Animating Eroded Landscapes: The Cinema of Ali Hatami

By

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Abstract:

International scholarship on Iranian cinema has been stimulated and yet constricted by the reception of recent Iranian films at major film festivals, where a few exceptional “festival films” have ended up defining Iranian cinema as a whole. To redress the limitations of current accounts of Iranian cinema, my thesis focuses on the work of Ali Hatami, a major Iranian director whose singular style has hindered his inclusion into the critical writing on Iranian cinema. In the first chapter, case studies of two of Hatami’s films, *Baba Shamal* (1971) and *The Love-Stricken* (1991) trace the fundamentals of his style to Hatami’s fascination with Iranian traditional arts. The second chapter uses a study of Hatami’s *Ghalandar* (1971) to illuminate the director’s equivocal stance towards traditional conceptions of gender. Finally, in the third chapter, an examination of *Haji Washington* (1981) reveals a similarly equivocal tone in Hatami’s account of a historical encounter between traditional Iran and the West.

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Introduction: Hatami, the disqualified auteur

The critical literature on Ali Hatami signals a contradiction plaguing studies of world cinema; having the reputation in Iran of “the most Iranian filmmaker”, Hatami has been consistently excluded from the English language scholarship on Iranian cinema. Academic writing on world cinema and national cinema is crucial in this context since it mediates access to alien film cultures like Iran’s. Academic critics, however, tend to approach world cinema in ways that confirm their own ideas. To achieve recognition, a filmmaker’s body of work must conform to all-embracing templates, which are themselves meant to underpin familiar critical positions and prejudices¹.

In Hatami’s case what is bewildering about this critical negligence is his status in Iran as an auteur director, a circumstance that might have made him a darling of cinematic circles abroad as well. Notwithstanding the alteration it has gone through since its inception, the concept of film authorship still maintains its popularity as a viable approach in film studies, partly because positing the name of an author as the driving force behind a film reaffirms the status of film as an art form. In the light of the notion of the author-director, which has evolved with reference to the dominantly collective model of the film industry, Hatami’s embodiment of the term is less contentious. Indeed he quite

¹ Traditionally, most of these critical positions are marked by a bias to illustrate the world cinema in an oppositional stance to the dominant (Hollywood or Western) cinema, so that the former can embody a sphere of “political resistance” (Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah xix). All the same, as Dennison and Lim indicate that origins of this duality that underlies the conventional concept of world cinema could be found in a similar treatment in literature and the idea of *weltliteratur* introduced by Goethe in reference to works that stand distinct from western literature (2). Meanwhile Nagib and her colleagues draw our attention to the fact that this binary model, even if conceived as oppositional, possesses the potential for finding a commercial purpose and being used as a marketing brand, similar to the ways in which the brand “world music” has been exploited by the music industry (xix).

consciously strived to define himself as an author, as his comments bear witness to: “I believe in authorship and have always observed it” (Heydari 17).

For one thing, the emergence of *auteur* directors was predictable in Iranian cinema, given the Iranian film industry’s dominantly artisanal mode of film production.² This artisanal mode also enshrouded the production of films by creative art-orientated directors, enabling these filmmakers to use their personal visions as the major driving force behind their projects and therefore achieve the exemplary status of an author with respect to filmmaking. Hatami entered the fold in the late 60s in tandem with other young directors whose films infused new blood into the predominantly commercialized cinema of Iran. Like his other colleagues- whose films collectively constituted what retrospectively received the designation of the Iranian New Wave- Hatami also took the responsibility of writing his own scripts, a task that not only befitted his background in writing plays for the stage, but also brought him closer to the way in which the *auteur* filmmaker was originally imagined and prescribed. What is more, for many of his films Hatami also took on the position of production designer, which went a long way towards the formation of the particular style of his films, one issued, by and large, from the vision of a singular artist. Of course for the earlier part of Hatami’s career (1970-1972), we might suspect a joint authorship, since in some of those films Hatami enlisted the service of Parviz Sayyad, an actor and also a director in his own right, who was similarly

² The only established film company that remained active for about three decades and owned its studios was Pars Film. It was run by Esmaeel Kooshan who supervised and collaborated to the rebirth of Iranian cinema after one decade of hiatus in the late 1940s. Not so long after 1979 revolution, however his company folded.

influenced by Iranian art and cultural traditions.³ Additionally Sayyad created a repertory company of actors and used to bring them into projects he got involved in (including two of Hatami's films). There is, however, not enough documentation to clarify the extent to which Sayyad added to the overall vision of Hatami's films- he appeared in all three films he and Hatami worked together, and produced two of them as well. Therefore given the on-and-off status of their collaboration and the overall stylistic and thematic consistency one can observe throughout Hatami's corpus of work, this collaboration can hardly dilute Hatami's pronounced authorial voice. Critics concerned with film authorship sometimes conceive the author not as a real person but as one implied and sustained in the film, and which is perceived to narrate the story.⁴ The unorthodox style of Hatami's films - as I will discuss- as well as his desire to play the part of a traditional narrator and his pivotal role in execution of his projects, all make his films stand out as cases in which the real author is superimposed over the implied author.

In practice, matching the criteria of authorship is only one of the prerequisites for establishing an *auteur*. To legitimize an author, it is imperative that his/her films be presented and introduced on platforms available to critics and academicians. It goes without saying that film festivals have served as the foremost of these platforms. In relation to Iranian cinema, the function of festivals in putting this national cinema into the spotlight has been discussed at length by scholars such as Bill Nichols and Azadeh Farahmand. Farahmand, for instance, argues for the salience of the Tehran International Film Festival- held under the aegis of the royal regime in the 70s- in defining the Iranian

³ Also a theatre artist, Sayyad broke new ground by bringing the national theatre of *Ta'zieh* to an official stage after many years of proscription (Moosavi 59)

⁴ One writer that propagates this take on authorship is C. Paul Sellors in his book, *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*.

New Wave, by noting that both the festival and the New Wave emerged at roughly the same period (Farahmand, “Disentangling” 269).⁵ Regretfully Hatami’s work, despite sporting the marks of an author, barely benefitted from the festival circuit, which did little to enhance his reputation. The limited availability of the films he made prior to the 1979 revolution- as with many films from that period, which has contributed further to a critical neglect of that area in the history of cinema- as well as Hatami’s untimely death in 1996, which cut short his career around the time the worldwide popularity of Iranian cinema had peaked in the 90s, are all complicit in his low international profile. Nevertheless, this lack of recognition continues up to this day – sixteen years after his death- in the non-Farsi literature on Iranian cinema. This neglect ought to make us suspicious about the way World Cinema as a category has been conceived and studied, which directly correlates to the function of film festivals in presenting films from across the world and shaping the topography of world cinema.⁶

It is claimed that the initial objective of film festivals has shifted over time, to the point that these institutions have lost their interest in discoveries and even in organizing retrospectives the general trend is to revisit familiar names (Cousins 155). The degree to which this observation is valid is open to debate and, in fact, one can point to various festivals- not those rated as A-class- that still vigorously explore unexcavated areas of

⁵ Of course, similarly important in definition of this movement is the decision of some of affiliated filmmakers –including Hatami- to join forces and establish *Kanoon-e Sinamagaran-e Pishro (Progressive Filmmakers Centre)* in 1973 as a way of departure from the body of commercial cinema and to underscore their different orientations and ambitions in filmmaking.

⁶ Dudley Andrew indicates that how through their selections, these venues gradually formed what he defines as a “basic map” for the world cinema (19).

film history as part of their agenda.⁷ However the general concept of the transfiguration in the dynamics of festivals is difficult to reject. With their function ever more entangled with commerce, film festivals also provide the filmmakers with an arena to broker new production or distribution deals, but even more, their function has been increasingly extended to film production. This confusion of roles, according to Farahmand, pertains to the formation of Iranian Cinema as a concept delegated by films of the New Iranian Cinema, that is, the Iranian films that started to circulate in festivals from the late 1980s onwards, which all displayed the same stylistic choices. She observes that some of programmers- Marco Mueller as an instance- who chose Iranian films for their represented festivals also had careers as distributors or producers which, in turn, had an impact on their programming decisions. Citing the weakness of Iranian currency and the low production expenses of those Iranian films circulating in the late 80s and 90s as incentives for Europeans to invest in these projects, she implicitly suggests an extra economic reason for consolidation of a certain concept of Iranian cinema (Farahmand, "Perspectives" 94, 98).

Festivals are not solely accountable for the defining of national cinemas through formulas and certain criteria. The *raison d'être* of these happenings, that is their audience and in particular the reviewers and writers, all have their part in such a process of configuration. Following Farahmand, cinematic writers step inside screening venues not just to discover novelties but also to find familiar features that help them constitute patterns ("Disentangling" 265). This process of "generification," she believes, lies at the heart of festivals. According to this process, the novelty is permitted to the degree they

⁷ Cases in point are Udine Far East Film Festival, or Tokyo Filmex that each year has held a retrospective dedicated to a lesser known Japanese director.

still carry features already known as a representative of a given national cinema. As Nichols describes, writers like him hope to find their patterns to be reaffirmed despite “moments of unexpected variations” (Nichols 23). These patterns or paradigms, which in Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong’s belief are defined by the interaction of “programmers, filmmakers, and the audiences” (91) treat films coming from the same country as necessarily similar and equate them with their respective national cinema. These patterns eventually turn into an impediment, for directors feel the obligation to obey them in order to enhance the chance of having their films selected for the festivals as representatives of their national cinema.

In case of the New Iranian Cinema that won favour with foreign spectators and writers, the pattern quickly emerged: “long-take, long-shot minimally edited style...limited use of music and even dialogue” (Nichols 21) have been among features that have led critics to describe Iranian cinema as a “cinema of austerity” (Nichols 26) by extrapolating features of films presented in festivals to a whole national film industry. This quality that Nichols finds so intriguing in Iranian cinema also defines the majority of films described as “festival films”. These festival films- including those belonging to the New Iranian Cinema- also feature open endings, location shooting, or at least the use of sets which “can be meticulous, but seldom baroque” (Wong 75) and sometimes casting non-professionals. As Wong points out, these festival films include many elements attributed to “art cinema” by David Bordwell, who characterized it as an alternative

model to classic Hollywood cinema; in effect, the two terms – festival films and art cinema- to a great extent overlap (73).⁸

This fascination with the films featuring certain stylistic choices, strikes a chord with a view of cinema popular among scholars, which could be traced to Bazin's notion of realism and its later modification as Deleuzian concept of time-image. Both Bazin's and Deleuz's schools of thought operate within a binary model in which one form of cinema is favoured over the other (Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah xx-xxi). The influence of this binary model on the popularity of the New Iranian cinema as a constituent of world cinema could be easily noticed in lots of critical writings on these films, including a piece by Chaudhuri and Finn. These two writers avowedly draw upon Deleuze's theories in order to praise "the open image" which in their view consistently emerges as a distinctive feature of the New Iranian Cinema.

The envisioning of any national cinema along the line of "art cinema" and on the basis of commonalities limited to a certain group of films closes off the inclusion of films created by filmmakers who, despite their artistic ambitions, do not adopt the approved stylistic choices. In case of Iranian cinema, the obnoxious outcome of this stratagem surfaced in the scandalous screening of the episodic film *Tales of Kish* (1999) at the Cannes Film Festival, when the festival president Gilles Jacob stipulated the omission of an episode made by Bahram Beizai as a condition for the inclusion of the film in the competition line-up, warranting this decision on the incongruity between this episode's style and the rest of the film (Farahmand, "Perspectives" 98). One however might start to think about the connection between this decision and the reliance of Beizai's style on

⁸ This could be resulted from the fact that the world cinema, in its conventional usage came into being as the surrogate for "foreign art films" (Andrew 19).

expressive acting and editing, two features inconsistent with the existing paradigm on the Iranian cinema.

Meanwhile the way Iranian cinema was perceived through those films slotted into the festivals has not gone down well with every Iranian critic. In a book structured as a dialogue, two writers –Maziar Eslami and Morad Farhadpoor- who are highly critical of the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami- possibly the most famous Iranian director abroad- repudiate the image of the cinema of austerity imposed on Iranian cinema. These critics bring into question the validity of the binary of Hollywood and “art cinema”, which in their view resulted in the appreciation these works savoured as examples of the latter category. As Eslami and Farhadpoor contend, this binary is born from a fantasy of an oppositional cinema nurtured by Western scholars, one that totally puts aside the codes of perfection observed in mainstream (Hollywood) cinema. Being aware that production of films of this stripe rarely passes muster with the dynamics of filmmaking and spectatorship in their own society, these writers project the object of their yearning on less developed societies and construct a vision of national cinemas as the possessor of all the formal attributes they covet and qualities such as “originality, spirituality, affection, [and] organic society”, which they believe Western society has lost (Eslami and Farhadpoor 14).⁹ In other words, these two writers conclude that the patterns formed in the festivals and projected over films of a national cinema are driven by a yearning to construct the image of the “other”, which, as Eslami and Farhadpoor argue is one of simplicity and primitiveness. This otherness as channeled through the presentation of

⁹ Chaudhuri and Finn, for instance, close their article on the New Iranian Cinema with this rueful statement: “The open image of Iranian films remind us of the loss of such images in most contemporary cinema” (179), nevertheless they reject the idea that the appeal of these films flows from representation of the “other”.

national cinemas is decided and moderated at major film festivals (Wong 103) which are seen by Eslami and Farhadpoor as worthy heirs to Orientalist representations of Eastern societies in travelogues (146). Due to this tendency, they believe, these festivals are dismissive of those films coming from Third World Countries that instead of presenting their diegetic world in an objective way, are profoundly imbued with a modern subjective vision (Eslami and Farhadpoor 57). What is more, the difference these venues are receptive to has a threshold, evident when films display the more disturbing facets of a different culture (Eslami and Farhadpoor 34). In fact, comments Nichols makes about the qualities he and his colleagues are seeking for in festival films are consonant with above-stated negative view, qualities such as “crosscultural humanity” and “rejection of Hollywood norms” (Nichols 18). It has not been lost on other scholars that the image unanimously constructed around the New Iranian Cinema is deliberately quite close to the concept of European Art cinema, and this is perceived as an act of “appropriation” by Western scholars to propose their ideal alternative model to Hollywood cinema (Gow 10).

These unuttered guidelines deter the presentation of Hatami’s films in festivals due to the fact that in more than one respect his style deviates from the congealed idea of Iranian Cinema and to some extent, festival films. As a result of the way it is conceived, Hatami’s cinema is the polar opposite of the cinema of austerity, enlisting a panoply of traditional artefacts to evoke the spirit of a bygone period by way of extravagance, to the extent of his films being likened to antique shops by his critics. Crucially and in opposition to the strong realist impulses of the films associated with the New Iranian Cinema, Hatami always upheld formalism and rejected any connection with realism.

Going over his interviews, we frequently come across assertions about his lack of faith in realist representation such as: “I have nothing to do with reality. It is not my issue.” (Hatami, “Jostojoo” 69), “I cannot accept the logic of reality and I do not care about it” (qtd. in Heydari 106), or “The truth is more beautiful than reality” (qtd. in Heydari 149). The fact that he made his first feature film, *Hassan the Bald* (1970) in colour in a time when the majority of Iranian films were shot in black and white (Heydari 32) would underscore this vigorous anti-realist tendency, particularly given the association of colour with fantasy, as well as a predilection for elegance that underwrote his works from the outset of his career.¹⁰ One writer even described him as “the only imaginative director in Iranian cinema (save for Bahram Beizai)”. (Kaheh 224)

As all the Iranian writers agree, Hatami represented a unique style that did not yield a follower after his death. In Hamid Reza Sadr’s words “His films defy conventional categories in Iranian cinema.” (“Sibi” 46) and are difficult to pigeonhole into one genre. In fact the peculiarity of his style was the number one obstacle preventing the completion of his last project, *Takhti, The Hero of the World*, which remained unfinished when he died during the shooting, for no other director was found able to shoot the film in a way that sustained Hatami’s vision. Hatami himself attributed this peculiarity to the fact that he created films with no pre-existing models (Rohani, “Ghali” 68), an approach that obviously works against the positioning of his films in the familiar critical templates in which scholarly writing on national cinema takes shape. For the uniqueness of their style, Hatami’s films resist assimilation into larger paradigms and therefore suffer from an oblivion in scholarly discourse. Many Iranian writers justly

¹⁰ To stress the stark contrast of his style with realism once he mentioned that even trees in his films are painted. (Hatami, “Jostojoo” 62)

position Hatami as part of the Iranian New Wave, but in international writing he did not receive an attention on a par with his New Wave colleagues (For instance, Naficy's discussion of the New Wave in the second volume of *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* includes very few references to Hatami). In her discussion on Iranian films' two waves of international popularity, Farahmand invokes "favourable conditions" as mutable but essential factors that facilitate the reception of films. In the case of the Iranian New Wave, she underscores the "political allegory" that informed many of the films belonging to this movement as one such favourable element in light of the politicized ethos of the 1970s (Farahmand, "Disentangling" 275). Again Hatami, despite belonging to the movement, has been never viewed as a political artist, and this along with singularity of his style seems to have disqualified him from consideration outside of Iran as part of the Iranian New Wave.

Hatami's works were only briefly unveiled to foreign spectators. His last two finished films, *The Mother* (1990) and *The Love-Stricken* (1992) had a limited screening during annual screening weeks of Iranian films in Paris and other cultural events sponsored by the government abroad. More importantly, his last film before the 1979 revolution, *Desiderium* (1977) was screened in Tehran International Film Festival and awarded with a prize.¹¹ The 1979 revolution and the ensuing events, however, seemed to diminish his interest in presenting his films to the foreign audience. In an interview towards the end of his life in 1992, he mentioned that he did not make films for the festivals ("Hadis-e Nafs" 9). Nevertheless he also implied that the people in charge of

¹¹ Fereydoon Moezzi Moghdam, a programmer for Tehran International Film festival remembers that Hatami personally came to him and asked him to translate the film's dialogue for the subtitles.

foreign marketing – which for several years was monopolized by the governmental organization of Farabi- did not try to present his films, presumably because of their awareness of the general criteria of festival films. However around the same time and maybe inspired by the revived reputation of Iranian films, he was gestating a project (*Snow Queens*) informed by an ambition to reach the international audience, for which he was planning to employ foreign cast and crew. However this- unrealized- project with its epic scale and historical content differed dramatically from the pattern for which Iranian films in had gained prominence in international markets.

In discussions of Hatami's works it is often claimed that his films are not "comprehensible by *strangers*." (Talebinezhad, "Saye" 167), a belief that discourages the introduction of his works into the literature on world cinema. In fact the ardent response that Iranian "austerity films" have sparked in festivals should have driven these writers to this conclusion, particularly since the eloquent dialogue of his films was considered by these critics as their prime appeal for the domestic audience, which inevitably was lost in translation.

Both during his life and after, Hatami has been viewed by many as a director with a strong allegiance to Iranian traditions. So especially after his death, his works were declared by many critics as the paramount example of Iranian national cinema. Writers ideologically allied with the Islamic regime, even strived to define a position for his career in opposition to works of other vanguard filmmakers repudiated for being influenced by the West. Despite these attempts, an assessment of the true position of Hatami in relation to tradition, as his films and career jointly show, requires a more complicated description than a simple alliance. Some writers rightly took note of the

intermediate stance Hatami took in relation to tradition and modernity, a position that mirrored the confusion of values and cultures afflicting his own society over the course of its transition to a modern society. His works as a critic puts it “honestly communicated a chaotic identity” (Kaheh 224) characteristic of Iranian society, which in turn placed him in that intermediate position. Throughout this thesis I will show that this middle position not only makes itself explicit through his film’s narratives, but also determines the principles of his style.

In a review of Hatami’s biopic on life of Kamal-ol-Molk¹², the famous Iranian painter of the 19th century who helped introduce western principles into Iranian painting, Robert Safarian draws a speculative analogy between Hatami and this painter by asking the reader whether Hatami faced a similar conundrum of how to bring together new expressive patterns with what he had in hand as his own cultural heritage. (Safarian, “Dor-zadan” 446). I have taken my cue from this question and, by attending in my first chapter to various aspects of his unique style, try to elaborate how his films respond to this conundrum, and how his measured, middle-of-the-road stance led him to reconcile the new foreign medium of cinema with the established traditional and local art forms. The next two chapters will engage with his films at the level of story and character, clarifying the way the arc of his narratives discloses his double sentiments about tradition and as such, supports a correspondence between form and content in his corpus of work.

