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## *Persian or Islamic? Depictions of Love in Contemporary Iranian Cinema*

IRANIAN CINEMA HAS been showered with gold, silver and bronze Leopards, Lions, Bears, Seashells and Palms from the major international film festivals since Abbas Kiarostami won his first international award in 1989: a Bronze Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival for *Where is the Friend's House*. In more recent times, internationally and domestically, cinema has become the cultural marker of Iran and a major site of conflict between the government and its filmmakers. Yet it is poetry that perhaps best reflects Iran's 2,500-year history as its most significant and enduring cultural achievement and export. The influence of Iranian poets, such as that of Hafiz on Goethe<sup>1</sup>, are as well-known as the fact that Rumi is the best-selling poet today in the United States. Thus it could be expected that there is a strong relationship between cinema and poetry and much has been written about it in general terms. I am interested in the way romantic love, often allegorical for, or ultimately transcending into, love for God, as expressed in much classical Persian poetry, manifests itself in contemporary Iranian cinema.

Let me start with some of the constraints. The concept of love as portrayed by Rumi or Hafiz is less readily expressed cinematically, but the strong narrative elements in the work of Firdausi and Nizami lend themselves well to the cinematic form. Turning to the Iranian film industry there are constraints on *how* to portray, dictated by the Iranian cinematographic regulations (veiling, touch etc), and *what* to portray in the tensions between Islamic and pre-Islamic (or Persian) culture (the official favouring of the depiction of Islamic values and religious subjects over national culture and myths). Furthermore, officially cinema is considered to be at the service of education in its broadest sense rather than entertainment. How then might contemporary Iranian cinema portray love and to what purpose?

In this article I will explore Abbas Kiarostami's *My Sweet Shirin* (2008), based on Nizami's classical Persian love story, and contrast it with *Gold and Copper* (2011, Homayoun Asadian), the title of which references Rumi. Neither of these films is a typical expression of love, but for different reasons. Kiarostami's film is widely viewed as a technical experiment. *Gold and Copper*, with its setting in the clerical world, is a rarity in Iranian cinema. I will argue that both use the concept of love for other agendas – the former protesting the suppression of pre-Islamic culture, the latter embracing Islamist values but utilising a universalising narrative.

Formally *Shirin* falls into the category of what Jamsheed Akrami has described as Kiarostami's 'reductive experimentations'.<sup>2</sup> When Debra Young filed a review for the *Hollywood Reporter* from Venice after the film's premiere, she described *My Sweet Shirin* as 'simply a parade of close-ups of 113 Iranian actresses who are watching a film which

... only exists in the mind of the viewer'.<sup>3</sup> Unusually for a film review, she detailed Kiarostami's working method. 'Kiarostami has stated that the actresses are staring at three dots on a sheet of white cardboard off-screen, while imagining their own love stories; he chose the Shirin narration only later, after he finished filming'. The *Variety* review also filed from Venice, by Ronnie Scheib, follows this almost verbatim.<sup>4</sup> This focus on the technical nature of the film and on noting the almost incidental use of the Shirin story for the soundtrack is typical of the film's reviews and even Kiarostami can be found in interview on YouTube describing the process. It is clear that he was deliberately focusing attention on this aspect of the film in his Venice and subsequent media interviews.

When discussion about the film moved from the media to academic circles, the emphasis continued. In the entry for Kiarostami in *The Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema* the film is dismissed thus: 'his exploration of the cinematic experience continues in *Shirin* ... a compelling exploration of the relationship between image, sound and (female) spectatorship'.<sup>5</sup> The issue of female spectatorship is a valid one. My own original viewing experience as a non-Farsi speaking female spectator was a powerfully emotional one – the soundtrack functions as a kind of radio play with the emotional expressions on the faces of the actresses re-inforcing (or perhaps cueing) the emotional impact. My experience confirmed Bordwell's assessment that, 'the film is an almost absurdly pure experiment in facial empathy'.<sup>6</sup> Renowned critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, in writing about the film, was initially most concerned to countermand claims that Kiarostami had changed direction. Adding to the technical analysis of the film he established a formal line back to *The Wind Will Carry Us* through Kiarostami's use of 'imaginary reverse angles'.<sup>7</sup>

