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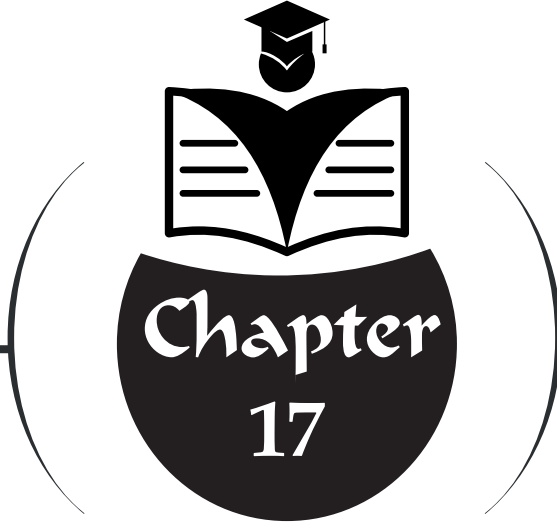
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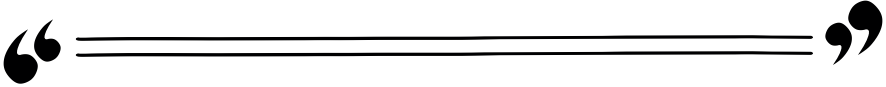
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REPRESENTATION OF AFGHAN IMMIGRANTS IN IRANIAN CINEMA



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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, Iranian cinema has established a cinematic tradition that has attracted international attention with its narrative language developed around social realism. This cinematic approach aims to make visible structural problems such as social exclusion, identity crisis, and marginalization, while addressing the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of Iranian society (Adelkhah & Olszewska, 1987; Deb, 2020). In this context, the living conditions, identity struggles, and social integration problems of Afghan migrants in Iran are among the prominent themes in Iranian cinema. The Afghan migration, which accelerated especially after the 1979 Soviet invasion, has become a permanent social phenomenon in Iran, encompassing millions of people; however, this process has also brought with it problems such as precarious work, poverty, and legal exclusion for migrants (ANU Press, 2008).

The position of Afghan migrants in Iranian society is mostly defined by illegal or unregistered, low-wage, and precarious labor conditions; This situation deepens their social marginalization (Farzin, 2020). Iranian cinema reflects this reality with a critical perspective, focusing on the invisibility, identity conflicts, and belonging issues of migrants. Forced migration processes triggered by challenging conditions such as natural disasters, wars, and environmental destruction separate individuals not only from their physical spaces but also from their social belongings; deepening the vulnerability of migrants. In this respect, migration should be considered not only as an economic or political crisis, but also as a humanitarian and structural crisis (Dashti, 2021; Castles & Miller, 2008).

The aim of this study is to analyze the representations of Afghan migrants in Iranian cinema and to examine the reflections of the problems of identity construction and social integration of migrants in cinema. In this regard, the films *The Cyclist* (1987, Mohsen Makhmalbaf), *Djomeh* (2000, Hassan Yektapanah), and *Baran* (2001, Majid Majidi), which offer important examples in terms of Afghan migrant representations, were selected using purposive sampling method. The films were examined within the framework of narrative structure, character development, and immigration themes, analyzing the economic exploitation, social exclusion, and identity crises experienced by Afghan migrants. Makhmalbaf's *The Cyclist* metaphorically depicts the struggle for survival of an Afghan migrant who cycles for days to save his wife wounded in the war, highlighting the extraordinary costs migrants face in order to become visible (Nader, 2019). Yektapanah's *Djomeh* centers on a young Afghan man working in the countryside and his search for belonging and acceptance, highlighting the social and cultural dimensions of migration (Azimi, 2017). Majidi's *Baran*, on the other hand, treats migrant identity as an individual experience, subtly making visible the ethnic and gender-based exclusion of Afghan women (Fairclough, 1995).