I will ground my arguments in the context of the grand scale social changes resulting from the process of modernization of the country in the 20th century. In view of the transitional status of Iranian society at this time with regard to modernization and the

¹² *Kamal-ol-Molk* (1984)

circumstances involving Iranian film production with filmmakers more apparently occupying the position of social agents, it is impossible to eschew a discussion of modernity as a force of the utmost magnitude in determining social relations and thereby directors' artistic orientations. Even if plainly perceived in terms of a retreat to pre-modern period, as in certain critical discussions of his films in Iran, the orientation of Hatami's cinema makes sense only in the presence of a driving force pushing in the opposite direction, against which he felt compelled to react. In my study, however, this social background will be used only as a point of entry and a guideline to find a way into the personal vision of the director, and for the purpose of making sense of his style and decoding his narratives, not the other way round.

Chapter One- A study of the fundamental elements of Hatami's style

A- Why look backward?

The introduction of important technologies- including media technologies- sets into motion in the recipient society a string of compensatory reactions that make the novelty subservient to preexisting values and repurpose the technology to meet that society's unique ends. This general observation is more or less applicable to the process of creating a national cinema regardless of the nation in question. In the case of cinema, technological assimilation can take place in more than one register and can range from topic and subjects that speak to the social realities of a certain country to the alteration of aesthetic conventions to conform to local sensibilities.

In the 1960s, a motivation of this nature gained momentum in Iranian cinema. By the end of the decade, it culminated in the birth of what was later baptized as the Iranian New Wave. In assessing the Iranian New Wave, a consideration of the history of filmmaking in Iran is crucial. Feature film production in Iran started in the early 1930s; nevertheless, considering the predicaments faced by filmmaking pioneers as well as the reluctance of the government to offer its support and the ensuing hiatus which lasted till 1948, the delay in genesis of a proper national cinema is not baffling. According to one notion, even commercial Iranian films, which often amounted to imitations of Egyptian, Indian or Turkish movies, were not entirely bereft of a national viewpoint. As Mohammad Tahaminezhad posits, even commercial films demonstrated a level of

resistance¹³ through visual features he refers to as “golden elements” as well as the upholding of a conservative political and sociological point of view (*Royapardaz* 17). These golden elements, as he explains, included an emphasis on visual attraction of femininity which used to be underrepresented in Iranian traditional society, visualized conflicts in form of physical fights and realism (Tahaminezhad, *Royapardaz* 37). Nevertheless the serious attempts that consciously aimed for the establishment of a decent national cinema started around the time when the Shah of Iran was implementing his plans for the overnight transformation of Iranian society in the early 1960s. This forced drastic change provoked a vigorous reaction from both the common people and the intellectuals. One of the most famed discourses of resistance against this trend was penned in 1962 by Jalal-Al-Ahmad, a dissident writer who applied the term of *Westoxication/Gharbzadegi* to decry what in his opinion was an unconditional submission to Western culture. The resistance to modernization was not limited to intellectuals but also spread to artists who by an unwritten rule on many occasions assumed the position of intellectuals in the Third World countries. For instance, a group of Iranian painters and sculptors, known collectively as representatives of the *Saghakhane* school, began to revisit the heritage of traditional culture from which they borrowed visual elements for the creation of their own work. In contrast, reaction from the film industry was slow, chiefly because of the misgivings of the producers about the

¹³ For instance, Naficy identifies a hybrid capacity in operation in films of Samuel Khachikian, a director who earned a name by making crime films in the 1960s that in comparison to other films of the period showed a more serious attempt to approximate the qualities of standard cinema. His films despite featuring characters with Iranian names, had only a vague relation with the social realities of their period. All the same, Naficy believes that his films still strike a note of difference via a combination of “imperfect imitation, exaggeration and mimicry” (Naficy, *Volume 2* 421)

efficiency of the new entrants to the field, while established directors were more concerned about generating revenue through recycling already tested formulas. More alert to social happenings on a grand scale, the fresh talent- some of whom received their education in the West- wished not only to produce films of quality but to connect to the concerns of their contemporaneous society. The attempts by forerunners of Iranian New Wave –Ebrahim Golestan, Farrokh Ghaffari and Fereydoon Rahnama- were all informed by such a desire to lay the groundwork of what could claim the title of national cinema. They hoped to find the best way to reconcile the imported technology with a local vision so that the former could work in the capacity of the “mirror of Iranian society” (Mirbakhtyar 48) and come closer to the domain of Iranian culture. Obviously this was their reaction to the menace of a sweeping social change whose rapidity was believed to be disrupting the identity of the nation.¹⁴

Among the generation of filmmakers associated by critics and film historians with the New Wave of Iranian cinema- which is generally believed to inaugurate following the commercial success of Masoud Kimiai’s *Gheysar* (1969) and the critical plaudits it received together with Dariush Mehrjui’s *The Cow* (1969) - Ali Hatami has been singled out as a director who throughout his career most conspicuously demonstrated a consistent endeavour to define and create a national cinema. He did not simply contend with tending to transformations Iranian society was going through, but also displayed an ambition to interrogate the conventions of cinema and modify them in a way which permitted them to

¹⁴ In fact one of the films made by the abovementioned directors- Rahnama’s *Siavash at Persepolis* (1967) places the issue of loss of identity at its core by offering a new reflexive take on one of the most famous stories of Iranian national epic, *Book of the Kings*. In this film, characters of the original story and their action were reinterpreted in the light of the pressing issues of the time.

be in step with the established principles of the older Iranian visual and theatrical traditions. This obsession underscores his works from his early career as a playwright before he went into filmmaking. In keeping with the cultural zeitgeist of Iran in the 1960s, theatre artists demonstrated their tremendous zeal in reviving the techniques of traditional Iranian theatre. Their enthusiasm should have been fuelled all the more by learning that certain avant-garde Western playwrights, notably Bertolt Brecht had borrowed from Eastern theatrical traditions.¹⁵ Here Hatami followed suit, as can be seen in the brochure published for the stage performance of his play *Harir va Mahigir* (*Silk and the fisherman*, 1965). In this brochure, he declared, in an apparent reference to Brecht, his intention to experiment with the “distantiation” effect. (Eshghi, “Zaman” 50)

By streamlining his talents into the medium of cinema, Hatami accepted a more demanding challenge. As the cinema was basically seen as a visual art, and even the Bazinian openness to sound cinema did not deny the significance of visuals, Hatami in his self-appointed venture had to wrestle with a major obstacle. Unlike in many Western and far-Eastern countries, in Iran the masses had not been exposed to visual culture enough to develop an extensive comprehension of visual language. In characterizing the

¹⁵ This interest however was preceded by a similar disjunction between the new Western theatre and what was known as the traditional theatre, however limited in comparison. The westward policies of the government should take part of, if not all the blame for this. For instance in 1931, Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty had outlawed the traditional theatre of Ta'zieh because of its open use of religion and the theme of rebellion against non-Islamic rulers which it promulgated, and this ban was in force for a number of years (Dabashi 19). Further responsibility for the problem belonged to a group of intellectuals who even went so far to deny the existence of a national theatre. To flaunt their distance from the body of society, they frowned upon the entertainment of the latter group as unworthy of their attention (Beizai, *Namayesh* 208). Bahram Beizai's essential monograph, *Namayesh dar Iran (Theatre in Iran)*, first published in 1965 was in fact itself part of reaction to the presiding negligence.

reaction of uninitiated Iranian spectators to this new visual culture during the first days of film screening in Iran in the early 20th century, Naficy uses the term the “Shock of visuality” that mandated a transition from hitherto predominance of “orality” to a gradual appreciation of visual language (Naficy, *Volume 1* 78). For centuries Iran had been ruled by religious strictures that proscribed images of human likenesses. The ruling classes and well-to-do people allowed painters to illustrate books and other decorative formats whose distribution remained limited to a small circle of the patrons (Dabashi 79). This legacy has been a major concern for Iranian filmmakers including one of the most prominent filmmakers of the New Iranian Cinema, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who believes that the cinema’s visual language has its roots in the conventions of painting, and therefore a lack of familiarity with this language handicaps the spectator’s appreciation (qtd. in Mottahedeh, “Traditions” 180). It has to be said that the Iranian audience- like any other - quickly became familiar with the basic conventions of classic cinema given presumably because of the latter’s origins in universal human perceptual capacities. As long as films’ images were mostly meant to be subservient to the narrative, audience had little trouble in understanding them. The popularity of cinema and growth of film culture are enough to testify to this adaptability.¹⁶ But problem would arise when directors tinkered with these

¹⁶ In a recently published study, the writer – Javad Salimi- makes this claim that cinematic narrative conventions have their parallels in traditional *Pardeh-khani* performances and therefore Iranian could easily familiarize themselves with the new medium of cinema (Salimi 2). Nevertheless, this study fails to achieve its objective and the comparison drawn throughout the book is too loose and ill-defined to underpin a tenable argument. Interestingly, Salimi picked up *Siavash at Persepolis* as the case for his study. But ironically this film, which Salimi argues to be influenced by techniques borrowed from *Pardeh-khani*, was completely ignored by common Iranian cinemagoers and ended up a commercial failure as a result of its director’s artistic ambitions. Therefore, even if Salimi’s parallel was pictured in a convincing manner, it would

conventions by assigning further agency to the image on the basis of a different set of visual principles that do not fully correspond to the Western patterns. Hatami was aware of this problem and the fact that stream of images fed through cinema, although comprehensible for the audience, was different from his/her unique visual culture that yet to be developed. His comments regarding this problem were in agreement with observation of Makhmalbaf- as a director making films with more international appeal- when he explained:

[...] we do not have images of our past, because we did not have a tradition of [figurative] painting in that sense. Whatever was depicted on carpets and domes were metaphysical imagery. [...] Our people have not seen the image of their past and therefore do not have the right idea about it. Instead they are familiar with Western people and their relations. In consequence, the image that has been offered to the spectator is the image of the other (Nematollah 25).

These expressed concerns in conjunction with Hatami's own career of stylistic innovation intimate that in his view the prerequisite of a bona fide portrayal of Iranian life lies in the development of a unique style, a gruelling undertaking in itself due to the absence of an extensive visual heritage that would otherwise inspire new solutions.

One prevalent feature of Hatami's work throughout his career was his ostensible preoccupation with the past, in which the majority of his films are set. Even those set in the contemporary times unmistakably showcase signs of a bygone era. His fixation with the past seems to be more focused on a certain period, namely the 19th and early 20th century, when Iran was governed by the Qajar dynasty (1785- 1925). One should not lose

contradict its claim about the role of such similarities in the rapid spread of cinema in Iran.

sight of the fact that the same period hosted consequential encounters between Iranian society and Western culture. In fact the history of European emissaries sent to Persia goes well back to the time of Safavids, a dynasty in power between 16th and early 18th centuries that unified the country and retrieved the national sovereignty following the age of Mogul rulers. Nonetheless until the Qajar era, the encounter with the West did not seem to sway the social values and life of the common people, since its impact was mostly limited to governments and their foreign policies. There is also an autobiographical side to Hatami's obsession with this period, for he recalls a childhood sojourn at the old mansion of a family with aristocratic background during a period of infirmity, where he was also asked by another inmate to make stories for her entertainment. The indelible effect of this brief chapter in his life, as he himself acknowledged, proved important to his later works as a filmmaker ("Ravi" 29). This however was later blended with the other impulses among the younger generation of artists, who called for a return to origins, and this seems to have a determining role on Hatami's filmmaking. Aside from the personal fascination, Hatami himself stressed the importance of Qajar era as a limbo period in which the legendary past clashed with the modern world of rationalism. In an interview in 1988 he asserted: "During the Qajar era, our national identity underwent a transformation. Our way of dressing, speaking...everything changed" (qtd. in Farrokhzad 72). However, he adds that this modernization project misfired because the transfiguration took place only on the surface. Throughout his films, Hatami displays a strong preoccupation with modernization. Unlike many of his colleagues he did not simply focus on the current conflict of values- and consequently was criticized for ignoring the social issues. Instead, he used his camera

as a time machine to take his audience back to interrogate a foundational moment of loss. This temporally backward journey was not limited to the choice of historical subject matter and its sociological implications, but involved the structure of media itself. For Hatami, the new medium of cinema belonged to the already mentioned process of modernization and had its basis in a passive acceptance of technology along with its attached principles. Looked another way, Hatami can be said to have invited the spectator to engage in time travel, while himself emulating the role of the artist who at a critical moment accomplishes his historical role. To borrow Beizai's words in his eulogy, he invested his vigour and talents in "identifying and re-inscribing the abundance of the lost images from a world that existed prior to his birth" ("Moallem" 34). Although Beizai described the intention underlying this attempt as "to offset the annihilation," I argue that Hatami's filmmaking involved more than salvaging the country's imperilled heritage. It also included an attempt to create a new grammar out of this preserved legacy. Through this chapter, I will show how Hatami's concept of a national cinema is rooted in this historic lacuna between old and new media which he tried to bridge, and how the limitations attributed to his cinema have their origins from this mediatory function.

Hatami's presentation of the turbulent era of Qajar did not please many critics who found his sugar-coated imagery of the past- achieved by dint of his meticulous attention to the setting and costumes, as well as his tableaux-style mise-en-scène- a betrayal of historical reality and a dubiously "positive and partial interpretation of feudal culture and values" (Eshghi, "Shabah" 211). An avid history researcher can easily find facts that belie Hatami's version of history and clearly see that in truth, the Qajar era was an unfortunate period in Iranian history as a result of the incompetence of

the rulers as well as the rivalry of imperialist forces in expanding of their area of influence. No one denies, however, that the same period allowed intellectuals to get wind of Western ideas of freedom and equality, which culminated in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907), as well as the arrival of the latest cultural phenomena including motion pictures. Nevertheless Hatami depicts a more positive image of the period. For example his films suggests that the Qajar rulers and the politicians had supported the period's artists, a view that downplays the rulers' corrupt nature¹⁷.

All the same, Hatami's fascination with the past was totally different from that of a historian. He makes no bones about his intent to set the positive traits of the putatively tyrant Qajar rulers into relief. A good case in point is Nassereddin Shah (1831- 1896), the fourth king of the Qajar dynasty who was assassinated just when getting ready to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his ascent to the throne. According to Mohammad Mehdi Dadgoo, the executive producer who collaborated with Hatami on several projects, Nassereddin Shah was one of Hatami's favourite characters (100).¹⁸ Although an absolute monarch, his artistic side brought him into contact with photography as an art form and led him to set up an atelier in the court, where, in the spirit of a dedicated artist he even took on the duty of developing the photos himself (Dadgoo 100). It seems that the same conflicting aspects that marked the character of the king surrounds Hatami feelings about the past.

¹⁷ For example *The Love-Stricken* (1991)- one of the films to be discussed in this chapter-showcases such a purified representation by putting all the blame for the failure of the mission on the devious French man, whereas the minister is pictured as a musician and the Iranian ambassador in Paris does everything in his authority to support the mission of the group (Eshghi, "Shabah" 217).

¹⁸ Not surprisingly, Hatami made a TV series about this king – *Soltan-e Sahebgharan* (1974)- that more or less presented a relatable picture of this historical figure.

There was another aspect of Nassereddin Shah's reign that squares well with Hatami's preoccupation with the transition to the modern world. In fact, part of the king's historical role stems from his status as the first Iranian monarch who had embarked on journeys to Europe¹⁹ and jotted down his observations in his diary. The direct exposure of the royal court to Western civilization led to drastic changes in the Iranian visual arts. Aside from the flourish of photography in the royal court- as I already mentioned the consumers of the visual arts for a long time were confined to the highest ranks of society- the reign of Nassereddin Shah brought about a renaissance in traditional painting in response to the limitations of royal art. Painters began directing their attention away from the court and towards the more ordinary subjects of life, albeit in a rather cautious fashion. Again, this bears a similarity with Hatami's concoction of history from popular accounts of the period. A contributing factor to the Nassereddin Shah-era stylistic transformation was the advent of photography and its astounding ability to reproduce scenes from the real life. As such, photography provoked the painters of the era to call up all their talents to challenge the new mechanically reproduced images in depicting everyday life (Meskoob, "Tamayoz" 4). The new technology also spared them from the duty of recording events at royal court (Diba 239). This history therefore testifies to a productive interaction between old and new media, ostensibly missing in the case of cinema.

Here it seems necessary to describe the specific features of Hatami's style before trying to elaborate on how his films are nurtured by artistic traditions. This chapter presents an analysis of two films from Hatami's rich career that illuminates the evolution

¹⁹ In 1873, 1878 and 1889.

of his cinematic language and underscores the consistencies in style that earned him the status of a veritable auteur. Central to this are the similarities between the tenets of his style and those of the visual and theatrical traditions superseded by the new technology. The films that I have chosen for the purpose of my discussion include *Baba Shamal* (1972) a quasi-musical²⁰ Hatami made early in his career, and his last completed film²¹, *The Love-Stricken/Delshodegan* (1992), which also has music at its centre. A joint study of these films will highlight the evolution of Hatami's style and the elements whose persistence throughout his career forged his distinctive signature. *The Love-Stricken* was made at a time when Hatami spoke confidently about the peculiarity of his style and, not followed by any other feature length film in his career, can be viewed as the apogee of his approach. By the time he made this film, critics had fully developed their commonplace critique of his works. By choosing as a focus *Baba Shamal* from the earlier part of his career, my intention is to show consistency in Hatami's corpus of work and to demonstrate that, contrary what some critics have claimed, there is no substantial break in his style before and after the 1979 revolution. I do not intend to deny the impact of the revolution on his career, but instead want to reveal aspects of his style that predated the religious regime and carried over to the post-revolutionary years, appearing in its most refined state in his ultimate film. *Baba Shamal* and *The Love-Stricken* are also among works whose narratives more or less pale in significance and the style is instead foregrounded instead. Hence these two films are apt candidates for studying the form

²⁰ As I will discuss its style further in this chapter, it would become clearer why "musical" is an inappropriate term to describe this film. A better descriptive term might be "rhythmical" which was also used in its publicity material.

²¹ He died during the shooting of his last project, *Takhti: the Hero of the World* (1996), of which only about one third (50 minutes) was shot.

Hatami strived to cultivate throughout his career. That being said, I will not refrain from bringing up examples from his other films and projects throughout.

Hatami created *Baba Shamal* following the critical and commercial success of his first feature film, *Hassan the Bald* (1970), hoping to produce another hit this time by casting three big superstars of Iranian cinema. Thus in some sense, *Baba Shamal* resembles an expansion on the structure of the earlier film. The main storyline is built around a male friendship thwarted by the love for the same woman. The titular character (played by Mohammad Ali Fardin) is the tough-guy patron of a quarter who manages to placate Luti Heydar (Nasser Malek Motii), the head of the adjacent neighbourhood, who is enraged by the dalliance in his territory by a man dressed in Western-style attire from Baba Shamal's quarter. The men broker a brotherhood pact that leads Baba Shamal to look up to Luti Heydar as his mentor. However, Baba Shamal later marries Shokat (Foroozan), a girl with whom Heydar was once in love. Heydar tries to conceal his inner feelings, but people who find his presence a hurdle to their sensual exploits, make Baba Shamal privy to his secret. The verbal confrontation between the offended Baba Shamal and Heydar ends with the latter stabbing himself with his machete, only to prove his faithfulness to their oath. Physically and emotionally injured, Heydar shuts himself off in his place, while his underlings take over. Lacking his noble character, these underlings start bullying people, provoking Baba Shamal to take action by fighting them, while Shokat goes to Luti Heydar and pleads with him to intervene. Her insistence pays off and Heydar returns back to the alleys and after regaining the control of his men, reconciles with Baba Shamal.