But Scheib, in his *Variety* review, does discuss one non-formal aspect to the film. 'Like *Ten*, *Shirin* comes across as inescapably feminist, suggesting Kiarostami's personal stake in employing Iranian actresses whose talents he has never before tapped. The film also tips toward feminism in that the younger, prettier faces are not necessarily the ones that capture the eye'.<sup>8</sup> He is suggesting that Kiarostami is perhaps responding to the frequent claims that he avoids the difficulties associated with the representation of women in Iranian cinema.

Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa reads a more complex feminist stance and a political context:

The fact that we see all these women wearing scarves shows us that they're in Iran. You can't really disassociate this film from the present moment there, politically or otherwise. When you see these women crying, you can't help but think of martyrdom. At the beginning, we even hear Shirin addressing other women, 'Listen to me, my sisters', about their common pain and her own story, and at the end, she asks them whether they're crying for her or for their own, inner Shirins. You can't eliminate this context.<sup>9</sup>

Young and others note the presence of some currently famous actresses – typically Hedieh Tehrani, Leila Hatami and Niki Karimi as well as Juliette Binoche, who would star in Kiarostami's later *Certified Copy*.<sup>10</sup> However many Iranians viewing the film

would notice something else – they would see the recently deceased Iren and other pre-revolutionary actresses banned from the screen; they might also recognise Jafar Panahi's daughter, who is not an actress. Is she a representative for Panahi, whom many will notice as a shadowy figure in the background? Moreover an Iranian friend living in Tehran reminded me that the voiceover was from a pre-revolutionary actress. He could not remember her name but he commented tellingly, 'somehow it reminded me of Shah time'.

Justification for the readings of *Shirin* limited to technical aspects is Kiarostami's formally similar three-minute film, *Where is my Romeo?* This film was made in 2007 as part of a Cannes commissioned series, *To Each His Own Cinema*, in which the visuals are virtually the same, and the soundtrack pre-existing from Zeffirelli's famous film *Romeo and Juliet*.

I would like to push these readings further by giving more consideration to the soundtrack. Saeed-Vafa claims a political aspect to *Shirin*, but notable is non-Iranian Richard Brody's response to *Romeo*, worth quoting at length.

I watched it in my office and forgot to plug in headphones; a female colleague, hearing Juliet's death throes (at forty seconds in), thought I was watching an erotic film. The mistake is accurate: Kiarostami's conjunction of a woman's pleasure and death is an implicit accusation of the repressive measures applied, particularly against women, in Iranian society. But the Prince's roar, at 1:51, of the line 'All are punished'—departing from Shakespeare's text by repeating the phrase—speaks clearly for Kiarostami: the injustices done to women are done to all. The female spectators' rapt terror at the spectacle reflects their personal implication in its subject, love rendered illicit.<sup>11</sup>

'Love rendered illicit'. Love is shown here as political, using the story of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Returning to Nizami, his *Khamasa* consists of five works, including the great love story of King Khusrau and Shirin, Princess of Armenia. They fall in love with each other by reputation and their first long-delayed meeting confirms their love, but it is doomed to end with Shirin dying on Khusrau's grave. If the story's trajectory sounds familiar, Nazari has written that, 'It is said that the story of Shirin and Khusrau told in the second of the 'Five Treasures' (*Khamasa*) by Nizami inspired Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*'.<sup>12</sup> Irrespective of the veracity of the claim, a straw poll among Iranian friends and colleagues indicated that they also believe this – perhaps we can then assume that for Kiarostami there is a connection between the two stories.