Although all three films mostly represent Afghan migrants as victimized and passive figures, they highlight their human aspects, enabling the viewer to empathize with them. However, the fact that representations are mostly limited to individual stories and do not include practices of collective resistance or solidarity reveals the limitations of immigrant representations in Iranian cinema. This study aims to analyze how the phenomenon of immigration is interpreted through cinema and the effects of these representations on social perceptions by examining the representations of Afghan immigrants in Iranian cinema in a multifaceted way.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Model

This study examines the identity and integration problems of Afghan migrants in Iran through the representations of Afghans in Iranian cinema. The research employs document analysis, a qualitative research method. Accordingly, three films—*Baran*, *Djomeh*, and *The Cyclist*—were selected using purposive sampling because they focus on the social and cultural problems experienced by Afghan migrants. Content analysis was applied to selected scenes from these films to achieve the research objective. During the analysis, character representations, spatial uses, and symbolic elements in the plot were analyzed; how migrant characters are represented and the ideological background of these representations were discussed (Fairclough, 1995). As a result of the content analysis, similar examples were juxtaposed and coded, and themes were formed from these codes. In this process, the visibility of Afghan migrants in Iranian cinema, their roles in the formation of social perception, and their impact on cultural integration were evaluated in depth. Thanks to this approach, cinematic texts have been considered not only as aesthetic products but also as socio-cultural and political discourse spaces. Thus, how the experiences of migration are represented through cinema has been analyzed in a multifaceted way, both in the context of individual identity construction and social integration (Hall, 1997).

2.2 Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this study, the process of data analysis and interpretation was carried out through three selected films on the representation of Afghan migrants in Iranian cinema, and the findings were evaluated from a holistic perspective. First, the narrative structures, fictional frameworks, and thematic focuses of the films were examined to reveal how Afghan migrants are represented in economic, social, and cultural contexts. In the analysis process, the forms of exclusion experienced by migrants, identity construction processes, search for belonging, and experiences of invisibility were addressed at both individual and social levels. In the productions examined, the economic dimension of migration is conveyed through a symbolic language via the heavy costs endured

for survival; while the process of individualization of identity is dealt with through the theme of human transformation. The social dimension is reflected through the search for belonging, the difficulties of cultural adaptation, and the visibility of practices of othering. During the interpretation phase, it was found that representations of migrants are mostly shaped around victimhood and passivity; themes of collective resistance, organization, or empowerment are only partially present. However, some productions break stereotypes and offer an empathy-based narrative, thus highlighting the human aspects of Afghan migrants. The analysis results show that in Iranian cinema, Afghan migrants are positioned both as a reflection of societal perception and as figures with the potential to transform this perception. In this context, cinema is considered a dual-directional representational space that can both reproduce prejudices and strengthen empathy and social sensitivity.

3. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

3.1 Analysis of the Film *Cyclist* (1987) in the Context of Afghan Migrants

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Cyclist* (1987) addresses the invisibility, economic exploitation, and degrading living conditions of Afghan migrants in Iranian society through an allegorical narrative. Through the desperate struggle of Afghan refugee Nasim to treat his sick wife, the film reveals that migration is not only a spatial displacement but also a process of physical and psychological destruction.



Figure 3.1. *Nasim Meeting His Wife in the Hospital (The Cyclist, 1987)*

The film opens with Nasim's daily labor: an immigrant who works hard all day and silently waits by his sick wife's bedside in the evenings. This silence sets the emotional axis of the film. A short but intense dialogue with his wife sets Nasim's entire story in motion:

- Wife: "Nasim... the medicines aren't enough anymore."
- Nasim: "I'll find them. No matter the cost."
- Wife: "Don't waste yourself... Not for me."
- Nasim (with firm determination): "If you live, I will live too."

This statement transforms Nasim's act of cycling from merely a way to earn money into an existential resistance. The immigrant's will to survive becomes a necessity fueled by love. Nasim's encounter with a bookmaker reveals the film's central moral conflict. For the bookmaker, Nasim is not a human being, but a body to be observed:

- Bookmaker: "If you cycle for seven days, you'll earn the money needed for your wife's treatment."
- Nasim: "Seven days without stopping?"
- Gambler (with a sarcastic smile): "Seven days, seven nights."
- Nasim (thinking silently): "Are they going to watch my suffering?"
- Gambler: "Everything in life is a spectacle, my friend."