Unlike *Baba Shamal*, which does not reference a specific time, the story of *The Love-Stricken* is set in a particular historical period and, in fact, was partly inspired by a true event. In *The Love-Stricken*, Hatami sketches the journey of a group of traditional musicians in the early 20th century during the reign of the last Qajar king, invited by the representative of a French company to visit Paris and have their music recorded. Following farewell sequences, the musicians find themselves in Paris only to find things do not go according to what they imagined. The French company backs out, and the group begins to run out of money. The leader of the group has to sell his own property in order to cover the expenses. Meanwhile a love affair blossoms between Taher, the singer and a blind Turkish princess residing nearby. The group manages to hold a concert, but is forced to compromise by omitting singing from their programme. Yearning to meet his beloved, the tuberculosis-ridden singer starts singing outside the concert hall, while the princess, aware of his presence, rushes out to meet him at his last breath. The group, mournful over the loss of their friend, leave France on a ship, but the ship is shelled by the enemy- Germans- and sinks into the sea taking the recording with it.

B- Composition

One striking feature of Hatami's pictures that makes them stand out visually is the use of certain techniques not very common among his colleagues. As I will explain, these techniques serve to establish his intended line of continuity between traditional art and relatively new medium of cinema. The difference of his mise-en-scène from other Iranian directors is so pronounced that in case of a film like *Jafar Khan Has Returned From the West* (1984-8), from which some parts were omitted and replaced by scenes shot by

another director in order to pass the censorship board, the informed spectator would have no problem in identifying which scenes are from the original version simply by paying attention to the way the scene has been arranged. The balanced compositions, abundance of long shots, mostly- though not exclusively- static camera work, and the right angle the camera assumes to the scene became at once his trademarks and the pretext for his critics to claim that his style exists far from the territory of cinema. In fact, no other director – at least in Iranian cinema- had used the camera in a full frontal position to the scene with as much perseverance.²² In interviews, Hatami admitted to this strange preference: “In choosing the camera angle, I try to assume a full frontal position and do not put my camera in an angle [...] either horizontally or vertically to the scene” (qtd. in Heydari 126). As it seems, the frontal staging that Hatami knowingly adopted has been a legacy of Iranian traditional performing arts which tend to display “the entire action like a tableau to observing viewers” (Naficy *Volume 2* 246).

There seems to be a level of exaggeration to Hatami’s description. Perhaps frontality was a choice he gradually decided should dominate the main orientation of his camera. From time to time his films show images taken from oblique angles, including high and low angles. Nonetheless these angled shots were more frequent in the earlier part of his career. In *Baba Shamal* for instance, there are numerous low and high angle shots including the beginning sequence, when Luti Heydar abruptly arrives to catch *fokoli*- the capricious guy in western attire- red-handedly trying to seduce a girl (Still 1), and at the very end of this scene the camera frames Heydar from a very low angle, to

²² I do not claim the majority of shots in his films are taken from a perpendicular angle to the scene. The number of scenes taken from this angle varies from film to film. But generally speaking the recurrence of this type of camera placement, which is common in Hatami’s work, cannot be seen among the works of other directors.

show him unaware of *fokoli* hiding directly above him on top of the vaulted alley (Still 2). It seems that in the earlier part of his career, Hatami was inclined to use this kind of imagery more frequently to pinpoint moments of tension.²³ Interestingly some of the camera angles look more exaggerated than those used in films with a more conventional mise-en-scène (like the abovementioned closing image in the first sequence of *Baba Shamal*)²⁴. The frequency of these “perverse” shots- considering Hatami’s trademark imagery- dwindles as his career approaches its abrupt end, so that in *The Love-Stricken* the only outstanding use of high angle shots occurs with the arrival of musicians at the circular courtyard in front of the recording studio. This style choice could be also attributed to the slower- or more transcendental- rhythm of the film- which was dictated by its spiritually-driven plot and the fact that here Hatami stripped his narrative from any physical tension and strife. But in general the maturation of Hatami’s style entailed positioning the camera in ways that brought his images closer to traditional Iranian painting. Hatami’s unique mise-en-scène was unmistakably informed by the principles of traditional painting, as if he had taken the task of revolutionizing painting in a way different from the painters of the Nasserī period,²⁵ by adding the element of cinematic motion.

²³ The application of this angle was interpreted by some critics as signaling the overwhelming presence of fate, a theme that emerges frequently in Hatami’s cinema. (Amini, “Hamahangi” 295). Hatami however sometimes used this during scenes that picture traditional dances or ceremonies (Robabeh’s dance for Mirza in *Baba Shamal* or the bride grooming for the wedding in *Towghi* (1970).

²⁴ The use of horizontally oblique shots is more prominent during the scene where Baba Shamal move with his bride and their entourage towards his own quarter, while Luti Heydar men chase them and Luti himself tries to protect the group and prevent the break up of a fight.

²⁵ Nassereddin Shah’s time in power (1831-1896)

Although Hatami's growing proclivity for levelling the disparity between paintings and the images of his movies reached its apogee in *The Love-Stricken*, this characteristic of style was already evident at the very beginning of his career. *Baba Shamal* starts with an introductory sequence in which a rhymed text describes the denizens of an unclarified city sometime in the past. This voice-over accompanies a series of old-style paintings - though less elegant than the renowned Persian miniatures- over which the camera slithers and identifies the various city residents named by the narrator. In fact, this chapter resembles a reworking – or expansion – of the opening of Hatami's first feature *Hassan the Bald*, whereas his next film, *Ghalandar* (1972)- in a gesture that anticipates director's shift away from telling stories set in an uncertain past and towards those which evoke a specific historical period- features titles flowing over a series of images that offer a more realistic and historically accurate rendition of the past. For the most part, the camera in this opening chapter of *Baba Shamal* follows the rhymed description of a city and its inhabitants shrouded in the dust of time as it pans across the images to capture the mentioned subject. In at least one case, the camera exceeds its duty of merely showing the faces by adding action to the scenery mimicking the action suggested by the voice-over: when the lyrics speak about the lovers' Friday night's pleasures, the camera in simulation of a sexual rhythm zooms in and out on the image of a couple.²⁶

The Love-Stricken presents another instance of the blending of painting with the film footage. Following the scene of the musicians at the port, preparing to depart and bidding farewell to Khosrow Khan- the member of the group who decides to remain and

²⁶ Later in the film, Hatami once more applies the zoom in relation to a sexual theme, a scene that I will address later.

study playing piano- it fades out and then fades in to a painting that depicts a capsized ship. The camera then zooms back to show the gramophone disks floating on the waves, and then tilts down on the painting to frame one single disk on the shore along with the poetic icons of a flower and a nightingale, and with this image the director terminates his film (Stills 3, 4, 5 and 6). Hatami, who had to produce the film himself, was obviously unable to shoot the actual ship accident on account of the budget shortage. In fact it was one of Hatami's assets to be able to create a full feature out of material that might look insufficient to other directors.²⁷ Nevertheless this creative replacement is consistent not only with the visual style of his film, but also with his previously demonstrated inclination to define his cinema as mediation between old and new cultural forms. The recourse to painting is less confounding than it might seem, since the described scene is not the sole invocation of the actual paintings in this film. The very opening image of *The Love-Stricken* shows a drawing of a pair of nightingales (Still 7) that dissolves into a close-up of two mechanical nightingales in a clockwork contraption. Hence in tandem with the closing image, this opening shot creates a full circle of painting-inspired imagery. Furthermore Hatami from time to time shuffles a painted portrait of the Turkish princess with a flower and nightingale within the images of his film. In fact, we are first shown her likeness accompanied by the singing of Taher, just before dissolving into the shot of her descending stairs in search of the source of the song (Stills 8 and 9). The same pattern is repeated in the next encounter between the singing Taher and the princess. Finally, in the concert scene, when the princess notices the Taher's absence, her painted portrait is shown in a shot in which the camera moves from her eyes to her ears. Next

²⁷ I will revisit this capacity of being resourceful on a restricted budget in Chapter Three, when discussing the production of *Haji Washington* (1982).

comes a long shot of concert hall superimposed on a close-up of the princess' portrait, all to intimate that she takes note of Taher singing outside (Stills 10, 11 and 12). Here the insertion of the painting, whose poetic and re-emerging figures of the nightingale and the rose effortlessly position the princess in the terrain of ethereal love, works beautifully in a film in which love is presented mostly in a transcendental and spiritual sense that could be interchangeably applied to the music and people.

The combination of the painting and the film footage was earlier used in *Baba Shamal* albeit in a conspicuously more carnal capacity. When Baba Shamal takes Shokat to their conjugal bed, Hatami begins with a shot of them foreplaying and then gradually zooms back to reveal a Western-style painting of Eve taking the apple from the snake to offer it to Adam, while the cut-out apple shows the couple now occupying only a tiny fraction of the composition (Stills 13 and 14). As the above examples suggest, Hatami does not simply include the paintings in a decorative spirit; he assigns them a dynamic and meaningful function to complement his tableaux-style imagery.

Aside from the frontal presentation of scenes, Hatami's mise-en-scène stimulates analogies with painting in other ways. For one thing, the profusion of traditional items within the frame competes with the actors for the viewer's attention, thus making the viewer more prone to respond to these images as re-enacted paintings. To top it all, the symmetry of his compositions coupled with an oft-static camera approximates a certain visual language predominant in Iranian traditional painting. Even films such as *Ghalandar* that include many shots taken by a camera positioned obliquely to the scene, represent a strong penchant for symmetrical compositions (Stills 15 and 16).

What is more, Hatami shows a preference for dividing the frame to provide actors with equal spaces. Occasionally the architecture of the location allows him literally to split his shots into equal compartments and create virtual diptychs or triptychs. *Baba Shamal* provides an early indication of this tendency in Hatami's visual style that flowers in his later works. In a scene similar to a montage sequence, Hatami uses the split screen to pair up the characters, so that we can see both the speaker and the person he or she thinks or complains about together in the same frame (Stills 17, 18 and 19). Hatami never again used this technique with the same boldness; instead in his later films he focused his experiments on the properties of the settings to create a similar effect. *Baba Shamal* features this use of the set design during the conversation between Baba Shamal and Shokat on their wedding night is framed behind a window that at times places them in two separate framings (Still 20). Also in the foregoing montage sequence, the image of Robabeh and Mirza in which their split is again created by set design (Still 21) is inserted between the series of split-screen images. We see a variation of this technique in the scene in which Luti, after escorting the wedding procession to Baba Shamal's quarter, dwells on his memories of his old love. Here Hatami uses a flashback image of Luti's encounter with Eshrat in which the two stand on opposite sides of the *Saghakhane*, while the middle space is allocated to a decorative religious drawing that separates them (Still 22).

In *The Love-Stricken*, this tendency to divide the frame is most apparent where Nasser Khan- the *kamanche* player- discusses his journey with his wife and brother-in-law. Here, as they sit outside the building, the actors almost occupy the same plane, with columns dividing the frame equally into three spaces, each allotted to one character. The

same order is replicated in the last image of their flashback, as Nasser and his wife sit on the opposite ends of a table separated by a window with parted curtains in the background where the brother-in-law can be seen playing the violin (Stills 23 and 24). Here the shallow depth of field – often criticized in his films- helps create this triptych impression.

Hatami's interest in maintaining the symmetry of his images makes two-shots a plausible aesthetic option for constituting a pleasing balance of the two characters. In opting for this strategy, Hatami swerves from the conventions of the conversation sequence by abandoning a tactic many directors readily adopt. While his earlier films include over-the-shoulder shots (Still 25), by the time of *The Love-Stricken* he has altogether excluded such shots from his range of options. In this film, conversations are rendered through a medley of two-shots and tighter single shots connected through eye-line matches, without any over-the-shoulder shots whatsoever. *Baba Shamal* sports sporadic use of over-the-shoulder shots, as in the scene showing the distressed Shokat in Heydar's place, but altogether its application is very limited and seems like the remnants of the habitual language that the filmmaker is bent on abandoning.²⁸

The meetings between Baba Shamal and Luti Heydar in *Baba Shamal* are instructive in uncovering the roots of the idiosyncratically balanced composition that manifestly marked Hatami's films towards the end of his career. Their first confrontation consists of an ample number of two shots where Heydar and Baba Shamal stand on opposite sides of the screen –at one point, even crossing the frame to swap their places-

²⁸ Comparing the shots added by Motevasselani to *Jafar Khan az farang bargashteh* with the rest of the scenes is again illustrative of Hatami's dismissive stance towards over-the-shoulder framings in conversation scenes. (Stills 26 and 27)

as they deliver their lines, separated by the entrance to the alley in the centre of the background (Stills 28, 29 and 30). Later when Baba Shamal tries to dissuade the lovelorn Heydar from leaving town, the dialogue ends in a two shot where a tree assumes the role of separator, until Luti Heydar decorates Baba Shamal with his machete as a token of their brotherhood (Stills 31 and 32).

The Love-Stricken also features several conversation shots with actors arranged in a way that renders the application of over-the-shoulder shots an improbable choice for the tighter shots that follow. In these instances the characters- once more in a nod to the presumably static arts of painting and photography- both face the camera as they speak. They might be situated in different depths, as in the beginning of the conversation between Taher and his nanny (Still 33); yet the full frontal placement of both camera and actors lessens the effect of depth to some extent. Contrary to what might be assumed, this kind of staging is not limited to the scenes taking place in Iran and finds its way into the second part of film, set (supposedly) in Paris. One scene that easily stands out is the private conversation between Monsieur Julie and the Iranian ambassador, where they sit side by side and face the camera (Still 34).

It does not take a lot of effort to discern the symmetry as a distinctive and dominant feature of Iranian painting until the principles of western schools of art took hold in the late 19th century.²⁹ The inclination towards a symmetrical design was fundamental not only to the Iranian painting but to other arts such as architecture and carpet-weaving (Meskoob, “Darbare” par23). Carpet-weaving is perhaps relevant to this

²⁹ In his article, *Darbare-ye honar-e naghashi-e Qajar*, Meskoob enumerates some examples of paintings displaying one figure and more with symmetrically balanced framing.

discussion since in one of his last interviews following the screening of *The Love-Stricken* Hatami likened his filmmaking to the weaving of carpets. By taking the visual style of Hatami's films as described above into account, one can see the lengths he took to emulate the traditional pictorial form. In point of fact, according to Tahaminezhad, Iranian filmmakers frequently resorted to this principal for staging scenes: "Iranian cinema abounds with the symmetrical composition chosen merely for the sake of creating balance in the frame" (*Royapardaz* 75). Hatami however was perhaps the only director employing this principle to the hilt and with the intent of conceiving a national cinema.³⁰

While the images of Hatami's films might be perceived and defined as two dimensional, it does not mean that he placed all the action on a single horizontal plane. Consider, for example, the conversation scene between the minister and his diminutive servant in *The Love-Stricken*, in which they are respectively placed in foreground and the depth of the image (Still 35). In *Baba Shamal*, the scene that best represents Hatami's use of interaction between foreground and background is the courtship ceremony in which Mirza, who is sitting midway between Shokat and her mother on one side and Baba Shamal and his men on the other, could be seen in the foreground of both groups so as to stress his mediatory role, as well as to clarify the position of the two groups, which are otherwise entirely separated as a result of frontal shots, in relation to each other (Stills 36

³⁰ Unlike what one would conjecture, symmetrical composition was not a technique used by Hatami only in the context of historical narratives, but could also inform scenes taking place in contemporary settings. Aside from *Mother/Madar* (1990) which despite being set in contemporary time, places its characters in an old house with traditional architecture, a brief excerpt from Hatami's unaccomplished script, *The Last Prophet*, about Mohammed's life also displays this tendency. In a scene that takes place in the present day, the description is as follows: " from the image of viewfinder of TV Camera, the camera tracks back and at the end, TV technical crew are shown to the right and the presenters to the left side of Ka'ba. (Hatami, *Majmooe* 2:1332).

and 37).³¹ The wedding scene provides us with another example of Hatami's use of action in depth. As Baba Shamal and Shokat sit in the foreground and while a woman, according to custom, scrubs cones of sugar over them, we see through the windows in the depth of the image a group of male servants in the back room who start snapping, turning around and dancing with their trays. Later they are shown in tighter shots but still involving multi-plane staging (Still 38). Therefore, contrary to the well-seated view of Hatami as the creator of flat images, his films reveal his flair in creating dynamic relationships between foreground and background. This effect, however, is played down as a consequence of the frontal neutral position of his camera. Altogether it seems that in Hatami's style the use of depth is overshadowed by the lateral staging. But the latter is by no means less worthy of discussion. Relevant here is David Bordwell's criticism of Rohmer's exaggerated conviction about deep staging as the true meaning of mise-en-scene. Bordwell acknowledges that lateral staging equally provides the artist with a chance to envision a creative mise-en-scenes: "Deep or shallow, cinematic staging relies on a perspectival projection of space" (*Figures 16*)

Paintings of the Qajar era- especially those from the first part of this period- are characterized by their static quality. As Meskoob notes: "comprehension of motion is barely visible in the official Qajar paintings." ("Tamayoz" 3) Hatami's films were the frequent recipients of similar criticism against what was described as their static visuals.³²

³¹ In fact the presence of Mirza in the foreground, saves the scene from becoming a simple verbatim of its earlier counterpart in *Hassan the Bald*.

³² While Hatami's camerawork has been broadly branded as static, there are instances in his career that represent a different tendency. In *Mother*, Hatami's penultimate feature film, an ample number of tracking and panning shots are included. As *Mother* was set for the most part in an old house, the incorporation of camera movement can be seen as determined by the architecture of the location and the limited spaces of the rooms, as

Hatami himself acknowledged his preference for intentionally eschewing camera movements, remarking: “I am aware that some scenes could be taken by a tilt, pan or tracking shot, but at times I avoid these camera movements and look for my own way” (Rohani, “Ghali” 68). As his films reveal, the personal way for him was synonymous with an alternative that better complied with the traditional aesthetics. Meskoob locates the essence of the aesthetics of Qajar-era painting in “their glamour and eye-candy elegance” which visualizes “ideal beauty.” Further, “in using colour, the painter is not intent on imitating nature, but seeks unadulterated (ideal) visual pleasure. Therefore the aesthetics of these painting lie in their eye-pleasing compositions, their visual pleasure and their decorative aspect” (Meskoob, “Tamayoz” 6). Isn’t this description redolent of complaints about Hatami’s evocation of the past, his divorce from the contemporary society, and his distortion of history? At least one anecdotal quote from Hatami shows how comfortable he was with this quality. He recalled that Amir Naderi³³ once told him that his film, *The Desiderium/Sootedelan* (1977), had been compared to as a crème caramel! But Hatami did not take this amiss. In his opinion “It is a very nice definition that sits well with my initial intention” (Hatami, “Jostojoo” 64). Hatami’s meticulous creation of pleasing colour palettes for his films is also reflected in choice of costumes. For instance in describing his experience on *The Love-Stricken*- one of his films most criticized for its artificial beauty- Hatami explains: “I chose colours [for costumes] in a way that ensure they match in scenes with two or three people. I have thought about this

compared to the spacious Qajar palaces. Regardless, it gives a clear indication that camera movement was still a possibility among Hatami’s directorial decisions.

³³ Naderi is an Iranian filmmaker who started his career in cinema as a still photographer and worked at this position on Hatami’s *Hassan the Bald*.

composition, how these characters and their background and designs of carpets and colours of the walls are positioned together³⁴ (Hatami, “Lebasi” 19).

There is another important point about the Iranian traditional painting and how it was influenced by Western aesthetics. The convergence of the two styles of painting started more than a century prior to the Qajar period through the works of a group of painters whose style is known as *Farangi-sazi*. The most prominent figure in this movement was Mohammad Zaman. By virtue of their partially executed perspective and their similarities with European naturalist and realist painting, Zaman’s work stands somewhere between the traditional Iranian painting and Western painting, where traces of both schools coexist harmoniously. While Zaman- unlike painters in the Qajar court- had swerved from the convention of registering ideal faces and bodies and instead embraced realist impulses, his work still carries an Eastern imprint evident in various ways including the composition, the poses of the figures, and the sentiments imparted. Additionally, Zaman typically adorned the background of his paintings with decorative elements commonly used in traditional paintings (Azhand 226). Hatami’s reconfiguration of cinematic tools could be seen as an attempt of a similar nature, but executed differently. Iranian painters embraced the Western system of painting in particular ways:

By replicating European paintings, Iranian artists of this period [Qajar] were not only experimenting with styles, methods and approaches, but were in essence striving to come to terms with their ambiguous relationship with Europe and redefine themselves within a changing global system (Ekhtiar 59).