The film credits for *My Sweet Shirin* note that it is based on the book by Farideh Golbou written in 2000, in turn based on Nizami's version. The story is contained in Firdausi's earlier *Shahnama*, which Fischer notes has 'a degree of anti-Islamic innuendo . . . serv[ing] as an agonistic, subversive, ongoing critique of the corruptions of the present'.<sup>13</sup> However it was Nizami who so intensely romanticised the story. Furthermore it has been asserted that, 'Nizami . . . created a bridge between Islamic Iran and pre-Islamic Iran'.<sup>14</sup>

Fatemeh Keshavarz comments on Nizami's own vision of his Shirin. Her view is a literal one, in line with Michael Barry's observation that contemporary Iranians no longer view Nizami's work as 'charged with profound allegorical and mystical meaning'.<sup>15</sup> Keshavarz writes, 'Travelling on horseback from country to country, inheriting the throne, rejecting a king's proposal of marriage ... and counseling a young and ill-behaved king in matters of ethics and rulership are not traditional female tasks in any premodern society. They are certainly not what we would consider a medieval Muslim poet's vision of routine activity for an ideal female protagonist'.<sup>16</sup> Talattof comments on Nizami's positive portrayal of his female characters as 'lovers, heroines, rulers, and even educators and challengers of men' by contrast with Firdausi's more limited representation of women.<sup>17</sup>

Nizami's version has been told and illustrated in countless manuscripts and books, but both Nizami's and Firdausi's versions have also been traditionally the subject of what are the forerunners of Iranian cinema. Coffee shop paintings, narrative in nature and a mix of Iranian religious and national myths, have been a specific genre since the end of the 19th century. They in turn had their roots in the Iranian visual story-telling tradition, which took place both in the street and coffee houses, with visual aids – either the coffee shop paintings or large canvases owned by the story-tellers themselves.

A key moment usually chosen by manuscript artists in illustrating the story is the crucial incident where Khusrau first spies Shirin – as she is bathing. Shahruz Nazari reminds us that images of Shirin bathing were created 'even under the Safavid Shi'ite government' (1501-1722). This moment is illustrated in a Bodleian Library manuscript from this very period – 1549 (see p. 154).

However as Young comments, 'Delightfully full of passionate trysts in perfumed gardens, the story of Shirin and Khusrau is probably unfilmable in today's Iran'.<sup>18</sup> Kiarostami's film is the first version of the Shirin story filmed in the Islamic Republic, despite it being the subject of one of the earliest Iranian films, Abdolhossein Sepenta's *Shirin va Farhad* (1934) and Ismael Koushan's Iranian Turkish co-production *Shirin and Farhad* (1970) from the late Pahlavi era. By comparison there have been six filmed versions of it in the Indian sub-continent.

Kiarostami's film credits point to his use of the Shirin story as anything but incidental. For the opening credits he dissolves between fourteen pages from an old wood-cut book of the story. The film opens with a brass and drum fanfare onto the symbol of kingship, the twin lions and sun. Of the other thirteen illustrations, among scenes of battles and hunting, with and without Shirin, and innocuous pavilions and courtly scenes of the two together, are the famous bathing scene with a bare-breasted Shirin most prominent in the foreground, a scene of them embracing with Shirin seated on Khusrau's lap and a scene where Shirin is throwing herself on Khusrau's corpse. As if to emphasise the Persian aspects, over the closing credits Kiarostami, not known for his use of non-diegetic music, makes a final small act of dissidence. A poem from the mystical poet Shaykh Farid al-Din 'Attar is sung by male and female voice in a call and