This dialogue shows how migrant labor is commodified and how human life is turned into entertainment. Nasim is both a figure struggling for his family and an "object of spectacle" instrumentalized by the system.



Figure 3.2. *Nasim Begins Riding a Bicycle (The Cyclist, 1987)*

As the race progresses, the crowd grows, the enthusiasm intensifies; however, Nasim's body gradually withers. While the spectators watch his suffering with applause, the tragedy of immigration turns into a "spectacle of suffering." His response to a spectator's warning summarizes this situation:

- Spectator: "Stop now! There's a limit to money!"
- Nasim: "That's not my limit."

From the fourth day onwards, Nasim oscillates between reality and fantasy. His wife's voice is heard as a symbol of conscience and limits:

- Wife's voice: "Nasim, enough. Come home."
- Nasim: "This is home now. As long as the wheel keeps turning, I still exist."

This scene strikingly reveals the immigrant's placelessness and lack of belonging. For Nasim, home is no longer a fixed place; it is the cycle itself that consumes his body.

When the seventh day arrives, the gambler's words express the film's harshest criticism:

- Gambler: "Even death is a spectacle."

This sentence symbolizes how human life is devalued within the capitalist system and how the migrant body is transformed into an absolute object of exploitation. Nasim's refusal to let go of the pedal represents the last vestige of human dignity:

- Nasim (whispers to himself): "Turn... turn... if you stop, everything will be over..."

In the film's finale, the camera rises; the crowd fades, the bicycle continues to turn. It is unclear whether Nasim is alive or dead. This uncertainty points to the endless cycle of migrant labor: to work, to endure, and to remain invisible.

The Cyclist is a powerful cinematic narrative that criticizes the alienation of human labor, social exclusion, and the modern "spectator society" in the context of Afghan migration. The character of Nasim is neither glorified as a hero nor as a tragic figure; he is the silent representation of millions left outside the system. Makhmalbaf leaves the viewer with an open question:

When do we watch a person's suffering with empathy, and when with a spectacle of pleasure?

3.2 Analysis of the Film Djomeh (2000) in the Context of Afghan Migrants

Hasan Yekta Panah's film Djomeh addresses the silent, invisible, and constantly tested nature of migration through the daily struggle of Cuma,

an Afghan migrant living on a rural farm in Iran. Instead of grand dramatic events, the film makes visible the fragile position of Afghan migrants in Iranian society through everyday relationships, small tensions, and unfinished conversations. Cuma's silence is not a passive acceptance, but rather an existential strategy developed to avoid deepening exclusion. The gossip-based dialogue at the beginning of the film clearly reveals the migrant's "guilty from the start" position within society:

- Habib: "Juma, Juma, you went to a sorcerer."
- Cuma: "I didn't go."
- Habib: "They saw you go."
- Cuma: "I didn't go for myself, I went for someone else."
- Habib: "Didn't he have legs, that you went?"
- Cuma: "He needed them."

This short conversation shows that Cuma is a figure who constantly has to explain himself. His immigrant identity makes him suspicious from the start; even a well-intentioned act turns into rumor and surveillance. Throughout the film, Cuma's calm and defensive language silently carries the daily pressures of immigration.



Figure 3.3. *Dialogue between Friday and the business owner (Djomeh, 2000)*

The relationship between Cuma and the farm owner, Mahmut Bey, represents the class and hierarchical dimensions of migrant labor. Mahmut Bey is not an overt tyrant; however, his "well-intentioned" attitude does not eliminate inequality:

- Mahmut Bey: “Close the door, don’t let the cows escape... How are you?”
- Habib: “Hello, how are you? Check the car, check the water.”
- Mahmut Bey: “Load the goods quickly, I’m in a hurry.”