³⁴ At the same time he did not approve of an extravagant use of colour. When a colleague showed him parts of his own TV series that took place during the Qajar period, Hatami objected finding the colours too lurid to correspond to that historical era (Nikpoor par 11).

Even though charged with a similar ambition, Hatami's negotiation with the medium apparently counters this trend, as he knowingly avoided imitation in favour of forging a new set of rules that enabled him to define his unique position on the map of world cinema.

Insofar as Hatami's struggle recuperated the traditional aesthetics and re-inscribed them into the film medium, one might wonder why this project drew him closer to a static art like painting and not to a more dynamic or dramatic art. In fact this affinity with painting invited criticism and his innovations have been deemed futile, because they were perceived as aberrations in light of the customary idea of cinema as an inextricably dynamic art.³⁵ This conviction springs from a line of thought that in addition to viewing cinema as an art governed by certain strict rules, draws a solid line of separation between film and older pictorial practices. Following this notion, the static nature of the traditional visual arts hinders their assimilation to the principles of cinema. Hatami, however, contested this idea, insisting that a still camera would be more conducive to the registration of the quintessence of Iranian life. Saeed Nikpoor, an actor who collaborated on *Soltan-e Sahebgharan* and *The Desiderium* recounts that Hatami's response to this criticism was to point to the unchanging landscape of the street and argue that such a stillness defines the rhythm of Iranian life, unlike the dynamic camerawork his colleagues used in their films (Nikpoor par12). Moreover, Hatami's investment in the principles of an ostensibly static form is less baffling when one considers the dialectic between static imagery and dramatic presentation which underlies a number of theatrical traditions known to Iranians before the advent of the seventh art.

³⁵ See Amir Poorya's review of *The Love-Stricken* for instance (Poorya, 79).

C- An updated *Shahr-e Farang*

A general overview of Hatami's output easily unravels his studious effort to create a kind of film that neatly corresponds to the sensibilities of his own society. It began with, but was not limited to, his choice of stories in the first place. Nevertheless for Hatami the way in which the story is presented should resonate with the cultural memory of the domestic audience. Given the dynamic nature of cinema, its reconciliation with the aesthetics of older forms was a central issue for Hatami, who assumed the role of the historical mediator in his effort to envision a national cinematic language. Given this, it is not surprising that his works frequently demonstrate an obsession with the relationship between still and moving images, as if he were interrogating the true nature of cinema and its very fundament of generating motion out of stasis. By seeing him in the light of the mission he undertook, this curious scrutiny simply complements his portrayal as an artist concerned with origins of his art. Hatami's revisionary approach to history, which entailed the rejection of the official version, is in this way echoed in his artistic career, for in another act of historical heresy, he tries to usurp the position of his forerunners so as to reorient the national cinema towards a path had to be taken long ago.

The inaccurate reconstruction of the past in Hatami's films could be an invariable result of the ambivalent temporality the director implicitly assigns to himself. It is also defined by Negar Mottahedeh as a kind of ahistoricity in line with the nature of his mission (Mottahedeh, *Representing* 198). She however goes as far as see Hatami's *The Love-Stricken* as a heavily self-reflexive work, in which the musicians' mission is but a historically displaced image of director's own endeavours to sow the seeds of a national

cinema: “As a film preoccupied with the processes involved in production and inscription of sound and national representation, *Delshodegan* forwards a reflection on its own process of production, that is, on what Metz refers to as filmic enunciation” (*Representing* 203). This thrown-up parallel nonetheless has a major limitation: The musicians of the film are simply hoping to have their music registered on records in order to preserve it and make it more accessible to the larger public. Therefore technology here is mainly seen as a tool of distribution. Hatami’s engagement with technology went beyond that. Although his mission included preserving the traces of gradually disappearing artefacts and traditions and document them on the supposedly durable format by taking advantage of what Bazin saw as cinema’s unique ontological capacity, the technology he dealt with gave birth to a new form of art and was not solely used as a passive equipment for recording existing material. Hatami took on the more serious challenge of neutralizing a new medium possessing a language already developed in another culture, as well as reconfiguring a unique national grammar for it by drawing on the cultural legacy of his nation. However, for the musicians in *The Love-Stricken*, the form had almost reached perfection and –at least in the context of the film- did not necessarily need any metamorphosis. Contrary to his film’s characters, Hatami -who started making films in the late 60s when Iranian cinema had been established as a sustainable industry- had access to the technological tools, but felt a need to discover a distinct language. Mottahedeh insinuatingly relegates Hatami’s camera to the level of a recording machine, a conviction not dissimilar to that of critics who see his work simply as a compendium of images salvaging the past. The difference is that Mottahedeh isolates *The Love-Stricken* from the rest of Hatami’s corpus and thus ignores that Hatami’s

struggle to make “films without models, films that are genuinely national” (Mottahedeh, *Representing* 198) had predated *The Love-Stricken* by two decades at least.

But where does this exploration of the past take Hatami? The answer is suggested in his films, and most significantly in the opening image of his very first feature, *Hassan the Bald*. The film begins with the image of a contraption towards which the camera tracks, while the narrator starts to deliver the introductory rhymed lines.³⁶ The impression is that Hatami is inviting us into his world through the agency of this contraption. The machine, called *Shahr-e Farang* –literally translated as “the Western city” or “the European city”³⁷ - is nothing but a mobile peeping show machine once popular in Iran. According to Issari, *Shahr-e Farang*

[...] was a peephole box, measuring approximately three by three by two feet, set on four legs that were about four feet [in] height [...] Each box had three peepholes with big magnifying glasses. Inside a roll of related pictures was wound on two wheels, and the owner, who generally had a pleasing voice, explained the picture as he wound them through the box, one after another (43).

Similar to other proto-cinema entertainments, *Shahr-e Farang* was based on providing its audience with visual attractions, in this case “ a series of pictures of foreign towns and famous historical personages who lived there, or pictures of tales from folklore

³⁶ *Hassan the Bald* was adapted from a play Hatami had written and taken to the stage earlier in April 1969. However, this opening recitation did not come from the play version. (Mir Mohammadi 21)

³⁷ “Foreign towns” is Issari’s translation for this term, but “Farang” in this phrase originally means France and has been commonly in use to refer to any European or by extrapolation, Western country.

or fables popular with the Iranians” (Issari, 43-44).³⁸ The main features of this machine- the sequential paintings with accompanying sound to explicate the images- suggests that it was no coincidence that the inaugural image of Hatami’s body of work presents the same contraption. It is as though he is inviting the viewer to peep at the images- this time images belonging to the past- shown through his own cinematic version of *Shahr-e Farang*. The use of *Shahr-e Farang* does not remain limited to the more fairy-tale world of *Hassan the Bald*. In Chapter Three, I will discuss how he integrated this peepshow machine into the narrative of his biopic about the first Iranian ambassador to the United States, *Haji Washington*. Hatami himself admits that he found this peep show for visualizing the oral tales quite interesting (cited in Amini, One hundred 112). It is true that the peeping show machine had been originally invented in the West (Salimi 30) and Hatami was very well aware of this (Amini, *Sad Film* 112). Yet, *Shahr-e Farang* still could be considered as a particular modification of the peep show equipment in Iran, whose application was profoundly imbued by a native sensibility that revealed itself even in the design and the decoration of these contraptions (Salimi 31).

The connection between Hatami’s style and peep show practices is pertinent to his attempts to realize the idea of a national cinema, particularly in the light of the undeniable line of proximity in narrative principles between *Shahr-e Farang* and specific theatrical forms, as I will explain, a connection seemingly nonexistent in case of cinema. The application of painted images as a narrative tool in drama defines a tradition known as *Pardeh-dari* or *Pardeh-khani*. This tradition has been documented at least as early as the sixteenth century but its roots lie in the much older practice of *naghali* or story-telling,

³⁸ Don’t these images correspond well to the two kinds of shot Hatami concedes to employing the most, long shots and close-ups? (See page 71 of this thesis).

performed by solo performers (Malekpour 60).³⁹ Malekpour defines the general concept of the tradition as such: “[...] story-tellers (*Pardeh-khans*) hung a huge painted canvas, or *pardeh*⁴⁰, on a wall in a square or a tea-house. Painted on this canvas were events in the stories being told, and the story-teller would refer to it while telling his story” (61). Robert Floor mentions that the *Pardeh-khan*- or *shamayel-gardan*- the other term he applies for this type of entertainer- could use a series of images sometimes attached together in form of a scroll which he gradually unfurled in time with his narrative. Like the other major and better-known Iranian theatrical tradition of *Ta'zieh*, most of the curtains/*pardehs*, and therefore their accompanying narrative were relating religious themes and stories⁴¹. In fact as both Beizai and Malekpour point out, the evolution of *Ta'zieh* has been manifestly influenced by this practice (Malekpour 61; Beizai, *Namayesh* 77).⁴² Floor reminds us of the dramatic dimension of *Pardeh-khani*, and how a *Pardeh-khan* would stop telling a story at certain points on the pretext of collecting coins from people, an act which also created the kind of narrative suspension normally anticipated in a dramatic presentation (*Theater* 122). To the degree that the audience was generally

³⁹ According to Malekpour, in the pre-Islamic period (prior to 651 A.D.), song and music were attached to this practice, while later Islamic rules that outlawed music resulted in their separation from storytelling. The term Malekpour uses for this combination of storytelling and music is *Ghavali*, an Arabic term which is also used to define a group of practitioners who sing religiously themed poems, which was allowed under a more relaxed interpretation of Islamic rules. It is interesting to know that for the project of *The Last Prophet*, Hatami was thinking about enlisting some of the techniques used in *Ghavali* to overcome the problems he had in portraying a saint, a practice generally prohibited by Islamic religious authorities.

⁴⁰ In Farsi, the word “*pardeh*” means “curtain”

⁴¹ In his book, Beizai names *Soorat-khani* as a “certain off-shoot of *Pardeh-dari*” (*Namayesh* 77), in which *pardeh* was supposedly crammed with the imaginary figures. But he admits there are important gaps in the knowledge about this model of practice.

⁴² According to Peter Chelkowski, in far-flung rural areas, the simple performance of *Pardeh-khani* came in handy to serve as a substitute for the logistically far more complicated *Ta'zieh* theatre (Chelkowski 94).

familiar with stories being performed, it was to a great extent left to the *Pardeh-khan* to imbue the material with his personal performing skills and maintain audience interest. Floor notes the pedestrian quality and garish designs of the drawings (*Theater* 119) emphasizing the vital role of the *Pardeh-khan* in bringing life to these low quality images and moving the audience with his mode of performance, a technique allegedly unique to each performer (Tahaminezhad, *Royapardaz* 24; Floor, *Theater* 83) and therefore underlining the centrality of his position. According to Floor, a collection of stories worked simply as a template for the *Pardeh-khan* who took the liberty of using them for presenting his own version. In fact in *naghali*, the tradition of storytelling and the forebear of *Pardeh-khani*, narrators rarely remained faithful to the original source and opted instead to spice up the story by incorporating their own invented details in the fashion of an *auteur*, making their versions unique (Issari 44-5). The same concept should have carried forward to *Pardeh-khani*. In an article that mostly focuses on Hatami's career before the 1979 revolution, Rezai Raad asserts that Hatami "makes use of the familiar structure of Eastern stories; those grounded in the subconscious of his audience- which in turn secured the success of his earlier films" ("Kamyabi" 236). It is easy to surmise that Hatami had followed the lead of these old-style storytellers. The same holds true of his supposedly historical narratives, which are drastically personalised in terms of the represented events and characters, if not the pictorial details. With regard to the changes he applied to the original stories, Hatami told an interviewer: "if someone resigns himself simply to narrate an old tale, he will not go beyond the position of a narrator/*naghal*" (Sohrabi, n.p.). Of course what he meant by "narrator" in this remark is someone who simply relays the existing material without adding his personal touch, a

statement that also testifies once more to his conscious attempt to carve out his niche as an author.⁴³

D- Alternative narrative

A common criticism of Hatami's films that pertains to the connection between his filmmaking style and the practice of *Shahr-e Farang* concerns his mode of storytelling. In a departure from the classical narrative model whereby all subplots ultimately underpin the main story strand, his narratives follow an episodic structure where different subplots are loosely connected and the plentitude of characters obscures the focus of the main story (Mirbakhtyar, 49). *The Love-Stricken* is the prime example of this structure, where in the first part of the film, in a way not dissimilar to popular tales, the musicians are fully introduced one by one in separate sequences, bidding farewell to their families. As Talebinezhad notes in his review:

The first half of *The Love-Stricken* demonstrates Hatami's endeavour to appropriate the Iranian narrative forms. The characters are introduced thoroughly and one-by-one, in the fashion of legendary-historical tales. [...] When every character [band member] is introduced, again like old tales, their fates are intertwined as they set off on their journey. There are several examples of Iranian old tales that conform to this structure ("Khal" 77).

According to Heydari, Hatami himself described his chosen model as akin to *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. In an interview, Hatami identifies "digressions and

⁴³ In a later interview Hatami asserts his desire to gestate new legends: "Why shouldn't we create new tales? For what reason should we repeat the stories? Tales are concocted by people, so, what is wrong if I choose to add my creation to this [existing] collection?" (Hatami, "Jostojoo" 62)

multiplicity of tales” as the major attributes of Eastern tales that inspired his narratives (Nematollah 24). The adoption of this model however resulted in a drastic departure from the customary narrative structure for, as Rezai Raad notes, the causal relationship between different sequences seems to be missing and “the events remain separate and unique” (“Kamyabi” 236).⁴⁴ He contends that although these stories might be “interesting per se, they sometimes do not dovetail with the rest of events” (“Motreb” 5). No wonder that the reaction of critics accustomed to the classic rules is nothing but discontent. One writer, for example, articulates his dismay by turning Hatami’s description of his style as carpet-weaving on its head, writing “In weaving the Persian carpet, if we concentrate too much on minor designs to the extent that we forget about our [principal] aim of weaving a carpet [as a monolithic piece], at the end our tapestry will look more like a rug” (Hooman 133). Similarly Rezai Raad’s critique of Hatami’s narrative- particularly in *The Love-Stricken*- expands Hatami’s famed quote and contends the carpet design he chose as

⁴⁴ It would be instructive to compare one full-page description of the storyline of *The Love-Stricken* which Hatami wrote for a special issue of *Gozarash-e Film (Film Report)* magazine, with the elliptical and furtive narrative of the film. Some of the details provided in this lengthy synopsis are fully absent in the final film. Just to name a few: the background of Mohandes-ol-Mamalek (supervisor of the band), the fact that the instrument maker is Christian, Khosrow Khan’s familiarity with the note-reading system. The jealous character of Nasser Khan is somehow played down in the film while in the published version his bitterness is imputed to his unfulfilled dream of playing Maestro Delnavaz’s instrument. Similarly, the madness of Monsieur Julie – the representative of the French company- is mentioned fleetingly in a dialogue and he suddenly disappears from the story, whereas according to the synopsis he meets the group in his deranged status and troubles them. It is not clear whether all these omissions were decided upon the budgetary reasons, or the director saw a distinction between the narrative and its filmic version. At least in one instance- Taher’s back story- scenes were shot- according to a report on the film’s production- that did not make it into the final film. Also following the premiere of the film at Fajr Festival, Hatami had his film re-edited, making it slightly shorter. The earlier cut has never been publicly screened since.

a model is one merely used for decorating walls with little value in terms of a true household application (“Motreb” 5).

Hatami admits that his idiosyncratic narrative mode gestures to the unusual fabric of *The Love-Stricken*: “[This] film did not originate from a story. It was made of the characters, their combination and the imperative of situating them within a framework. Then it assumed the shape of a narrative” (“Darbare-ye Delshodegan” 5). But he still insists on adopting the model of Eastern stories, which in his view establishes narrative in a somewhat unique manner. Notwithstanding his intention to consciously deviate from narrative conventions and formulas in order to devise an alternative, more locally orientated form, Hatami recognized the need to know those conventions (Nematollah 24). That is to say, in refashioning cinematic structure for his own ends, he did not advocate ignorance of the basic conventions or suggest re-inventing film grammar from scratch. However, he acknowledges that for him, narrative comes secondary to his formal experiments, telling an interviewer “My penchant for legendary and historical films is not flowing from the topic, but [...] has been motivated by seeking a form. [...] I wanted to find an Iranian mode of expression” (Soleimani 7). In making the narrative secondary, Hatami’s approach once more resembles a modern reincarnation of *Shahr-e Farang* that displays a more formal complexity while the connections between images- in this case, episodes- remain loose and rely on the intervention of the *auteur* as the external force to put them together.

There are people like Rezai Raad who believe that it was during his post-revolutionary period of work that Hatami opted for this elliptical structure, and in contrast, his earlier films reflected a tendency to forge more classical romantic tales.

Rezai Raad attributes this to the “self-imposed mission of paying homage to other national arts [...] which Hatami took up during the second period of his career” and believes this informed distance from the dramatization harvested nothing but failure. (“Kamyabi” 247). While Rezai Raad’s article is an attempt to highlight the distinction between Hatami’s earlier works and these later “mechanical/contrived attempts” (Rezai Raad, “Kamyabi” 247), a film like *Baba Shamal* clearly indicates that narrative experimentation was essential to his oeuvre even from early in his career. Unlike *The Love-Stricken* with its flashback sequences, the narrative in *Baba Shamal* is quite linear. Nevertheless the film, at points, digresses from its main love story narrative (as in the horse-wagon scene, the group street sweeping dance, or even the previously discussed montage sequence of split images). In terms of cause and effect, some events are not cogent enough. For example, while Shokat and Baba Shamal agree on a token betrothal, we, like Baba Shamal, are blindsided to find that Shokat is actually wed to him, since the rhymed dialogues hardly disclose any delicate shift of attitude on her part. Interviewed a few years before his death, Fardin who played the role of Baba Shamal complained about the incomprehensibility of the film’s plot. He believed that the presence of the Iran’s biggest movies stars, use of colour (uncommon in Iranian films of the days) and the customary attractions of dance and music could not save the film from its lack of a cohesive story and therefore its commercial flop (Kianian 57).

It is interesting to note that in some scenes Hatami, in order to connect the events of the film and to progress the plot, enlists the same voice-over from the opening sequence (unlike *Hassan the Bald* in which voice-over was limited to pre-titles sequence). This application establishes an analogy between the opening sequence, which

is more clearly modelled on a *Pardeh-khani* performance, or *Shahr-e Farang* peepshow for that matter, and the structure of the rest of the film, as if to extend the principle of *Shahr-e Farang* into the cinema. Hatami chose to offer a dramatic justification for the presence of this sound by casting the narrator, Morteza Ahmadi, in the role of the announcer. However considering the way this announcer is presented- always shown above the crowd, overlooking the inhabitants of the fictional city- he could be seen as the double of the director/narrator.