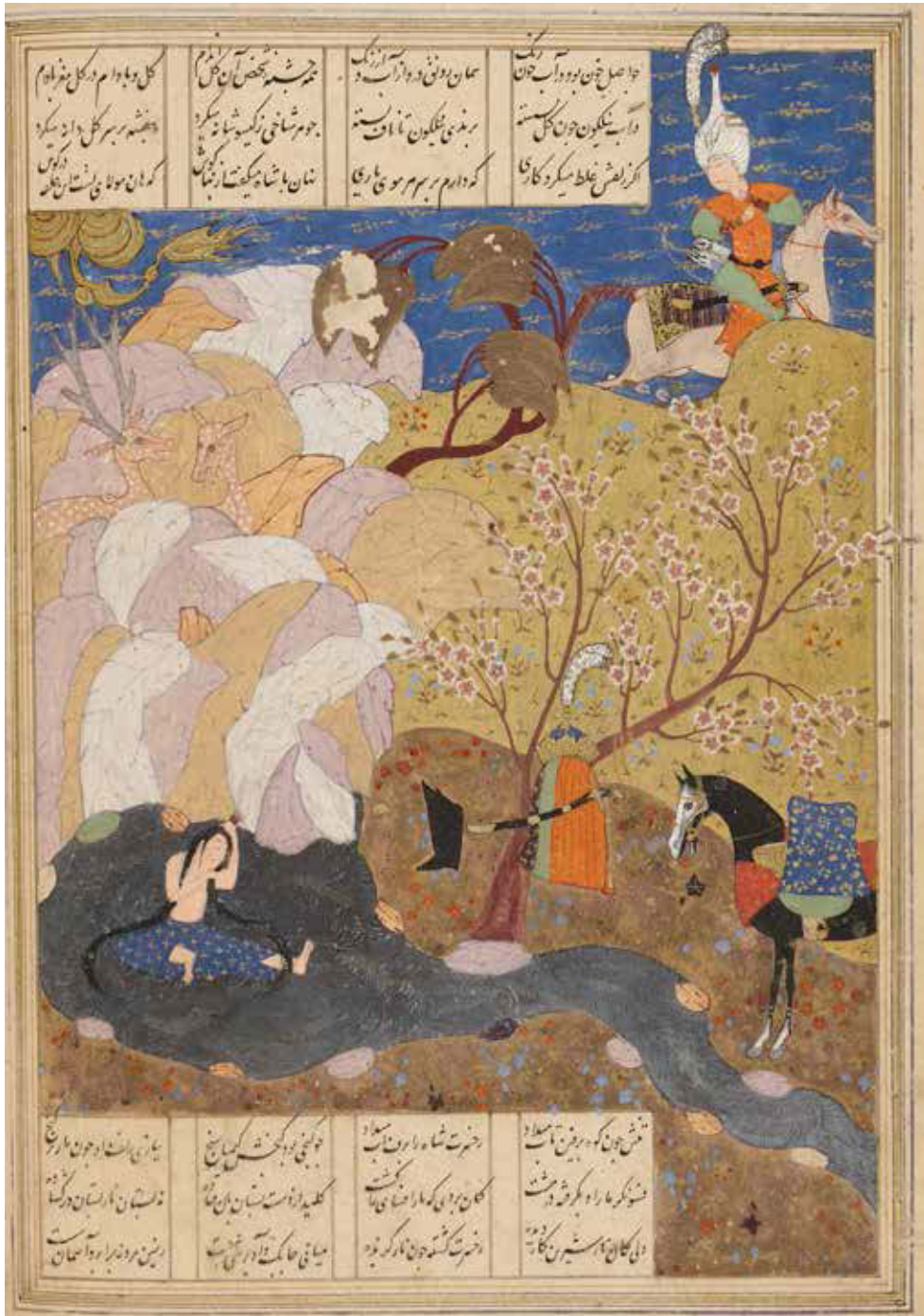
response style. Generally female solo vocalists are not permitted to perform for a male or mixed audience and as Mottahedeh has written, in relation to veiling, screen space is considered public space.<sup>19</sup>