In these scenes, Cuma’s silence defines the migrant’s place within the system: obedience, not speaking, is acceptable. Cuma’s interest in the young girl working at the grocery store is less a romantic love story and more an expression of his desire for belonging and a normal life. However, this desire is constantly hindered by invisible social boundaries. The scene where migrant labor is regulated not only by physical but also by moral and hygienic standards clearly reveals this situation:

- Cuma: “I’m a worker, my clothes were dirty, I don’t want anyone to say ‘your clothes are dirty.’ It’s better for you if I dress cleanly in livestock farming. The Ministry of Health won’t fine you.”
- Mahmut Bey: “Thank you for thinking of me.”

This dialogue shows that Cuma is obligated not only to work but also to constantly legitimize himself. Mahmut Bey’s polite response softens the relationship; however, it does not produce equality.

Cuma’s identity is deliberately left ambiguous throughout the film. The lack of details about his past emphasizes that migration is not an individual story but a structural experience. This becomes even more apparent in the conversation about marriage and age:

- Cuma: “In Afghanistan, girls and boys have to marry before the age of 20. If they don’t marry, gossip will spread.”
- Mahmut: “You’re over 20, unmarried, did they spread rumors about you too?”
- Cuma: “They spread rumors about me too... But I can’t tell everything.”

The phrase “I can’t tell everything” symbolizes the traumas the migrant carries but cannot express. Instead of dramatizing this silence, the film chooses to leave it incomplete, thus strengthening the untold aspect of migration. The short conversation in the grocery store simply summarizes the economic and social position of Afghan migrants in Iran:

- Customer: “How much is your daily wage?”
- Cuma: “Thirty Tuman isn’t enough.”
- Customer: “Does that save you?”
- Cuma: “We’re workers, we have no choice.”

- Customer: "You must be sending money to your family."
- Cuma: "We're convinced. There's a war there."

This dialogue shows that the migrant's life, as well as their labor, becomes an object of scrutiny. The expressions "we are forced" and "we are convinced" emphasize that migration is not a choice, but a necessary form of survival. The film's moral core is crystallized by a short dialogue between Cuma and Habib:

- Habib: "Bring your money to the bank, the interest is high."
- Cuma: "My words are not for money, but for humanity."

For Cuma, labor is not only a means of livelihood, but also a way to remain human. However, the film clearly shows that this moral stance does not find a response within the system.

The use of space concretizes the migrant's inability to settle down. Areas such as the barn, shed, and road are necessary stopping points where Cuma sustains his life; however, they never become "home." The desire to turn the shed into a home represents the yearning to put down roots; The bureaucratic barrier invalidates this desire from the outset:

- Cuma: "When Habib goes to Afghanistan, I'll clean the room on the roof. One side will be a workplace, the other a home."
- Mahmut Bey: "The Ministry of Health will come and say this can't be a home."

This scene shows that the immigrant is allowed to work; but not to stay permanently. Djomeh presents Afghan immigration not so much as physical movement, but as an experience of not settling down, knowing the boundaries, and silently withdrawing. The film leaves the audience with the question of Cuma's place becoming unclear in the final scene:

Can an immigrant truly "belong," no matter how much he adapts?

Cuma's love is expressed in its most naked and vulnerable form in the grocery store scene. This scene is a decisive turning point in the film's dramatic structure:

- Cuma: "I come here to shop, but for another reason. If you allow it, I will send Mahmut Bey to your father to ask for your hand in marriage."
- Grocery Store Girl: "They took your bicycle, children."

This abrupt and indifferent response shows that Cuma's most serious and sincere confession about his life is interrupted by a mundane detail. The scene symbolizes not only a rejection, but also the fact that the immigrant's emotional world is not taken seriously by society. Cuma's love is not reciprocated here, nor is it explicitly rejected; it is ignored and dissolved into

ordinariness. This reveals that not only the immigrant's labor, but also his emotions, are perceived as "superfluous."