It is still important not to underestimate the impact of the Islamic revolution and ensuing changes on Hatami's cinema, although his career seemed to be less affected than other major directors of his generation. As Behzad Eshghi writes, "Hatami remained always the same. The government changed, but Hatami kept to his own world" ("Zaman" 51) and Mirbakhtyar agrees, saying "the cultural and political consequences of the revolution had little impact on his style and ideas and he continued to make films utilizing the same pattern even after the revolution" (49). All the same, his movement towards historical narratives- which he began before the 1979 revolution with *Sattar Khan* (1972) and *Soltan-e Sahebgharan*- is quite evident, a trend described by Mirbakhtyar as the maturation of his commitment to "historical representation" (49). This change of gears towards revisiting history might have been related to new, post-revolutionary religious regulations and their denigration of earthly love affairs, which resulted in what Negar Mottahedeh calls a "cinematic desexualization" ("Traditions" 178). These rules would make it impossible to present the worldly interpretation of the love which had been essential to Hatami's films. He spoke of his hardship with these handicapping regulations in the mid 80s in an interview about *Hezardastan*-his only TV

series after the revolution: "The absence of love could be felt in this series; the earthly, but natural and legitimate love. Were it present, the series would be afforded with more vivacity. The authorities should reconsider our situation and make a clear decision." (Hatami, "Jostojoo" 65). Given the restrictions on the expression of natural love, the invocation of nationalist sentiments became his main alternative, since the literature of the Qajar era presents love either in earthly or nationalistic terms (Rezai Raad, "Motreb" 5). By taking up a nationalistic discourse- via praising the traditional arts in *Kamal-ol-Molk* and *The Love-Stricken*, Hatami's work to some extent accorded with the Islamic regime's declared policy of asserting its difference from both East and West; a doctrine that was religiously motivated rather than informed by nationalism. Mottahedeh has focused on this unofficial alliance in her discussion of *The Love-Stricken*, writing that "For director, Ali Hatami, the fundamental first step in creating a national cinema after the 1979 revolution was to construct a new 'optique,' a different style and an altered national form for Iranian cinema." (*Representing* 192). Mottahedeh's evaluation of Hatami's role, however, is as unfair as her account of the desexualizing of Iranian cinema is exaggerated.⁴⁵ By ignoring Hatami's experiments before the revolution in establishing

⁴⁵ She claims that "during the years that immediately followed the Iranian revolution and the Iran Iraq war (1980-88), close-ups of women were strictly forbidden" and then by connecting this to a ban on the exchange of glances between men and women, tries to construe the presence of "the unfocused gaze and the long shot" in Iranian films as a response to regulations that according to her made the use of the conventional tools of continuity in classic cinema difficult, if not impossible. Presumably her judgement is predicated upon those Iranian films screened abroad in the festivals, since long shots and the abandonment of continuity conventions were not rules in the commercial cinema that made up the bulk of the Iranian film industry's product. Of course some questions were raised about the extent to which women could be represented in films. One practical answer by filmmakers was to reduce the weight and position of female characters in the story to minor and ineffective roles, instead of subverting established conventions. The Iranian war films of the 80s provide us with the ultimate examples of this male-

a unique language for his films, she implicitly reduces Hatami to a cultural agent for the government.

Granted that the trajectory of Hatami's career has been partly determined by the external sociopolitical landscape as expressed through the agency of rules and regulations (For example, the love affair in *Baba Shamal* has given way to a vaguely platonic relationship between the singer and Turkish princess in *The Love-Stricken*). Yet, as the example of *Baba Shamal* shows, Hatami had consistently displayed a proclivity for concocting a different narrative form in which the structure remains looser than in a straightforward classic model. The anomalous and fragmented narrative in Hatami's films coupled with his picturesque mise-en-scène owes less to government censorship than to the obsolete art of *Pardeh-khani* and its updated version, *Shahr-e Farang*.

The exhibitionist nature of Hatami's films, which reaffirms their connection to the preceding performative traditions, correlates to the loosening of classical narrative structure and throws other aspects of his filmmaking into relief. One such aspect is costume design. Hatami's practice of designing costumes for many of his films solidified his control over the final product. In a piece he wrote on his –almost pioneering– experience with costume design, he acknowledges the cardinal position of costumes in his films: “costume design usually, or at least sometimes, affected my *découpage*” (Hatami, “Lebasi” 16).⁴⁶ One of the statements he made about the significance of costumes is particularly bold in view of the conventional concept of cinema that

dominated cinema. As another preventive measure, the directors were warned about using too much make-up for their actresses, lest running the risk of triggering a sensual response to their images.

⁴⁶ He brings the example of TV series, *Soltan-e Sahebgharan* and the problem presented by the long design of a historically accurate hat a character had to don. (Hatami, “Lebasi” 17)

bequeaths the prime position to the script. For Hatami, nevertheless, costumes might even occupy a higher rank in terms of priorities (This remark – although an exaggeration- also alludes to the central role of the post-production process in modifying footage for his directorial purposes). In his own words:

From the time I begin writing the script, I think about the costumes. My belief [...] is that writing for cinema is only a waste of time. After shooting, the script can be written and printed. But before making the film, writing is futile. Cinema is not writable, but we need a series of codes. Costume design is one of these codes which should be figured out in advance (Hatami, “Lebasi” 20).⁴⁷

E- Stillness and Movement

As mentioned earlier, the conflict between stasis and dynamism in cinema was a major concern of Hatami, and such a consistent obsession could be indicative of his awareness of this obstacle arising from what is often assumed to be the essential disparity between cinema and the older visual/theatrical traditions. This tension shows itself in his frequent use of still images. The opening titles of *Hassan the Bald* appear over images of mother with a basket of apples making a track of apples to the front door while Hassan follows her voraciously and picks up the apples for a bite or two. But Hatami punctuates this sequence with moments when the action freezes and creates a still image.⁴⁸ In his

⁴⁷ As for Hatami a faithful recreation of history was never an important issue, it comes as no surprise when he declares that historical accuracy should in many cases be compromised for the sake of attractiveness or credibility, if not for mere practicality (Hatami, “Lebasi” 20).

⁴⁸ In fact, a similar style for title sequence were later used by Parviz Sayyad- the lead actor of *Hassan the Bald* and Hatami’s frequent collaborator during early part of his career- for two of his own films in series of pictures featuring his famous comic

next film, *Towghi*, he uses a still image for a brief dialogue sequence between two women. In *Baba Shamal*, this playfulness in capturing the still components that constitutes a dynamic art is expressed in the split image sequence, where each shot turns one side of the screen into a frozen frame. Hatami also decides to end this film with a group photo of the film's heroes. In his next film, *Suitor* (1971), the photos of the female protagonist with her husbands similarly mark the end of each episode and the successive failures of the persevering suitor. Also in *Mother*, the taking of photographs functions as a vehicle to reconcile the two brothers, while the story of one daughter is told as she and her sister flip through an old photo album with images of her past. In the same film, Hatami uses a still image of the sea to accompany the mother's account of her husband's life in exile.

This fascination with photography suggests its intermediate position between film - as a medium premised upon the sequential running of a series of still images, at least before the advent of digital technology- and painting. The introduction of photography in Iran brought about less of a break from artistic tradition than one would suspect. As I already noted earlier, photography even helped the painting to mature in a way. Mottahedeh, who noted the similarity of images from *The Love-Stricken* to photos of the Qajar era expands on the quality of the latter by citing from Tahimi: " In these photographs [...] taken on what are seemingly outdoor terraces, the combination of painted landscape and typical white pillars provide the setting for the seated subject of the

character, Samad (*Samad and King Solomon's Carpet* (1971) and *Samad and Sami, Leila and Lili* (1972)). It is not then clear whose idea it was to shoot the title scene in *Hassan the Bald* in that manner, given Sayyad's possible contribution to projects he got involved in. But what distinguishes the use of this technique in Hatami's film is the delimitation of images with circular masks, as if they are seen through *Shahr-e Farang* machine.

portraiture” (*Representing* 216), and therefore hints at a juxtaposition of painting and photography. Again, the inclusion of the painted backdrops brings us back not only to Mohammad Zaman and his technique of *farangi-sazi*, in which some paintings offer glimpses of non-realist, traditional elements in their background, but also to Hatami’s inclination for creating a *mélange* of film footage and painting.

Occasionally, Hatami went in the opposite direction, so to speak, by creating motion through his reputedly static images. In *Ghalandar*, for example, motion is suggested through a series of axial cuts, with five quick shots that increase in scale as the camera moves away from the central character, and then the scene ends with a reverse order of similar shots. *The Love-Stricken* contains a brisk application of animating the static imagery in the scene where the minister starts to teach the talented, but not formally trained Faraj how to play the *tombak* (the traditional drum). Here Hatami uses an exterior long shot of the minister’s mansion through whose windows we glimpse the teacher and his pupil at opposite ends of the hall. After two brief single shots of each character, tighter shots of a similar set up show that the distance between the characters has been reduced as if they had drawn closer (Stills 39 and 40).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ It is later followed with the famous scene of rivalry between the minister and Faraj, as Hatami moves them along the hall to visually intimate the fact that Faraj has surpassed his mentor, a scene praised by the film writers who were likely pleased by the application of a moving camera in this otherwise visually static film (Hooman 75 and Aghighi 78). The way the characters are shown moving is also relevant. They are shown framed in medium to medium close-up shots as they are glide along the hall, while the camera tracks sideways with them and, except for the minister at the last moment of the shot, keeps them in frame. This technique is not dissimilar to how the image of *Shahr-e Farang* rolls before its audience.

F- Use of Sound

To take the analogy between Hatami's style and these theatrical forms one step further, it is interesting to consider the application of sound in his films. As I already mentioned the *Pardeh-khan* or *Shahr-e Farang* operator had to lend his voice to the motionless drawing in order to animate the images and bring them into life. In some respects, Hatami's use of sound resembles this complementary juxtaposition of sound and image. Indeed a great portion of Hatami's legacy and his popularity among Iranians lies in the poetic dialogues he wrote for his characters, which comfortably fit the melancholic mood of his tales. Many times he prefers to convey the information through the dialogue rather than visually. This does not mean he does not pay great attention to *mise-en-scène*. Nevertheless his staging more often than not is more decorative than expressive. Hatami himself stressed the crucial role of sound in his concept of cinema, for he believed that cinema is not simply visual ("Ravi" 36). His remark about the incompleteness of silent cinema is reminiscent of Bazin's retort to the adversaries of sound film who tended to overvalue images, worded in articles such as *The Myth of Total Cinema*. But this remains their only similarity, as Hatami's abandonment of realism extends to his approach to sound as well. Hatami was among the directors who willingly dubbed his own films, replacing one actor's voice with another's that better matched the character.⁵⁰ For him even the relation between sound and image should not mimic reality. Hatami's films were

⁵⁰ It is important to know that for many years dubbing films was the common practice in the Iranian film industry. It started with *Mashhadi Ebad* (Samad Sabahi-1953) in which the actors had a strong Turkish accent and sound re-recording and dubbing was used to solve this problem (Mehrabani 63). From the mid-80s filmmakers were encouraged to record the dialogue on the set. Hatami followed the crowd in his last film, while his other films and TV series are all dubbed.

among the few instances in Iranian cinema that benefitted from dubbed voices. Even a high profile actor like Ezzatollah Entezami, whose theatrical background made him more concerned with the use of his own voice, admits that Hatami's *Sattar Khan* was the only film in which he felt happy with having his role dubbed⁵¹ (Entezami 37-8). It seems that in separating the actors from their own voices and adding dubbed voices that recite his masterly composed lines,⁵² Hatami practically operates a modern *Shahr-e Farang*, with modern technology allowing him to employ a group of trained artists to create the voices. Seeing his films in this light, we comprehend better his indiscriminate use of elegant dialogues for a wide range of characters irrespective of their social position (again another reason for critics to whine about his otherwise impeccable dialogues)⁵³. It is no wonder that, unlike those Iranian New Wave directors who revived interest in direct sound through their films (Naficy, *Volume 2* 261), Hatami was not keen on parting with the established practice of dubbing.

The use of dubbing in Hatami's films has not gone uncriticized. Naficy, for instance, expresses his disenchantment with the dubbing of *Haji Washington*, believing that it works against the film's extremely careful visuals (Naficy, *Volume 1* 307). But

⁵¹ Entezami remembers that film was also dubbed in Turkish for the screening in certain provinces and he believes that Turkish dubbing was equally good (Akbari and Razavian 4).

⁵² This approach in separating image and sound and the zealotry about dialogues may also derive from Hatami's fascination with radio plays in his childhood. These programmes have been described as stirring "Hatami's sensitivity and imagination", inasmuch as he was given the liberty of visualizing the scenes. (Heydari 22)

⁵³ About this uniformity of dialogue Hatami made a comment that further benefits this analogy. He justifies the similarity of dialogues for different characters in his films by making a comparison between image and sound and concluding that as it is a rule in the case of the images, there should not be a huge discrepancy between dialogues. Then he stresses that dialogues, despite being uttered by different characters "are all issued by the same writing style, a style chosen by Ali Hatami." (Nematollah 27)

Hatami exercised strict control of dubbing, claiming that he never allowed dubbing directors to include *pas-gardani/behind-back* dialogues⁵⁴ in the dubbing process (Nematollah 26).

Meanwhile, dubbing seems to be another area which involves a connection between old and new art. In fact, long before it became a norm, a live format of dubbing was in use in Qajar era theatres, where *dilmajs* (recitors or translators) -not dissimilar to Japanese Benshis- were employed to describe and create a narrative over the images of silent films projected on the screen for the cinemagoers. As Naficy describes, the function of a *dilmaj*- whose duty entailed adding the national flavour to the film through his descriptions- was “a continuation of the popular tradition of [...] *Pardeh-khani*” (Naficy, *Volume 1* 118-9). However, given the fact that film production in Iran did not start until the early 1930s and even then only four silent features were produced, the continuity that this connection suggests did not immediately pertain to domestic cinema.

Hatami’s approach to the music complements his attitude towards other sorts of sound. Neither *Baba Shamal* nor *The Love-Stricken* is a musical in a conventional sense, even though Hatami is reputed to have made the first Iranian musical film. For *Baba Shamal*, he used the playback system in the sense that prior to shooting he recorded all the rhymed dialogues accompanied with a *tombak*.⁵⁵ Heydari believes that the film suffered from this technique, as well as the variety of rhythms, some of them unfamiliar to the audience, and notes that Fardin shared this conviction (54). Hatami invited Morteza

⁵⁴ These are lines not in the original script, but added during dubbing and in the scenes when characters were not facing the camera, mostly to add a mild comic effect. They were even used dubbing foreign language films.

⁵⁵ Hatami believed that the rhythm of the drum could help the actors in delivering their lines (Heydari 57)

Hannaneh to compose the music only when the shooting and editing was already finished. As a result the composer had little opportunity to allow music to play a “constructive role” (Heydari 57) and therefore, the organic relation between music and images that typically defines a musical is missing. As Hatami’s remarks reveal, he was reluctant to create such a harmony between music and image, believing that making rhythmic films could be limiting in that the rhythm of the pre-recorded audio track must be obeyed and in consequence the scope for creating editing narrower (Heydari 56). Nevertheless, he seems to have conflicting sentiments regarding the music, for in a later interview he confesses to his “curious fondness for the rhythm” (Rohani, “Ghali” 68).

Hatami’s final attempt to mix music and cinema is encumbered by a similar attitude towards having sound and image out of pace with each other. This has been mentioned by Saeed Kashefi in his review of *The Love-Stricken* which for the most part salutes the contribution of the composer but remains highly critical of the director. Kashefi describes the rhythm of the film as tedious and unrelated to the rhythm of traditional music, the film’s presumed object of celebration (80). But the most notable dissociation between sound and image, also mentioned in Amir Poorya’s review (79), involves Taher. His singing- preformed by the master of Iranian traditional music, Mohammad Reza Sahajarian- is intentionally and conspicuously out of synch with the image of the actor. According to Shajarian, he and Hatami agreed on this point, assuming that the audience would not find it credible to hear his familiar voice over the images of the actor⁵⁶ (Rohani, “Hichja” 5). For this film, Hatami again used the playback system,

⁵⁶ This could be attributed to the position of Shajarian as one of the most distinguished singers and representative of a highbrow traditional music rarely employed in Iranian films.

this time recording the music prior to filming. But again, as Kashefi points out, there is no audiovisual harmony of the sort expected in musicals⁵⁷.

The incongruity between the sound and the image in *The Love-Stricken* sometimes yields subtle results. One instance concerns the first shots of Taher's singing which we hear over Christian-themed Western statues. While the incongruity accentuates the position of the singer as a stranger, it also reflexively corresponds to the position of Hatami as a reconciler of cultural difference. This scene also strangely resonates with the technique of *farangi-sazi* that Mohammad Zaman pursued by creating drawings with Christian themes (Azhand 356). Of course Hatami himself had already tried this blend at the level of images in scenes like the wedding night in *Baba Shamal*, where the Eastern couple could be seen through a western painting that references Western religious symbolism (apple of seduction).⁵⁸

Hatami's explication of his use of sound in his films point to a dynamic and somewhat dialectical relation between sound and image that underscores his style. While his films' dialogue is celebrated and some writers even go that far to give his films the sole credit for their dialogues, Hatami insists that his dialogue is not simply empty flourishes intended to impress the audience (Nematollah 28), nor that it is the main thrust of his work. He articulates his discontent about such a conviction by saying "images of my films are of immense significance and extreme attention has been paid to the visuals"

⁵⁷ Kashefi even complains that the music is almost buried under the Hatami's voluminous dialogue (80).

⁵⁸ The use of the apple as a Western symbol was one of influential Iranian critic Parviz Davayi's reservations about the film. In the Islamic version of Adam and Eve tale, the apple is replaced by wheat, and Davayi believed that this symbolism was out of step with Hatami's commitment to bring the traditions of his culture to the surface (303). It should be added that in at least three of his films (*Hassan the Bald*, *Baba Shamal* and *Suitor*) Hatami uses the apple to represent lust.

(Nematollah 26). Given the intricately detailed setting and costumes presented in his films, this statement sounds fair. Further, if one leafs through the published collection of his writing- which presents the script of his films simply in the form of transcriptions of the dialogue accompanied by brief descriptions of the scenes- one can easily note how unfair it would be to reduce his films to their dialogues, as reading these masterly composed lines hardly elicits the unique feelings of his films. A comment to similar effect was made by Hatami: “[The dialogue of my films] cannot have the same impact when divorced from images” (Nematollah 25).⁵⁹

From Hatami’s standpoint, the relation between image and dialogue is defined in compensatory terms: “I believe when the dialogue starts, it accomplishes what image has been unable to do and vice versa” (Nematollah 25). Moreover, “dialogue in my works does not explain the scene but communicates things that pictures are unable to, or more precisely, unable to and still elicit the same mood” (Nematollah 26) As this comment suggests, in Hatami’s directorial vision, the application assigned to sound goes a long way towards establishing the kind of mood he wanted his films to contain. For instance, with respect to the application of dialogue he adds: “Its application is not to describe the events. [...] It evokes a mood⁶⁰ that could not be attained via music or image” (Nematollah 28)

Hatami also believed that dialogue has a responsibility on a par with the images in supplying his films with harmony. To emphasize this point, he posited a complementary relation between dialogues that collectively built up towards a climax. For this reason, he

⁵⁹ Contrary to the general perception, he even believed that his films, compared to others, contained fewer lines (“Ravi” 36).

⁶⁰ He also refers to it as “the fragrance of the scene” (Nematollah 20).

argued, his dialogues have been rhymed,⁶¹ but this was also a possible limitation since it made the harmony of his films vulnerable to censorship when the omission of a line of dialogue was ordered. To elucidate the integral role of dialogue in his cinema, he recalled a time when he even wanted to add some leader to the end of the shot in order for dialogue to continue over the black screen and accomplish its duty (Nematollah 30).

G- influences from Traditional Theatre

Hatami was influenced in other ways by traditional theatre. Most notably, he made improvisation a major tool in his directorial arsenal. Improvisation was not only a feature of *Pardeh-khani* and *Shahr-e Farang* shows, but in general was central to traditional Iranian theatre as well as to the literary arts (Naficy, *Volume 2* 213). Due to the centrality of improvisation to Iranian art traditions, it easily made its way into filmmaking practices and became one of the two main identifying features of commercial cinema in Iran⁶² (Naficy, *Volume 2* 200). But while in other arts, improvisation as a general practice was viewed as a valuable quality, in Iranian film production it mostly amounted to an affliction, for unlike improvisation elsewhere, it signified the ignorance of commercial directors regarding the conventions of cinema rather than a tool for them to personalize their products. (Naficy, *Volume 2* 205) Nevertheless in the case of Hatami, who deliberately refracted the qualities of the traditional arts through the prism of his own creativity, recourse to improvisation as the gist of his creative process conferred a different value on his approach (while at times it even provided practical benefits for

⁶¹ Hatami's use of rhymed dialogue in Hatami's works can be traced back to his earliest play *Dib*, staged in 1965 ("Ravi" 31).

⁶² The other feature is spontaneity (Naficy, *Volume 2* 200)

difficult projects).⁶³ Javad Toosi once described visiting Hatami at home, where he had a chance to leaf through a couple of his filmed and unfilmed scripts. By comparing the brief and general description of the scenes and dialogue with the actual detailed mise-en-scene and the elaborate lines in the fulfilled project, he had no difficulty in realizing that the script served only as a blueprint for Hatami and that the outstanding quality of his films was achieved to a great extent through improvisation during shooting (Toosi, “Khab” 49). Heydari also quotes Hatami as saying that *The Suitor* was completely improvised (70). Not all writers, of course, agree with Toosi about the positive effect of improvisation. Saeed Aghighi, for example, blames the film’s additional narrative strands and their part in undercutting the abstract quality in the first part of *Haji Washington* (1982) blames this on Hatami’s improvisational mode of filmmaking (Aghighi, “Hekayat” 98).

