio-political themes. As the director, Sohrab Shahid Saless stated, “The responsibility of the artist who has some kind of social conscience is to put his finger on the wounds of the body of society.”[[22]](#footnote-22) A realist reflection of socio-political aspects of society are made in the three films analyzed. In *Qeysar* (1969), revealing themes of political dissent and gender dynamics are present in Qeysar’s championistic revenge against unjustice, and the role of male gaze and female relations with the *luti* are apperent in the film. *The Cow* (1969) displayed key socioeconomic and political themes through the realism of rural life and the metempsychosis of Hassan, as well as pioneering allegorical messaging that would be used in later New Wave films. Finally, *A Simple Event* (1974) utilized a realistic and simple documantary style to illustrate the mundain lifestyle of the downtrodden working class, and provided a different utilization of the female role in Iranian cinema. Collectively, these New Wave Iraninan films, similar to Iranian memoirs, poetry, and official documents, can give social scientists a window into the socio-political climate in the year leading up to the eventual 1979 revolution.

Figures



Figure 1: Qeysar and Azam[[23]](#footnote-23)



Figure 2: Qeysar and Cabaret Dancer[[24]](#footnote-24)



Figure 3: Hassan in the Pasture[[25]](#footnote-25)



Figure 4: Villagers Gathered Outside House[[26]](#footnote-26)



Figure 5: The Boy Learns His Mother Dead[[27]](#footnote-27)

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2. Richard Tapper, *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (New York and London: I.B. Tauris Co, 2002), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Issari, *Cinema in Iran, 1900-1979*, 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Issari, 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Issari, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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