Figure 3.4. *The grocery store girl that Friday falls in love with (Djomeh, 2000)*

From this point on, the film offers the viewer neither a happy nor a tragic ending. Instead, it emphasizes the continuity of migration. Cuma's story is not completed; he is merely withdrawn from the narrative frame. His silent withdrawal is less an individual defeat and more an acceptance of a structural impasse. Thus, the film strongly conveys that migration is not a temporary situation, but a permanent state of existence.

Djomeh portrays Afghan migration not through extraordinary tragedies or dramatic explosions, but through the silent, repetitive moments of everyday life. The absence of grand events is not a deficiency, but a conscious aesthetic and ethical choice. Through ordinary actions such as digging wells, tending to animals, and wandering through the market, the film represents the unending weariness and invisibility of migration; it invites the viewer to a slow and lasting awareness rather than sudden emotional reactions. Although Cuma is at the center of the narrative, he is not placed in the classic cinematic "victim" or "resistance hero" molds. His silence is not passivity, but a survival strategy. There is no overt rebellion; however, the exclusionary and hierarchical structure of the system is felt in every scene. The film makes visible the invisible labor and constantly postponed humanity of the migrant through this silent existence. The question left to the viewer at the end of the film is ethically crucial:

Is accepting a person limited to feeling pity for them, or does it require recognizing them as a truly equal subject?

Djomeh implies that pity often produces a hierarchical relationship, while showing that equality is a much more difficult but genuine confrontation. In

this respect, the film positions migration not only as the migrant's problem, but also as a moral test for the society that observes and lives alongside them. With its silent narrative, it offers a profound ethical reckoning that forces the viewer to question their own comfort zone.

3.3 Analysis of the Film Baran (2001) in the Context of Afghan Migrants

Majid Majidi's film *Baran* (2001) depicts the lives of Afghan migrants living in Iran not through great tragedies, but through silent ruptures, daily labor, and invisible boundaries. In the film, Afghan workers represent an "invisible" community working without identity, without security, and under the constant threat of inspection. This invisibility is established not only at the social level but also cinematographically; the camera often shows Afghan workers as figures fading into the crowd. The construction site, with its unfinished structure, becomes the spatial equivalent of the migrants' suspended lives. The fact that Afghan workers are referred to not by their names but by their ethnic affiliations clearly reveals that migration has turned into an erasure of identity. This exclusion is concretized in the foreman's words:

- Foreman: "A man without an identity cannot work here. If the inspector comes, we'll all be ruined."

This dialogue shows that identity has ceased to be a human right and has become a condition for being able to work and exist. The invisible pressure of the state is constantly felt through the figure of the inspector. The Afghan workers' panic and escape at the slightest rumor of an inspection makes visible the persistent fear inherent in migration:

- Afghan Worker: "They're coming... Hide!"

"They're taking away those without identification." The ambiguity of the phrase "being taken away" deepens the invisibility of even the migrant's fate. In this respect, the film treats migration not as a temporary problem, but as a continuous form of existence; it does not offer a narrative of solution or liberation.



Figure 3.5. *Latif's identity dialogue (Baran, 2001)*

The revelation that the character we know as Rahmet is actually Baran, an Afghan girl, is one of the film's most powerful turning points. Baran's act of disguising herself as a man and working in her father's place symbolizes a system where survival is only possible by concealing one's identity. For Afghan immigrant women, this creates a double invisibility: being both an immigrant and a woman. Baran's silence is not passivity, but a strategy of self-preservation and survival. Najaf's warning clearly expresses this fragility:

- Najaf: "Don't speak, Baran... If your voice is heard, everything will be over."

This statement shows that even speaking and being visible means danger for the immigrant. Majidi's use of mirrors and reflections allows Baran's identity to be revealed indirectly, rather than directly, reinforcing the "unseen but felt" nature of immigration at a cinematic level. The character of Latif establishes the film's moral dimension. Initially, Latif's distant attitude towards Afghan immigrants stems less from personal hatred and more from the competition created by the precarious labor system:

- Latif: "I've been here for years. Am I going to lose my place just because an Afghan has arrived?"