This improvisation was also a defining ingredient of the Iranian comedy plays known as *Ru-howzi* or *Takhte-howzi*, a genre that also includes song, dance and music (Floor, *Theater* 44).⁶⁴ Hatami occasionally draws upon this type of theatre in order to create moments of comic relief in his films; in *Baba Shamal* he essentially borrows the *fokoli*, a recurrent character from this dramatic tradition. A *Ru-howzi* stock, the *fokoli* is a type who “favored Europeans [...] and wore a badly cut jacket, a homemade white paper

⁶³ See Chapter Three on *Haji Washington*.

⁶⁴ One of Hatami’s unfilmed scripts, *In company of the lady* could be regarded as a tribute to traditional comedy artists. In the script, set during the reign of first Pahlavi King in 1930- a high-ranking officer receives an invitation to an official garden party and has to face the dilemma of rejecting his traditional principles and bringing his lady unveiled to the party, or expect the worst retributions for turning down the invitation. But the saviour emerges in the garb of a comedy actor who usually plays the role of women. In one specific scene- when the tent collapses- Hatami’s description of the scene almost evokes slapstick comic impulses of these theatres.

high detachable collar (in French faux-colle, hence *fokoli*), a light cane and glasses or eye-piece with dark glass” (Floor, *Theater* 49). Hatami’s version, although lacking some of these described details, is clearly inspired by this character.⁶⁵ In another tribute to the traditional theatre, the dance that Robabeh performs to please Mirza- *Khaleh ruru*- is named after the title of an all-female play (Floor, *Theatre* 61) which possibly included a similar dance. Amir Esbati also takes a critical position on the costumes in *Baba Shamal* which according to him are more similar to those used in lowbrow traditional theatres (Esbati 26). Hatami’s later attention to costumes obviously resulted from his future dedication to a certain historical period. All in all, this impact appears so strong that one writer, albeit in a derogatory way, considers his films closer to the traditional theatre rather than cinema (Eshghi, “Shabah” 221).

Another instance of tapping into traditional theatre is the execution of the fighting scenes in *Baba Shamal*. Speaking of the renowned traditional theatre of *Ta’zieh*, Beizai writes: “In representing war scenes [...] charges are defined by a quasi-dance quality: obviously, they do not engage in a fight but just allude to it” (*Namayesh* 139). All the fights in *Baba Shamal* are orchestrated in way that completely conforms to this description. For instance, when Baba Shamal goes to confront the new head of Heydar’s men, they charge at each other in turn. Hatami himself admitted the influences of *Ta’zieh* on his costume design. Although the costumes in his films are usually elaborate and hence different from the minimalist costumes used in *Ta’zieh*, he still believed that the credibility produced by the latter provided a guideline for innovating with his own costumes. (Hatami, “Lebasi” 20)

⁶⁵ In Chapter Three, the re-emergence of this character in *Haji Washington* will be discussed.

The treatment of time in Hatami's films also creates analogies with temporality in traditional theatre. The fluid concept of time in the Iranian drama which results in the absence of historical accuracy and abrupt shifts of time- and for that matter, space- has not evaded the attentive glance of researchers (Beizai, *Namayesh* 129, 131). This temporal uncertainty is believed not to be unique to theatre but is present also in the traditional painting, as though it is an essential cultural component. This is also applicable to the paintings used for *Pardeh-khani*. Meskoob observes the shifting temporality in the paintings from Qajar period, arguing that "The time presented in the paintings of this era [...] is unified, not linear or divisible. [...] In the popular painting, such as that found in *pardehs* (curtains), images of the past and future appear side by side with those of the present. Sequential events are illustrated in rows and close to each other" ("Tamayoz" 3). Hatami once achieved this co-existence of past and present in *Kamal-ol-Molk* through picturing the titular painter in both his childhood and middle age together during the sequence of his reminisces of childhood days. The same technique is very briefly used in *The Love-Stricken* to connect Taher with the flashbacks of his childhood and youth. This temporal fluidity also defines the structure of the film with respect to the position of the flashbacks. The arrangement of flashbacks in the narrative structure of *The Love-Stricken* follows no clear order, leading one critic to deem them redundant because they merely rehash the same information and therefore serve little narrative purpose (Poorya 79). In *Baba Shamal* the only scene in which the two time lines interweave is when Mirza instructs Robabeh on how to inform Baba Shamal of the Heydar's affection towards his wife. Interestingly, this scene also manifests a level of

digression/repetition, since whatever Mirza tells Robabeh is followed by her relating the same line to Baba Shamal.⁶⁶

Here I do not take on the position of a historian to comment on Hatami's skewed historical accounts, neither do I intend to acquit Hatami's disservice with regard to the official version of history. All the same, when seen in the light of his experiments with temporality, this preference for a personalized version of history is less surprising. Hatami stressed his relative indifference to the historical accuracy of his films by claiming: "I am not able to make [historical] documentaries. I am not made for this. My job is to deal with people, faces, details and decorations" (Hatami, "Jostojoo" 63). As this remark confirms, contrary to the gap between the narratives of his films and established historical accounts, Hatami took extreme care in reconstructing the physical details of the era. As if he wanted to present credible tableaux of the past, a kind of surface authenticity was pivotal to his style, even if the narratives conveyed by these tableaux were drastically transfigured. For this reason, in his biopics Hatami attempted to cast actors with the utmost physical resemblance to the characters they were portraying. Similarly, his preference was to shoot at historical monuments or the sets that meticulously recreated the period (Heydari 100). But to vindicate his tinkering with the grand narratives, he

⁶⁶ From a different angle, Mottahedeh discerns a kinship between the temporality of the narrative in *The Love-Stricken* and in *Ta'zieh*. However for her, this similarity stems from a parallel she illustrates between the musicians' mission and Hatami's effort to redefine the tools of cinema and so the fact that Qajar era musicians could stand for the contemporary filmmaker is enough for her to establish a temporal confusion and declare that "as with *Ta'zieh* representations of antiquity that create correspondences with the present of the happening, the nation's past and present are coeval in Delshodegan" ("Representing" 195). Her analogy therefore originates from a hermeneutic standpoint and in relation to the events external to the film, and is not derived from its intrinsic qualities. Given this, it is difficult to accept this unproblematically as a valid palpable of the presence of *Ta'zieh* temporal aesthetics in this film.

asserted a desire for enacting the popular edition of history which for him stood as the real one. He claimed his narratives were forged from “the same rumours and gossips and conversations of the people, which as time passes, transmute into popular beliefs, and in truth turns into the real history of people” (Hatami, “Jostojoo” 62).

H- Major Critique

Hatami’s unique film style had its adamant critics who even though aware of his declared intention to inscribe an aesthetic external to the cinema into his films, believed in the incompatibility of the medium of cinema with this goal. Saeed Aghighi, for example, questions Hatami’s project by arguing cinema is a modern phenomenon with no background in Iranian history. He complains about the “accumulation of traditional ‘non-cinematic’ elements in his films,” “lack of background, depth of field or change of the camera angle” and finds in his films a limited “Persian miniature style of mise-en-scène.” Aghighi suggests Hatami would have been better off following the lead of Western musicals and making his sound in synch with his images (Aghighi 78). Another critic asserted a similar dissatisfaction with the dissociation between image and sound and the fluid narrative structure and absence of a general narrative pattern in *The Love-Stricken*, and then concludes that cinema has its own aesthetics and can not embrace the principle of traditional arts due to their static nature (Poorya 79). This criticism clearly illustrates the nature of the resistance Hatami had to face. Even film critics were so accustomed to the rules and conventions adopted in tandem with the technology that they upheld them as unbreakable conventions. Therefore they could not stomach any attempt at fundamentally reconfiguring the medium, and in effect denied the possibility of an

ethnically diversified cinematic language premised on traditional aesthetics. In his defence, Hatami repeatedly argued that the “young generation have forgotten their own histories and evaluate my films with patterns that do not fit my style and thus end up in misunderstanding them” (Rohani, “Ghali” 68)

At least one writer acknowledges the presence of this fragmented narrative pattern as Hatami’s exploration of the capacities of cinematic language in light of Iran’s preceding cultural traditions. He, however, believes that his atypical narratives also signal Hatami’s indecision about narrative in general. Therefore, he concludes that unlike a figure such as Sergei Parajanov with comparable aesthetic ambitions, Hatami behaves conservatively in defining his style, and that despite his reluctance regarding narrative, he cannot bring himself to completely part with it. Accordingly, Hatami’s films, as he states “give the feeling that the director wanted to follow the conventional narrative structure, but failed” and so look like “unintended collages” (Safarian, “Moghayese” par4). Regardless of Hatami’s degree of success or failure in his films, this comment cues an alternative line of criticism, faulting Hatami’s approach for not being radical enough, as if this high-absolute pattern allows no intermediate position to be imagined or allowed.

Insofar as the basic concept of mingling the static arts with cinema can pass muster, the results of Hatami’s experiment in style should not go unevaluated. The unfocused narratives of his films and his obsession with presenting the external manifestations of a lost – or eclipsing- age sometimes becomes so overwhelming that his films turn into catalogues of other art forms, which he fails to put in organic relation with cinematic structure. This problem has been frequently addressed in reviews of Hatami’s films. Parviz Davayi, for example, finds the scenes of *Baba Shamal* over-congested with

props, to the detriment of the “intimacy and the emotional resonance of the scene” (Davayi 303). Mihaan Bahrami also criticizes this tendency in Hatami’s films, writing that it amounts to little more than “adorned scenery with characters stripped of realistic, dramatic or symbolic weights” (Bahrami 192). With reference to this afflicting tendency Beizai writes:

His love for music, colour, tales and spaces- these popular products- of which he had a rich memory, were sometimes to a degree that it could bring someone to believe that he wanted cinema to be a medium for recording other arts. In truth he used insignificant tales as vehicles for putting together his favourite elements from these popular products. Nevertheless his work was in fact more like a collection than a craftwork like a carpet which has a calculated and unified form (“Moallem” 34).

Baba Shamal is emblematic of this drawback. The protracted courtship scene with its non-stop dialogue, seems to be indicative of a fascination with traditional ceremony and provides merely another opportunity for the audience to gaze at the splendid decoration of Shokat’s place. The following wedding scene with its dancers- from the Pars National Ballet troupe- suggest a similar desire, especially considering the way the camera occasionally focuses on the dancers. Here Hatami even seems more concerned with recording the art of the dancers than with the delivery of his famous lines. Similarly, the early morning sweeping scene is another narrative digression intended to showcase the dancing. According to Fardin, the scene was planned to be shot without him, which would make it all the more irrelevant, and only his insistence on joining the group resulted in his inclusion (qtd. in Heydari 56). Later in his career, Hatami came up with better, less confrontational formulas for integrating this archival function into his

narrative. In *The Love-Stricken*, the opening titles appear over a sequence of shots showing how an old master carves out a *taar* (a traditional music instrument). While in essence still showcasing a traditional craft, the scene also dramatically connects to the rest of the film.⁶⁷

I- Difference?

The question remains, how radical were the changes Hatami applied to his cinema? In other words, does his style totally neglect the conventions built up over the years and used worldwide by his counterparts? As I already mentioned, he was not totally alienated from the conventions of film language. This becomes clear in an interview from 1987, where Hatami analysed his style:

The framework of my style is pretty simple. Every scene is comprised of three main images. A) long shot that creates the atmosphere and establishes the mise-en-scene and the position of the actors. This follows by B) medium shot which I have not cared for so much and have not stressed on [using] it, but of course from now on I am going to give it more importance. Then comes C) close ups (Hatami, “Jostojoo” 65).

A very good example of Hatami’s penchant for the exclusive use of long shot and close-up shows up in a scene from *Baba Shamal*, when Luti Heydar orders his men to block the way to the water reservoir. The scene for the most part is made up of long shots of Heydar’s men controlling the crowd, letting in the elderly and women and fending off

⁶⁷ A harsh- albeit primarily politically loaded- review of *Haji Washington*, repudiates excesses in this tendency that according to the unknown writer would shade into a kind of exhibitionism inherent to *shahr-e farang* shows. As writer claims, Hatami treats props like to a museum owner who puts his objects on display, while masking their cultural or religious pertinence and “then throws down each object with extreme grace and directs the audience’s attention into the next prop” (“Ravayati” 20).

the men who try to sneak through, interspersed with close-ups of Luti overseeing his men. Hatami completes the description of his style by asserting the significance of the close-up in his films:

I care very much about the actor's face. It is the most important aspect. All lights and camera angles and the elements of the scene are arranged to place the actor into relief and enhance his/her performance. Hence, I like to get as close to an actor's face as the camera permits, to the point that there is no "headroom" in the shot. [...] The actor's eye and face should be at the top of the frame, not in front of us, instead dominating the audience like a star who firmly delivers a sturdy performance..." (Hatami "Jostojoo" 65)

In point of fact, one can easily observe that the overall principle Hatami formulated for breaking down the scene is not radically different from the guidelines of classic cinema about moving from an establishing shot to tighter framings. Although *The Love-Stricken* was made a few years after this interview, the structure of its scenes still observes the same formula of starting with long shots and then moving in. Meanwhile in the same interview, Hatami also expressed a growing desire for further employment of medium shots and a yearning for building a sequence around a series of medium shots as certain masters,⁶⁸ according to him, had perfected (Hatami, "Jostojoo" 65). This position seems to run counter to the dominant tendency in contemporary mainstream cinema where, as David Bordwell has observed, medium shots have considerably given way to close-ups (*Figures* 27).

Hatami's career, however, appears to bolster Bordwell's view of the way film aesthetics is influenced by other cultural traditions: "national cultural traditions,

⁶⁸ They remain unspecified in this interview.

particularly as manifested in adjacent media such as theatre or painting, are often relevant to casual and functional explanation of the style” (Bordwell, *Figures* 244). Meanwhile Bordwell strongly rejects the notion that these influences take place passively. Instead, he lays stress on the filtering role of an artist who has the authority to cherry-pick those attributes of the culture and traditions that snugly dovetail with his/her aesthetic view. The plethora of quotes from Hatami about his cinema, leaves next to no doubt about the intentionality of any discerned proximity between his style and aspects of other media and therefore makes him an apt illustration of the idea referred to in these lines: “Instead of unreflective transmission of a tradition, we have more or less a deliberate choice, perhaps even knowing citation”. (Bordwell, *Figures* 224) By and large, and notwithstanding modifications he applied to the position of the camera in relation to the scene and the actors, Hatami’s films still follow the basics of analytical editing by building a scene out of multiple shots. On this point, Bordwell sounds more convincing when he asserts that “a large part of cinematic storytelling crosses cultural borders so easily, and one plausible reason is that it rides on widespread perceptual tendencies” (*Figures* 39) than Mottahedeh who defines the style of his film as a “national seal” that fully runs afoul of “the unjust ruler” of Hollywood narrative conventions (*Representing* 209).⁶⁹

Bordwell’s other observations could also facilitate an evaluation of the significance and function of style in Hatami’s films. In an entirely different context- the

⁶⁹ While much writing on Hatami concentrates on the national flavour of his works, Kambiz Kaheh believes that his films simultaneously bear traces of some influence from Western cinema as well. He makes reference to the horse wagon scene in *Baba Shamal* which for Kaheh is redolent of a similar sequence in *Meet Me in St Louise* (Vincente Minnelli-1944). He connects this observation to Hatami’s concession in an interview that he was influenced by Minnelli’s musicals (Kaheh 229).

Japanese cinema of the pre-WWII era- he identifies a capacity other than the better-known denotative, thematic or expressive capacities that the style can exhibit. He reminds us that this aspect of style was generally frowned upon, as it was believed by scholars he refers to as “organicists” that style should remain unobtrusive and work in harmony with the other components (Bordwell, “A Cinema” 331). Bordwell takes an antithetical stance to this claim by saying “film style can swerve from fulfilling purely narrative functions and can solicit attention in its own right” and in these instances he believes that techniques exceed simply functioning as a carrier of a meaning. In fact, the unobtrusiveness of the classic continuity style works as a point of reference to highlight this less-discussed tendency, which in Bordwell’s words is founded upon the apprehension of “the sheer pattern-making possibilities of the medium” (*Figures* 34).

Can Bordwell’s definition of decorative style relate to Hatami’s aversion to classical style? Of course, in the instance used by Bordwell- that is, Japanese cinema- the techniques brought to the fore by filmmakers to construct a scene in a more style-orientated manner are profoundly cinematic, while in Hatami’s case, he has constantly been accused of blemishing the cinema with techniques believed to cripple cinema’s quintessential dynamic aspect. Nevertheless, Bordwell does not specify the extent to which the decorative technique must spring from an exclusively cinematic aesthetics. In Hatami’s case it is easy to find his deviations from the classical norm, and in many instances- including the fully-frontal position of the camera or his balanced compositions- these stylistic peculiarities do not seem to serve any specific narrative purpose or convey a meaning impossible to communicate through conventional styles. Hatami has no problem with being identified as a formalist and that description

squarely fits him. As he stated once “I am responding to the principles that exist within me and I follow the feelings for which I want to find my own way of expression”(Rohani, “Ghali” 68). This quote from an interview he gave towards the end of his career informs us of the crucial position of style in Hatami’s oeuvre. Hatami wanted to tell his story and communicate his message in a way not previously tried. For Hatami this was not simply a matter of creativity for its own sake. He wanted his style to stand out because it carried the signs of the traditions he had sought to preserve. In effect, his stress on the decorative capacity of his style was necessitated by his larger ambition to create a continuity between old and new media that I earlier discussed. Ironically, the tradition of *Pardeh-dari* also found a decorative application. According to Peter Chelkowski, rich families gradually developed a liking for using drawn Pardeh/curtains to adorn their homes, and in doing so afforded this item of a theatrical presentation with a decorative application (Chelkowski 94).

Nothing better illustrates the decorative facet of Hatami’s cinema than the allegory he himself utilized to elaborate on his style: carpets. While originally meant to serve the practical function of covering the floors, a carpet also carries a design with aesthetic appeal, and it is this aesthetic function that over time has taken precedence. One can think of Hatami as the carpet weaver of our time who intransigently weaves the learnt patterns of the past using new material. Nevertheless we should be wary of sticking very tightly to this allegory, as it inextricably diminishes Hatami’s cinema to eye-pleasing pictures. At the same time, it is still helpful in explaining the different reactions his films elicit. While some people- in some nations- still cover their entire floors with carpets and are still in the habit of sitting or lying down on a floor, others prefer to add one or two

carpets simply to enliven the view from their sofas.⁷⁰ Likewise some spectators are able to make a closer rapport with the world his films picture- especially those with a common cultural background who respond more strongly to the nostalgic impulses with which his films are brimming- while for others the decorative aspect of his film might be a hindrance to getting closer to the personal realm of the director. A similar cultural background is not necessarily required to appreciate Hatami's films, but it is fair to say that greater effort is demanded from an audience without it.

True enough, Hatami's cinema remained unique and his style did not yield any real followers. But however eccentric his films are, they still belong to the realm of cinema. Hatami's haggling with the past- even if exploited by cultural agents of the Islamic regime for substantiating their view of a seemingly independent but actually ideologically directed cinema- produces an expansion of cinematic grammars. This expansion is born from mixing film technology with a traditional Iranian culture sensibility, which is possibly hidden from filmmakers of other nationalities. Hatami was not simply the propagator of a faded past, busy with sprucing up a dusty legacy, but also an innovator who diversified the cinematic style through a personal perspective in the manner of an auteur. His films, even if failed in creating the desired synthesis, his films still beckon to the ways in which directors can avoid beaten paths and be more creative in using their tools. So unlike the claim of some of his critics, his revisiting of the past in his films was not a retrograde gesture. Despite some disparaging views about the nostalgia, there are still notions that validate its constructive nature. Following one of these standpoints, nostalgia "can be perceived as a way of coming to terms with the past, as

⁷⁰ In making this comparison, I have to articulate my disagreement with Rezai Raad's judgement that implicitly undervalues the decorative use of carpets.

enabling it to be exorcised in order that society and individuals can move on” (Cook 4). According to her nostalgia, by eventually intimating the permanent loss of the past, can be a catalyst rather than a hurdle to the process of modernity. Hatami’s films plaintively remind us of the termination of the past, they re-enact the moment of the loss of innocence, when the new- read, invasive- culture started to take hold. Hatami, however, was bright enough to know that this transition could not be reversed and there was no escaping it. Through his ventures into the past and recreation of a demised period, he wanted to act as a better mediator to level out this bumpy crossover.