A curious incident occurred in August 2011 confirming that the subject matter is unfilmable in Iran today and that even an 800-year old classic is taboo. Iranian government censors refused a publishing house permission to reprint their 8th edition of Nizami's own version of *Shirin*. While the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance offered no official explanation, media speculation was that the Islamic government's concerns centred on the 'indecent' act of the heroine, *Shirin*, in embracing her husband.<sup>20</sup> However, later on, due to the strong reactions of the media and Iranian artists, the Ministry denied any kind of censorship and the book was published. As a coda, indicative of the omnipresent and quixotic contradictions in the Iranian cultural sphere, the film *Shirin* did receive a limited domestic release. Kiarostami's films do not screen in Iran, not because, contrary to western belief, they are always banned, but because he does not usually bother to get a screening permit for them. But in 2010, well after its international release, *Shirin* received a single screening only, with Kiarostami present, as the opening film of Image of an Artist, a documentary film festival at the Iranian Artists Forum.<sup>21</sup> In 2011 it received a limited release in two theatres. Over the 28 days it grossed about \$12,000, a respectable result for a relatively inaccessible film.<sup>22</sup>

I am not the first to claim a Persian/Islamic subtext in Kiarostami's films. Michael Fischer mounts a strong case for 'a discourse of Islamic backwardness and parochialism versus Persian civilization and cosmopolitanism' in *The Wind Will Carry Us*.<sup>23</sup> I argue that the tension created from seeing 113 Iranian actresses (and ring-in Juliette Binoche) onscreen in Islamic garb whilst hearing a great and tragic pre-Islamic love story reflects the tension in contemporary Iran between the Islamic and the pre-Islamic. Kiarostami knows only too well that a standard filmic treatment of Nizami's classical Persian poem is unacceptable film material in Iran today – that we cannot see, that we as spectators can only imagine the film, is as much the point of the film as it is a homage to the actresses of Iran. It is also part of Kiarostami's *Unfinished Cinema* project where, 'the audience is considered as a focal point of this uncompleted cinema. It is the main factor of constructing narrative sequences and discovering its own closed or open endings'.<sup>24</sup> That he has thrown the emphasis in interview onto the technical matters is a typical Kiarostami deflection to avoid dealing with issues of state-ruled theology.

We now move to *Gold and Copper*, the title of which is taken from Rumi. 'Through love bitter things seem sweet, through love bits of copper are made gold'.<sup>25</sup>

*Gold and Copper* is a highly affecting melodrama about the spiritual growth of a young Muslim theology student coming to terms with the illness of his beloved wife. Seyed is very happily married with two children. He has come from the provinces with his family to study in Tehran. They struggle to make ends meet and his wife Zahra weaves carpets at home to supplement their income. But she becomes stricken with multiple sclerosis. Soon the young cleric is not only cooking, taking care of the children



Khusrau spies Shirin bathing.  
From a manuscript of Nizami, *Khamsa*, dated 956 (1549).  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Pers. c. 42, fol. 42v.



A still from the film, *Gold and Copper*, 2011.  
Courtesy of Mohammad Attebai, Iranian Independents.

and performing all the domestic tasks, but also weaving the latest carpet. His wife will only get worse. One thing that is never in question is their deep love and devotion to each other. It even impresses the nurses at the hospital, who do not attempt to disguise their disdain that he is a cleric.

Before exploring this film further it is useful to provide an overview of the situation for officially sanctioned cinema in Iran. While the Iranian clergy has always had a conflicted attitude towards cinema, it was embraced by Khomeini in his first speech on return from exile to Iran in 1979. However his support was for a 'pure' or 'Islamic' cinema, to be used to educate people towards right or virtuous living rather than to entertain. What constitutes such a cinema is rather fuzzy, but it can be stated that family values are given preference over romantic love. Furthermore one of the approved categories of Iranian cinema is a genre that embraces spirituality (as distinct from religion). Within this genre are films that have found favour both inside Iran and with the West. *Gold and Copper*, conservative in form and content, but very moving and finely scripted, directed and acted, meets all these points.

Returning to the plot, the positive resolution to the theology student's problems is that he takes a second wife with the reluctant acquiescence of the first. This, of course, is what makes the film Islamic. A Western 'happy resolution' would see a different kind of domestic adjustment' *Gold and Copper* is easily read as a universally applicable spiritual transformation, with a resolution accepted as cultural difference. But when the external context is taken into consideration the reading becomes complicated.