The transformation Latif experiences upon learning Baran's identity is not a sudden romantic change; it develops as a process of ethical realization. The shoemaker's words prepare the emotional ground for Latif's renunciation:

- Shoemaker: "He who lives alone becomes a neighbor to God... Separation is such a fire that its flame burns the heart."

The ethical climax of the film is established when Latif dares to relinquish his identity:

- Latif: "Give them my identity. Let them go... I'll manage."

This sentence is not a temporary act of compassion; it signifies a conscious price paid to make equality possible. Latif demonstrates an ethical stance by relinquishing the invisible privileges afforded by being a native. The film's ending, with Afghan workers being fired due to increased controls and the Baran family being forced to leave, emphasizes that migration is a state of continuous separation:

- Najaf: "We cannot stay here. This land is not for us."



Figure 3.6. Closing scene of the film *Baran* (Baran, 2001)

The film ends neither with a happy reunion nor a great tragedy; silence and a sense of incompleteness prevail. In the scene where Latif stares after Baran, the question is left unanswered:

"Is it possible to truly accept a person by possessing them, or by being able to let go of them?"

In this context, Baran frames Afghan migration not only as a sociological problem but also as an ethical and humanitarian test. With its silent ending, the film reminds us not of the insolubility of migration, but of its continuity, and invites the viewer to a lasting questioning of conscience.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to reveal how migration is interpreted in cinematic narratives and how these representations intersect with social perceptions by examining the representations of Afghan migrants in Iranian cinema through the films *The Cyclist* (1987), *Djomeh* (2000), and *Baran* (2001). Despite being produced in different periods, these films address Afghan migrants with similar themes: economic exploitation, identity ambiguity, invisible labor, the search for belonging, and social exclusion. The findings show that Iranian cinema mostly represents Afghan migrants as silent, passive, and fragile figures; however, these representations carry a strong human and ethical sensitivity. *The Cyclist* most strikingly highlights the economic marginalization and exploitation of labor among Afghan migrants, while symbolically demonstrating that visibility for migrants is only possible at an extraordinary cost. *Baran* addresses migration on a more internal level, focusing on identity, belonging, and gender, and particularly highlighting the double oppression faced by Afghan female migrants. *Djomeh*, on the other hand, conveys the everyday, silent, and persistent ambiguity of migration through the state of being caught between acceptance and exclusion.

When these films are considered together, it is seen that Afghan migrants are mostly homogenized as poor, hardworking, and obedient figures; while collective identity, political consciousness, and resistance practices are represented only to a limited extent. While cinema makes migrants visible, it often positions them as subjects who are “narrated” but rarely “speak.” However, it cannot be ignored that the problems experienced by Afghan migrants have gained global visibility thanks to the international circulation of Iranian cinema. In conclusion, the study has revealed that the representations of Afghan migrants in Iranian cinema both carry critical potential and contain significant limitations in terms of subjectification.

The representation of Afghan migrants in the Iranian context is mostly established through a categorical status rather than individual subjectivity. The framing of Afghans as a “burden” or “threat” in media and state discourses is reproduced in cinematic narratives through micro-practices such as identity control, precarious work, and invisibility. In the film *Baran*, bureaucratic control mechanisms reveal the structural pressure of the state, which is not directly visible but shapes daily life.

Economic instrumentalization is concretized in the film *The Cyclist*, where the migrant’s body and labor are transformed into a spectacle. This symbolizes the marginalization of the migrant’s human value in the face of economic value. Similarly, practices of rendering invisible and silencing point to a common logic of representation across cinema, education, and digital media. The frequent presentation of Afghan migrants in cinema as

figures who dissolve into the crowd contributes to the weakening of public subjectification.

In the film *Djomeh*, the migrant experience is constructed through fragile individual efforts lacking strong social networks; this narrative deepens the isolating nature of migration. Although cinema softens discourses of security and threat with humanistic narratives, the limited space for collective subjectification and open resistance of Afghan characters stands out as one of the fundamental limitations of these representations.

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