Chapter Two- The Imperilled Tough Guy and the Feminine Insurgence in *Ghalandar* (1972)

One common, but reductive way to envision modernity is to take it at face value as a spate of technological advancements achieved by dint of the scientific supremacy and technological proficiency initially owned and cherished only by a cluster of nations. On the basis of this optimistic and simplified account whereby power always radiates from the centre out to the periphery, what it takes for a nation to be modernized is plainly a conduit for the flow of advanced goods and services, with the hope that their associated technology would later follow suit. Lost in this technological reading is the cultural substrate specific to modern societies and its links with technological developments, so that even the function of these technologies could be prefigured and modulated by the culture of their point of origin. Taking these intricate links into account would help clarify why modernization does not limit itself to a technical change but inextricably invites the intrusion of a new culture with its own sets of values. To be fair, the most lingering and serious aspect of the anxiety inspired by modernization could be spotted here, for the physical novelty of technology typically wears off in a rather short span of time, enough for people to get acquainted with, and habituated to the operating commands. The true difficulty arises when people feel their deep-seated values are challenged by an alien culture, whose association with technology inscribes its superiority and tends to relegate host cultures to inferior positions.

Crucially important in studying the cultural changes ushered by modernity are the ways in which views on masculinity and femininity and the position, weight and agency accorded by society to each of the sexes have undergone reconfiguration, as modern

views of gender roles often clash with entrenched traditional values. Needless to say, a change of such calibre does not go down smoothly in the society, but instead sparks questions about its legitimacy at the very least. As members of a society in the process of drastic social changes, artists in literary and visual fields are not spared from the same questions and qualms on a daily basis, and unsurprisingly these doubts permeate their creations. It is almost incontrovertible to imagine a similar situation for Iranian cinema, since almost from its beginning, it reflected upon the ways in which modernity carves its indelible marks into the nation's social psyche.⁷¹ What is more, the majority of Iranian films could be safely placed under the umbrella of the genre of melodrama, a genre which in essence has its footings in conflicts within families and the friction between genders. Such an atomized model of the larger society provides an appropriate means for filmmakers to intimate their conscious or subconscious concerns over the social changes affecting gender roles. Irrespective of the qualities of these films or the message they tried to convey, family, as the venerated basic component of a traditional society and a place where the conventional roles for men and women are exercised, serves as a testing ground for investigating how a society's internal relations are affected by the rampant spread of alien expectations.

As the confrontation of Iranian and Western cultures has been a major thrust for Hatami to develop his unique style, one would ask how this status of shifting values is emplotted in his films and enacted by his characters. In my following study of Hatami's *Ghalandar* (1972), I will demonstrate how despite concessions to some of the tropes of

⁷¹ The second Iranian feature film (and the only extant Iranian silent feature) *Haji Agha, the Movie Actor* (Ovanes Oganians 1933) introduces a self-reflexive vantage point in directly tackling with cinema as an imported novelty that provokes a negative response from traditional layers of society.

commercial Iranian cinema- due to the director's choice to work within its boundaries, while transcending its limits- Hatami adds a complexity to his characters' feelings that distinguishes it from the trite morality typically advocated by mainstream films of the period. Similarly I will argue that characters in this film, although modelled after the gender stereotypes pervading commercial cinema, stick out for their unique traits. The ambivalent feelings they elicit not only conform to the overall melancholic mood integral to Hatami's filmic universe, but also to some measure reflect Hatami's own standpoint towards changes sweeping Iranian society; a position which despite his attachment to traditions differs from the kind of straightforward judgement intrinsic to *filmfarsi*.⁷²

Set in an unclarified period in the Qajar era- as the costumes hint - the film follows the story of its titular character, Ghalandar (Nasser Malekmotii), an honourable businessman who wishes to marry off his sister, Eshrat (Foroozan), in a token marriage in order to get rid of her persistent suitors. Sadegh (Yadollah Shirandami), a friend of Ghalandar who also looks up to him as a mentor is confided with this mission. But to fulfil this mission, Ghalandar stipulates that he must not touch his sister, or else he will pay with his blood. Later he makes Sadegh privy to the secret behind this threat, that he is secretly in love with Eshrat, and that Eshrat is not his real sister. To prove the veracity of his admiration for Ghalandar and his own claim to the title hero (*pahlavan*), Sadegh accedes and a wedding is thrown. Then in order to keep his promise, he tries to avoid his new wife and even leaves her to rush to the capital city, Tehran. But for all his efforts, Eshrat's insistence in claiming her conjugal rights on one hand and the taunts of his own

⁷² A pejorative term coined by French-educated critic Hooshang Kavooosi in reference to commercial Iranian cinema. According to him, this term succinctly defines these movies which purport to be both "Film" and "Farsi", while in truth they couldn't sustain either of these claims.

mother on the other ultimately bring him to consummate their marriage. Ghalandar gets wind of what happened, and enraged, kills Sadegh for not honouring his oath. Suspecting Ghalandar's involvement in the murder, Eshrat embarks on a self-debasing mode of revenge by fleeing home and joining a brothel. Her aim is to sully the name of his brother and inflict shame upon him. With paled respect and lacerated feelings, Ghalandar finally finds Eshrat and drags her back by force. When Eshrat fumes to expose her immeasurable loathing towards him by stating that wishes him dead, Ghalandar decides to take his own life by cutting his artery. Following his death, Eshrat, who has decided to dispense with her ignoble past, accepts a marriage proposal from Davood (Bahman Mofid), Ghalandar's sidekick, and together they set off on a pilgrimage in order for her to carry out an official repentance.

Formally consistent with Hatami's string of experiments in cultivating his unique style, *Ghalandar* features characters who strike a pronounced chord with two copiously deployed stereotypical icons of pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, the tough guy (or *jahel*) and the prostitute. The ways in which Hatami's characters both embody and yet deviate from the conventional models hints at his personal position towards drifting concepts of masculinity and femininity as one marked by a distinct plaintive ambiguity.

The tough guy, usually referred to as *jahel*,⁷³ or at times alternatively *luti*, as I will explain were apt vehicles for embodying the reaction fomented by the wide-ranging social changes that modernity brought in tow. Along with other cinematic stereotypes including their polar opposites, the *dandies*, they were marked by elements of "excess and inappropriateness" that in turn underscored their symbolic function while signaling

⁷³ Literally meaning "illiterate" or "ignorant" (Dabashi 26)

actual exaggerated responses to modernity in the society. In brief, these characters helped to negotiate relations between “premodernity and homosociality” with “modernity and heterosexuality” (Naficy, *Volume 1* 14) as an imperative of modernization. In case of *jahels* (and *lutis*), their image has been habitually tied into to a reactionary commitment to, using Naficy’s words, “an ersatz and formulaic native culture” (Naficy, *Volume 1* 263).

The historical pedigree of the filmic tough guy figure has been invariably brought up in discussions of this character type, though some writers viewed the nature of this connection as more of a parody (Dabashi 26) than a direct expression of the native culture. What almost all writers are unanimous about is the conviction that the tough guy or *jahel* is an embodiment of a male chauvinist agenda that champions reactionary views on the position of women in society. This in part could be imputed to the historical background of this character. As different writers explained, the *jahel*’s roots can be traced as far back as mediaeval times (around the 10th century), when the all-male groups of *fotowat* were formed. The members of these groups, later known as *ayyaran* (the plural form for *ayyar*), congregated around the idea of fidelity to certain codes of honour in which they took pride, although in practice they incorporated deception and trickery into their daily affairs (Dabashi 26; Sadr, *Iranian* 111). In reference to a more recent precursor of the contemporary *jahel*, the term *luti* was commonly used from 19th century with a connotation similar to that of the preceding *ayyar*. Sadr also points out that *ayyars* of the older time were also engaged in acrobatic and wrestling performances (111). It might worth noting that around 16th century and even earlier, the term *luti* was likewise used for entertainers and jesters (“Luti” par1). Naficy also goes to claim that even in the 19th

century – during the Qajar era- the term had acquired a bifurcated meaning and could be applied to both “entertainers and urban social bandits” (Naficy, *Volume 2* 267). In its linguistic origins, *luti* invokes an additional meaning which is at odds with the traditional connotation of chivalry; it could also refer to a pederast (Esbati 25). All these, along with the trickster element intrinsic to *ayyars* can prefigure the contradictory tendencies associated with the “tough guys,” including contemporary incarnations of the *jahel*. To differentiate between cinematic characters who gravitate towards one or other of these conflicting inclinations, Naficy applies the term *luti* more specifically apropos of the chivalrous model,⁷⁴ while the malevolent rogue whose villainy inspires little sympathy is referred to as the *lat*⁷⁵ (Naficy, *Volume 2* 267).

In a similar spirit, the political agency of *lutis* was anything but uncomplicated. They could be toyed with by social power-holders to assist them in consolidating their influence. By the same token, their position towards the law vastly varied from alliance to insurgence (Naficy, *Volume 2* 282). All the same, this did not imply their separation from the corpus of society, nor did it countervail the role of patron they exercised towards the fragile groups of women or the oppressed, or their frequent generosity, for that matter (Esbati 25). According to Naficy, in real life tough guys were more prone to form rival groups instead of espousing a patriotic cause. Their cinematic representation, on the other

⁷⁴ This is also in keeping with Iranica’s definition of *luti* when saying “they were supposed to work for their living, help others, and defend their neighborhood and town” (“Luti” par5).

⁷⁵ To distinguish the deadbeat ruffians from the chivalrous *luti*, the veteran actor and dubber, Morteza Ahmadi- who beside his cinematic career is regarded as a pundit on the culture of old Tehran- uses a different term that incidentally emerged as title of one of Hatami’s films: *Baba Shamal*. Ahmadi clarifies that a *baba shamal* was closer in his habits and way of life to a *jahel* (44). Hatami, however, has used this title in a more jocular capacity, for his character although happy-go-luck to a degree, is leagues away from a villain.

hand, seems to redesign these characters as guardians of traditional values confront changes linked to modernization which gained new momentum following the White Revolution, the name the Shah used for his reform agenda implemented in 1963 (Naficy, *Volume 2* 310). Aimed to instill modern social values in conjunction with technological modernization, the White Revolution appears to have inspired a flourish in the presence of tough guys on the screen as well as a change in their role and agency in films' narratives. This recalibration later overlapped with the formation of the Iranian New Wave, some of whose directors built on the tough guy figure to gestate their own subversive version of the character, one capable of carrying a message of dissent. What resulted was a climb in the number of bitter, ill-fated tough guy characters on the screen whose difference from their more benevolent precursors was not difficult to grasp. This recruitment of the tough guy (*jahel* and *luti*) was in keeping with the anti-establishment tendencies with which the character had been traditionally defined.

There was an additional rationale behind the ubiquity of tough guy (*jahel*) and stray woman stereotypes in Iranian films. As stated in a roundtable by Ali Mortazavi, a magazine editor and occasional producer, and Aman Manteghi, a director affiliated with the commercial stream, such limited options were caused by inordinate restrictions for which censorship can be held only partly accountable (Naficy, *Volume 2* 176, 307). Unlike other social and professional classes who through their representatives were able to show an extreme concern about their portrayal in Iranian films, which at times presented challenges for filmmakers,⁷⁶ these two outcast groups normally had no means

⁷⁶ This problem was not limited to pre-1979 cinema. A more recent example was the screening of Behrouz Afkhami's *Hemlock* (2000) which received a furious reaction from

to voice their discontent.⁷⁷ No wonder that filmmakers who coveted liberty, at least in the professional sense, chose to turn their camera towards these marginalized types, creating in effect what Naficy defines as the “tough guy” genre in Iranian cinema. In Hamid Reza Sadr’s opinion, this obsessive focus on tough guy characters is also illustrative of the predominance of a conservative position that the Iranian films had to adopt in face of myriad pressures and restrictions of those days. Sadr believes that these characters in their different incarnations either advocate traditional values in an upbeat tone, or alternatively act as bitter rebels, but the futility of their attempt for change is insinuated through their eventual demise (Sadr, *Iranian* 110). Either way, he believes, these “tough guy” films ended up acknowledging the modernization project pursued vigorously by the royal regime.

As Sadr points out, tough guy characters in cinema and their literary predecessors took on the job of representing conflicts besetting Iranian society (Sadr, *Iranian* 111). Therefore in the 1960s, at a time when a negotiation with an alien and invasive set of values became an imperative, these characters make their presence known in a more pronounced manner than ever. This is specifically pertinent to the *jahels*, the modernized version of the *lutis*, who made up the bulk of cinematic representations of tough guys, for while they began to avail themselves of the some external manifestations of modernity, deep inside their commitment to the traditional native culture was intact. In Sadr’s view, the frequent demise of these characters can be ascribed to this conflicting inclination

the Nurses Association, who had found the character of the seductive nurse an affront to the profession of nursing.

⁷⁷ A claim to similar effect was later repeated by the author director, Bahram Beizai, during a lecture in 1977 (Esbati 25).

towards tradition and modernity they host, and their resulting anxieties. (Sadr, *Iranian* 111).

With regard to the different terms used for the tough guy character, I need to make a clarification at this point. While *jahel* has been used unequivocally for the contemporary version of this character, *luti* instead can refer to either the *jahel* or his immediate 19th century precursor. For the purpose of my discussion, it is necessary to highlight the distinction between different embodiments of this character. So here *luti* is used only in the second sense to refer to earlier incarnations of the tough guy.

As already mentioned, tough guys also makes their presence explicit in the alternative, more artistically ambitious products of Iranian cinema, collectively known as the Iranian New Wave. Despite pursuing his unique concerns, Hatami as a member of the group of young directors who initiated this movement, had his own share in dealing with this omnipresent figure. In point of fact, *Ghalandar* was not Hatami's first foray in charting the stories of tough guys. In his second film *Towghi/Ring-Necked Dove* (1970), he had already presented characters that in their behaviours and habits very much shared the traits of *jahels*. The connection is also established further at the level of casting in that the leading male roles were played by Behrouz Vossoughi and Nasser Malekmotii, who were just fresh from working on Masoud Kimiai's *Gheysar*, reputedly one of the key New Wave pictures that put a new spin on the *jahel* character. The anecdotal accounts verify the idea of a connection between two films and that Hatami was partly inspired by the grossing and popularity of *Gheysar* in making his own tough-guy film (Toosi, "Mardi" 65).

What sets *Ghalandar* apart from *Towghi* is setting of their respective stories. There is no exact indication as to when *Towghi* is set, but judging from the costumes and the presence of a modern transport vehicle- a bus- it presumably takes place closer to our time.⁷⁸ By contrast, the story of *Ghalandar* takes place sometime prior to the 1920s and the Pahlavi era, a period when the icons of modernity were almost nowhere in sight and- in line with a romantic stance to the past- had not yet blighted the purity of traditional life.⁷⁹ In consequence, the central character in *Ghalandar* comes closer to the traditional *luti* than to the *jahel* model and unlike the latter figure, his plight and eventual death is less determined by an internal conflict over values.

In his study of tough-guy films, Naficy chooses to divide the genre into two distinct subcategories of *dash-mashti* and *jaheli* (or *kolah-makhmali/ velvet hat*) films (*Volume 2* 269). The difference, according to him, does not reside only in the period the story is set in, but also in the way the tough guy is pictured. His description implies a connection between the White Revolution and the development of the latter subgenre representing modern tough guys, since he dates the beginning of this subgenre to the time shortly after the inauguration of the Shah's reform plans. Under Naficy's model, *Ghalandar* would be placed- in opposition to *Towghi*- under the rubric of *dash-mashti* films. This additional categorization however proves to be less tenable than it might sound. Granted, tough-guy films underwent a drastic change in terms of characters and narrative arcs in the wake of the enforcement of the Shah's reformative plans. Yet, this mutation can be still better explained in evolutionary terms rather as a break down of the

⁷⁸ Nevertheless in referring to the police, the characters use the term *amnieh* which is almost an outdated term for the period the visuals of the film conjure up.

⁷⁹ The only non-traditional prop in *Ghalandar* is a gramophone that decorates the brothel.

genre. Indeed a search through the history of Iranian cinema does not produce enough titles to substantiate the presence of *dash-mashti* films as an independently definable entity matching Naficy's description ("concerned with premodern, rural toughs from the turn of the twentieth century") (*Volume 2* 270).

If we consider the release of *Gheysar* the turning point for the genre, the majority of films produced earlier still used the modern *jahel*, although bereft of the pessimism and bleakness that Kimiai's film had introduced. Remarkably, the tough guy films with period settings, including *Ghalandar*, were mostly produced following the success of *Gheysar*, when making *jaheli* movies became the order of the day. In light of this history, these retrospective stories are plainly variations on a theme, offering a touch of novelty for an audience overwhelmed by the typical image of tough guy. It also could be argued that this period version of the genre dovetailed more snugly with Hatami's vision and his preoccupation with the past. The ideal model of the tough guy who could lend himself to Hatami's imagination was not a typical *jahel* who already picked up some Western cultural traits at the expense of his traditional values, but the unadulterated version of the *luti* (That could be a reason why some critics to consider *Towghi* with its quasi-*jahel* characters an anomaly in the early part of Hatami's career).

Notwithstanding commonalities between the eponymous lead character of *Ghalandar* and the trendy *jahels* that stem from their genealogical connection, Hatami's rendition of the tough guy puts its peculiar characteristics into display. For one thing, *Ghalandar* is pictured as a self-employed businessman who runs his own store, a position that to some extent accounts for the respect he is shown receiving at the beginning of the film. This puts him in direct contrast to the recurrent image of *jahels* who most often are

pictured as rootless, parasitical characters, living a marginal existence on the fringes of the community (Naficy, *Volume 2* 281). Unlike the honourable Ghalandar, contemporary *jahels* were in general engaged in “non-productive or pseudo-jobs”, if at all, a finding that corroborates their incompatibility with the tenets of modernity as the force propelling productivity in a modernizing society (Talebinezhad, “Kharej” 30).

By virtue of his profession, Ghalandar exhibits affinities to the character of Mostafa (the uncle) in *Towghi*, a connection intertextually established by having both characters played by the veteran actor of commercial cinema, Nasser Malekmotii. In the earlier film, Malekmotii is cast in the role of a reformed *jahel*. Fed up with his own experience of a carefree life of vagrancy, he heeds his nephew to mend his ways and lead a decent and responsible life. To some extent, his character is modeled after Farman, the reformed *jahel* brother of Gheysar (again played by Malekmotii) in Kimiai’s film who is slain early in the film which sends his brother on the track of vengeance. But unlike Farman, who is a butcher – a profession that makes him more likely to return to violence of his older days- Hatami envisioned his reformed tough guy as a carpet trader who owns his business, a feature that carries over to *Ghalandar*.

Making his protagonist a businessman also provides another opportunity for Hatami to envisage his favorite location, the bazaar. Since his first feature film, *Hassan the Bald*, the bazaar has been a commonplace setting for Hatami’s characters to roam, with varying degrees of dramatic pertinence. Setting the action in the bazaar allowed Hatami to organize a visual catalogue of the traditional Iranian professions while

underscoring the centrality of this place to Iranians' traditional life.⁸⁰ *Ghalandar* opens in the bazaar to re-emphasize predominance of the traditional values, which are then questioned, challenged and re-affirmed over the course of the film. As we learn later Ghalandar is a businessman working in the same locale, a circumstance that augments his image as the representative of traditional life. Sutured in the context of a traditional mercantile system, Hatami's central character thereby experiences anguish at one level beyond that of the *jahel*. His affliction does not stem so much from an internalized conflict, as is typically the case with the established figure of the *jahel*, but has its roots in a traditional gender paradigm based on abstinence and social separation. Meanwhile in the absence of representatives of modernity, challenges inflicted upon this paradigm in this film, foreshadow the rampant cracks soon to spread throughout society in response to the intrusion of a culture advocating different gender rights and values. Interestingly near the end of the film, the same location of the bazaar serves in a different capacity to enframe the crisis. Here the indignant Eshrat, in her futile struggle to release herself from Ghalandar's grip, publicly showcases her resistance and defiance, while Ghalandar in an inversion of his earlier complacent stroll, has to ask his servant to clear their way through the crowd.