Let's turn firstly to the film's provenance. *Gold and Copper* is the third of a unique trilogy. All are about the clergy, and each contains *limited* criticism of the clergy, implying a brave producer. That all three films share the same producer led to the conclusion in some circles that *Gold and Copper* was 'a government film' (a synonym for propaganda). That the film premiered in the seminary in Qom, the largest centre for Shi'a scholarship in the world, gave further weight to this opinion. Furthermore the movie received a new award named *Path of the Prophets* at the 2010 Fajr International Film Festival.<sup>26</sup> And finally, its international sales agent, Mohammad Attebai of Iranian Independents wrote to me the following, indicating an unusual and final seal of approval: 'You may be surprised to know that Ayatollah Khamenei, the leader, has praised the movie, especially the subject matter and the two main actor and actress (sic)'.<sup>27</sup>

However, for myself and other international industry insiders, the very fact that *Gold and Copper* was distributed internationally by Mohammad Attebai, a major Iranian distributor of independent films and producer of one of Panahi's films, reads against the film as propaganda. Attebai has acknowledged the film's ambiguous position, noting 'Some film experts believe that *Gold and Copper* is a propaganda film with little chance for international screening . . . However, the human aspects of the film attracted [international] festivals . . .'.<sup>28</sup> It also received the *In the Spirit of Faith Award* at the Religion Today Film Festival Italy, indicating its acceptability to a Roman Catholic clergy. Perhaps the most significant marker was that, contrary to propaganda films, its Iranian box office was successful. Domestically, *Gold and Copper* was in theatres for 60 days and came in at number fifteen at the box office among 63 released movies in 2010, grossing a very respectable US\$ 520,000.<sup>29</sup>

International critical reception was largely positive. Two contrasting reviews both homed in on what they perceived as criticism of organised religion. Tom Ellis noted, 'I found it really intriguing how he became more secular as his troubles mounted . . . I have read that some feel that this film is meant to be a propaganda film . . . but I have actually wondered if this film might be quietly poking some questions at the Iranian clerical class'<sup>30</sup>. And in the industry bible for film and theatre reviews, *Variety*, Justin Chang wrote,

this classically fashioned meller is a film of near-universal appeal, offering a warm, sympathetic portrait of family life and a powerful sense of transcendence through everyday struggles. . . . *Gold & Copper* is above all a call for compassion, and as such it doesn't reject religion so much as the cold, unfeeling spirit in which so much religion is practiced. . . . the sublimity spoken of in the Koran [passages of which are



quoted] is achieved at ground level, through suffering, patience and *unconditional love*' [my emphasis].<sup>31</sup>

*Gold and Copper* was screened in the Iranian Film Festival Australia in 2012 after considerable debate between my Iranian co-director and myself about the possibility of a negative reception by the Iranian audience. The Brisbane audience, about 60/40 Iranian/non-Iranian, greeted the film very favourably in the anonymous voting forms and in verbal feedback, accepting it as a universal story of spiritual transformation.

The debate is understandable. The real intentions of director Homayoun Asadian and scriptwriter Hamed Mohammadi – criticism of the clergy or the affirmation of Islamic values – will most likely never be revealed. However, they seem to have achieved the near impossible with a cross-over film that spans government-approved to acceptance by both national and international audiences.

Both of these films, *Gold and Copper* and *Shirin*, take the expression of love in specific texts from classical Persian literature as their starting points. Perhaps they are representative of two viewpoints, with *Shirin* protesting the suppression of pre-Islamic culture and *Gold and Copper* promoting Islamist values through a universalising narrative. Neither is typical of a sector of contemporary Iranian national cinema. However, they are most certainly very typically Iranian in terms of the way they resist any attempt at absolute decoding, vividly illustrating the problems of reception of Iranian cinema.