A key to understanding how Hatami's ambivalent and enquiring standpoint towards traditional values- that moves him away from a rapt salute- lies in the expressed motives behind his choice of stories featuring tough guys. Not to dismiss the lure of the chance of duplicating *Gheysar*'s box office success as a major thrust, Hatami himself

⁸⁰ Early on, in *Hassan the bald*, the bazaar is the entry point of the tale's lazybones hero into the world he shied away from. As a later example, in *Haji Washington* (1982), Hatami opts to display his protagonist's progress through the bazaar, a scene that would reinforce the idea of his isolation from the body of the society.

points to his fascination with the idea of “exploring love among *jahels* and *lutis*” (qtd. in Talebinezhad, “Saye” 171-172) that lead him into helming *Towghi*. Given Hatami’s laudatory, albeit elegiac fixation on theme of love and its transcending, almost purifying capacity- epitomized in *Desiderium* (1977) - it is not difficult to discern the impediment imposed on -or intrinsically harboured by - the tough guy as the icon of traditional values, serving as a device to foreground the pernicious facets of a culture the director nevertheless continued to uphold. The salience of the part played by the tough guy figure in exposing problems of a traditional culture is both socially and cinematically grounded. In cinema the tough guy, more often than not, has been pictured as a footloose character, more prone to indulge in leisure activities with a bevy of (male) friends rather than to anchor himself in the family institution. To some extent popular by virtue of his familiar character traits of generosity and helpfulness, the boundary between the tough guy’s private and social life often blurs in filmic narratives (Esbati 25; Karimi 19). Such a compromised personal life turns a “tragic hopeless love” (Talebinezhad, “Kharej” 30) among other things, into a recurrent hallmark of the filmic representation of the tough guy, and in this way not only effortlessly lends itself to Hatami’s vision of forlorn love, but also belies the contradictory forces within tradition to which both the family and tough guys are intimately tied. Simply put, the crux of *Ghalandar*’ narrative, as one writer points out, is the tension a traditional man experiences between aspiring to epitomize an eastern guy and his own romantic feelings (Zamani 257). Such a tension can be defined as inherent to traditional conceptions of masculinity in Iranian culture.

As hybrid creatures both on and off the screen, tough guys demonstrated a dubitable morale. In general their pious side has been externally projected through their

frequenting of the religious sites and taking part in spiritual ceremonies and practices. (Talebinezhad, “Kharej” 31). All the same, inasmuch as their behaviour was generally perceived as a contradictory blend of pleasure and abstinence, the sincerity of their spirituality remained subject to suspicion (Karimi 19). In his discussion of tough guy characters, Naficy enlists his binary model of good and evil tough guys, to wit the *luti* and the *lat*, for the purpose of explicating the contradictory tendencies of these characters. In his model, spirituality is among the criteria that have to be proven in order to ratify the *luti*’s claim to his title (Naficy, *Volume 2* 277).

It is in this light that one can make sense of Sadegh’s decision to follow the request of his mentor and to prove his name worthy of getting prefixed by the title *pahlavan/hero* – another designation closely connected to the tradition of *ayyaran* and the character of the benevolent *luti*⁸¹ - by avoiding Eshrat. But as Sadegh fails to live up to his promise and sensual pleasures overpower his ascetic will, the presence of a purely spiritual tough guy in the highly sensualised context of Iranian cinema, specially in the 70s was a rarity. In fact, Hatami’s tough guys can still be seen as exemplars of an equivocal morality in their own ways. The main characters of both *Towghi* (Morteza) and *Ghalandar*, in one way or another, buckle under the heft of the sensual attraction. Later however, both end up finding a refuge in the sanctuary of shrines, where they demonstrate their heartfelt religious dedication. In *Ghalandar* the sincerity of this spiritual retreat is more tangible because the protagonist, despite being affected by his sexual drives, did not actually get involved in a sinful carnal fulfilment. Withdrawal from the physical manifestation of desire is what brings *Ghalandar* close to a bona fide

⁸¹ Both (benevolent) *luti* and *pahlavan* were expected to act as the defenders of the weak and downtrodden.

virtuous *luti* who, as Naficy cites from Bahman Mofid (a familiar face of tough guy who also appeared in *Ghalandar* in which he played Davood), was expected to abstain from sexual intercourse before marriage (Naficy, *Volume 2* 277)

The complexity of Ghalandar's character in the original script where the kinship between Eshrat and Ghalandar was to be genuine surpassed its onscreen representation. Hatami claimed that what inspired him to write the screenplay is a common assumption about Iranian men's uneasiness on the occasion of their sisters' weddings (Heydari 61). One should not overlook the fact that *lutis*, *ayyars*, *pahlavans* and likes – unlike the more individual figure of *jahel* -were usually formed into all-male groups. In *Ghalandar*, such a homosocial society is visualized in *Zoorkhane*, the hallowed arena for traditional athletes to perform “ritualized and spectacular exercises” (Naficy Volume 2 282) and remarkably the second place in which Ghalandar is shown. By displaying a landmark of a masculine culture, this sequence builds upon Ghalandar's initial appearance in the bazaar and reinforces his links with tradition as well as with the image of *luti* as a chivalrous figure, while at the same time throwing the centrality of the concept of homosociality to his character into relief. Although Ghalandar merely visits the arena and does not take part in the physical activities of wrestling and traditional athletics, the way Sadegh treats him as a mentor insinuates his background as a respected member of this circle, now seemingly retired from competition and taking on the duty of overseeing the younger members of their society.⁸² The significance of this male brotherhood as a prime value is further stressed through the conversation following Sadegh's wrestling, in which

⁸² There are strong parallels between Ghalandar and the character of Luti Heydar in Hatami's previous film, *Baba Shamal*, bolstered by casting the same actor in both roles, though unlike Ghalandar, Luti Heydar virtually has his own gang, though over the course of the film he retires from leading them.

Ghalandar tries to illuminate Sadegh about the true meaning of *pahlavani* (chivalry), while in the background of their two-shot we can see the rest of their community.

It is safe to claim that incestuous desire, which originally motivated Ghalandar's selfish oppression of Eshrat, underscores the aberrant nature of an overbearing homosocial culture which deems a contact with the opposite sex permissible only in inmost circle of family. The present version of the film, however, is partly stripped of its subversive tendency with a few lines of dialogue that changed Eshrat into Ghalandar's adopted sister. It is interesting that such a conservative change happened in the early 1970s when filmmakers in Iran were gradually moving towards piling up the ribald contents and exhibiting an exponential openness with regard to sexuality. On the other hand Hatami, despite embracing the subversive theme of incest, never in his career approached sexuality with a similar level of candour. Even in *Ghalandar* the lovemaking scene between Sadegh and Eshrat is portrayed through the self-containing artistic imagery of the multiplied reflections of their bodies, which reaches an almost abstract beauty. The ambiguity seems to be the bread and butter of Hatami's sensibility, because years later in the mid 80s he complained about the expectations laid on him- as a consequence of being a director from the pre-revolutionary period- to adopt a frank tone, something he considered detrimental to his style (Farrokhzad 72). It is interesting, then, to find that the subversive aspect of the story was so disturbing to the film's producer that, despite Hatami's relatively restrained portrayal of sexuality, the story had to be defanged by getting closer to the archetypal story of the tough guy and his ineffable love,

as had already been depicted in films like Masoud Kimiai's *Dash Akol* (1971) (Zamani 257).⁸³

The changes made to *Ghalandar* allude to the economics of commercial cinema, with which Hatami, unlike some directors associated with the New Wave, had engaged in an almost cordial manner, for a while. The situation readily shows itself in the casting of the film. Hatami did not hesitate to recruit superstars of Iranian cinema who were already cursed, as it were, by their association with run-of-the-mill, vapid *filmfarsis*. Hatami had articulated his willingness to collaborate with professionals, for he believed in cinema as a professional enterprise; but he simultaneously nurtured a desire to assist these stars in breaking free from the stereotypes in which they had become ossified. In an interview conducted a few years later he explained:

The point is that these so-called 'superstars' sometimes want to play in a film just to satisfy their personal ambitions and give a better performance [...] They usually bring things such as stereotypes and features of the roles they are known for along with them. The director must be extremely careful that these stereotypes do not end up in his film (Vezel 18).

He also pointed to the pressure flowing from spectators' expectations to find their favourites in typical roles. In casting, as well as other production aspects of *Ghalandar* and his two previous pictures- Hatami tried to take an intermediate position vis-à-vis

⁸³ Worthy of note is also this fact that the modified dialogue points to the hand of fate pulling the strings of this tragic story. This could be counted as another example to the leeway supplied by incorporating ethos of fatalism into the fabric of narratives of Iranian films. As such, the films were able to pass muster with censorship, despite underlying perverse sides to their plots (Naficy, *Volume 2* 218) Still the incestuous desire, despite the absence of any erotic touch between *Ghalandar* and Eshrat seemed too hard to stomach even if destiny is to blame.

commercial cinema. While incorporating some characters and formulas from mainstream films, he chose to tweak them, though not out of recognition. He crafted roles for his actors that conferred further complexity upon their already existing persona.

Hatami's endeavour was to straddle the line between the commercial cinema and the more avant-garde register of the New Wave movement. This middle-position tactic was shared by another seminal figure of the new wave, Masoud Kimiai, whose career choices in some respects reverberate and correspond with the ambivalent position Hatami assumes in his films in relation to tradition. In fact the commercial cinema of the period was generally defined and- partially by the same token- denigrated as one fabricated for the mass consumption with no wish to elevate or ameliorate the popular taste. The target group of these films, despite taking in some of the external features of modernity, still kept their allegiance to aspects of local traditions. On the other hand, the New Wave also consisted of films that audaciously attempted to push the boundaries of formal expression. But the makers of these films, in their quest to achieve formal complexity- a goal itself informed and triggered by a familiarity with European art cinema- displayed an extreme departure from traditional popular sensibilities. Granted that the relationship between commercial films and the traditional culture in Iran was exploitive in regard to both content and form, such a superficial relationship – which might even result from the cinematic illiteracy of filmmakers- was of much greater appeal to cinemagoers who felt being alienated by the modernist vision and language of the alternative films of the time.

Aside from the style of the film and its attempt to evoke a bygone era of unmarred traditional life, Hatami's recourse to stock characters associated with commercial cinema in films like *Ghalandar* was another means for him to strike a chord with the sensibilities

of the average cinemagoers. Similarly, in casting familiar actors in principal roles, Hatami invited the audience on board, even though his presentation of the familiar figures turned out to be unconventional. His casting, particularly in this film, therefore merits further attention. Nasser Malekmotii, the leading actor, had a long history of appearing in tough guy roles which continued unabated after *Ghalandar* till 1979. Hatami had collaborated with Malekmotii on his two previous films, though there his roles were relegated to the second place in favour of the younger (*Towghi*) or more light-hearted (*Baba Shamal*) characters. In *Ghalandar*, however, his character comes to front and centre and despite his idiosyncrasies, conjures up the archetype of tough guy he epitomized through his previous roles.

In the three consecutive films Hatami made in early 70s – *Towghi*, *Baba Shamal* and *Ghalandar*- the stories concern two generations of tough guys whose differences are established through the consummation of love by the younger group, while the older guys are only allowed to entertain the promise of pleasure. The difference between *Ghalandar* and the other films lies in the shift of focus to the older bitterly love-smitten character. What makes this version of Hatami's tough guy stand out is the strong sense of abstinence exuded from *Ghalandar*, despite his being in the thrall of erotic forces. Nevertheless the ending of the film further complicates *Ghalandar*'s character as a moral hybrid, for in the face of Eshrat's overpowering hatred and his own irremediably injured affections, he terminates the story of his life through the sacrilegious act of suicide.

In *Ghalandar*, depravity- more pronounced in the original version- leads to deprivation rather than fulfilment, and this adds to the bitterness of the story. Unlike the leading *jahels* of many other films, *Ghalandar* is not pictured amidst any physical sexual

activity whatsoever, not even to temporarily or vicariously placate a desire towards a forbidden object. He flaunts his difference by staying away from sites of pleasure. What is more, he even tries to enforce this abstinence as a rule the violation of which would be punishable only by death. In this respect, he resembles Luti Heydar in *Baba Shamal* whose sudden initial appearance that interrupts a clandestine flirting. Apparently these presentations of tough guys are related to the character's roots in traditional culture, which, of course, attracted Hatami. To refrain from sexual activity till marriage, which appears to be an ethical code of the *lutis*, underlines the noble side of the tough guy character and contrasts with the immoral image of the *lat/lout* (Naficy, *Volume 2* 277). The more contemporary figure of the *jahel*, although placed as the hero in many films, tellingly exhibited a deviation from this self (and other) suppressing trend by not abstaining from physical intimacy. Of course we should not lose sight of the fact that during the 1970s, Iranian cinema -like many other national cinemas- began abandoning its former timidity towards sexuality and inundating screens with bold, risqué images heretofore unseen (Sadr, *Iranian* 149). Consequently, and also to some extent reflecting the reality of contemporaneous tough guys, these characters in cinema were commonly pictured in ignoble set-ups and in company of women of easy virtue.⁸⁴ In this deviation from convention in favour of constructing a hero of an older time, Hatami not only establishes his position as an artist who manipulates stereotypes to match his own authorial vision, he also places further stress on the traditional paradigm of the separation of the sexes, underpinned by codes of a homosocial society in which the expression of feminine voices is at loggerheads with communal unity and integrity. By highlighting the

⁸⁴ A good early example is Kimiai's *Gheysar* in which the protagonist has a one-night stand with a dancer who is the concubine of the object of his vendetta.

dynamics of gender relations in a society largely observant of traditional values, Hatami gives a clue to the origins of social anxieties looming at the instigation of modernity.

To elucidate idiosyncrasy in Hatami's treatment of masculinity within the confines of a cinema brimming with tough guy characters, it might be appropriate to draw a comparison between *Ghalandar* and *Dash Akol* (1970), a key film associated with the New Wave with a similar theme and period setting. As with *Ghalandar*, *Dash Akol*'s plot is organized around perils of an impossible love for the tough guy- an old-fashioned *luti*- and its fatal repercussions. If *Towghi* came on the heels of *Gheysar* to build on its sensational success, *Ghalandar* again draws a profound and noticeable parallel with *Dash Akol*, although in this case no anecdotal evidence is available to establish the actual connection of two projects. Discussed in Naficy's book as an example of what he defined as *dash-mashti* subgenre, Kimiai- whose films were often identified as lugubrious odes to male friendship and labelled by critics as overtly masculine- employed in *Dash Akol* many of tropes associated with tough-guy films, which he in fact had a crucial role in establishing. At the same time, his authorial vision and directorial competence- not to mention the reputation of the literary source material- elevated *Dash Akol* to its distinguished position. From its opening, *Dash Akol* introduces itself as a film built upon a prevailing masculine violence. The title sequence is comprised of the images from the final fight between the titular *luti* protagonist and his nemesis, the *lout/lat* Kaka Rostam in negative format. As such, the film draws upon the archetypical conflict of good and evil and even in order to heighten this impression by setting the final confrontation between *Dash Akol* and Kaka Rostam, in a *tekye*, the place where the traditional theatre of *Ta'zieh*- itself presenting a religious account of fight between good and evil- is held.

Through parallels of this ilk, the film's fight scene is invested with heroism. On the contrary, in *Ghalandar*, Hatami nearly avoids stirring images of violence. Even when he presents fights or chases, the effect is far from the dramatized machete duel in *Dash Akol*.

Equally important are the slightly different moral stances Hatami and Kimiai have assigned to their *luti* characters. Unable to declare his love to Marjan- partly because of their difference in age and partly because of being entrusted with the responsibility of running the affairs of her household - and resigned to her marriage, Dash Akol eases his pain by nightly frequenting the tavern and turning himself to a drunkard. On Marjan's wedding night, he finally gives in to the dancer's heartfelt plea and joins her in bed. Their lovemaking is intercut with Marjan and her husband preparing to go to their nuptial bed, suggesting Dash Akol having a vicarious intercourse with the object of his love. This is further emphasized by having him passionately squeezing Marjan's handkerchief while his body is clung onto dancer's embrace. However right before heading off to fight the decisive duel, Dash Akol returns to the holy arena of *Zoorkhane* in order to regain his strength and chivalrous manner by – as he verbalizes- forgetting about his lustful desire. *Ghalandar's* morality on the other hand is slightly different. Injured by Eshrat and taunted by the people, he seeks solitude in a religious site, without resorting to the sinful acts of drinking or displacing the object of his desire on to another body. In comparison and despite the more audacious nature of his desire, *Ghalandar* exhibits a more straightforward psychology. At the end of the day, both characters share the fatal wound of impossible love that drives them on track of self-annihilation. Although Dash Akol faces a slightly different fate since his body is pierced by the mortal blow of Kaka Rostam's machete, as Naficy has pointed out, the film tries to intimate that he suffered

this fate as a consequence of his love for Marjan (Naficy, *Volume 2* 274). In general, and despite the particular touches of either of these *auteur* directors, the fate of Ghalandar is no different from what Kimiai had prescribed for his analogously forlorn hero; he, too, is denied a chance for transformation and death is the only remedy for the misery inflicted upon him by the impossibility of love.

As a modern embodiment of the tough guy character, who does not take an oath to seek perfection by refraining from corporal or material pleasures, *jahel* of Iranian film was frequently shown in *cafés*. An almost sleazy, low-grade cabaret, *café* by showcasing the performances of female singers or dancers, the *café* was a place for the tough guy to exert his domineering gaze on the feminine object on display. Moreover, the brawls that broke out in such places, which had entered *filmfarsis* as a formulated scene, lent the *jahel* a space to manifest his aggressive nature, which, from the standpoint of a macho culture would be interpreted as his masculinity. All in all, the *café* setting manifestly evoked the connotations of an essentially masculine microcosm (Sadr, Iranian 118). But the inclusion of *café* scenes was not simply impelled by a surge in the number of tough-guy films. As one of the locations abundantly used in the context of *filmfarsi* from early on, it also consistently supplied filmmakers with a good excuse to include the indispensable singing or dancing sequences.⁸⁵ Considering the period in which *Ghalandar* is set, the *café* with its openly Western name sounds a less plausible place to make a presence here. The habitual site of pleasure is therefore envisaged in the timeless yet

⁸⁵ Naficy justifies the ubiquity of singing and dance scenes to an existing “cross-fertilizing relation between film producers, cinema owners, and cabaret owners”. (*Volume 2* 176)

more unobtrusive environment of a brothel, where the male customers in the most forthright manner communicate the nature of their desire towards prostitutes.

This alternative locus of indulgence- which seems to crop up more than before in films from the 1970s, owing to the inclination of Iranian cinema to bank on the currency of sex, and the relative liberties conferred upon it in this regard- still offered a stage for Hatami to orchestrate singing scenes, performed by pronouncedly iniquitous women. This clear connection between music and immorality effortlessly ties into religious views- a major thread in the fabrics of Iranian traditional values- branding the class of entertainers with ignobility, a fact that resulted in an imbrication of the figures of dancer/singer and the prostitute, traceable to the early Islamic period⁸⁶ (Sadr, *Iranian* 76; Floor, *Sexual* 176). Aside from this disparaging line of thought- or probably as its consequence- historical facts reveal that back in the day, female entertainers – who according to Floor outnumbered their male colleagues- took on the role of purveyors of pleasure. In effect, female dancers embodied a co-existence of art and pleasure that made itself explicit in the suggestive contents of their performance (Floor, *Theatre* 41). With this historical overlap, Hatami had no trouble in responding to a commercial pressure for the inclusion of dancing and singing scenes in his film without putting the logic of the narrative at stake. At the same time, the clandestine nature of this substitute location better resonated with the traditional discourse of gender separation outside the family, which kept the moments of exposure to illicit feminine charm well under wraps. A telling scene in this respect involves the arrival of a police agent who wreaks chaos in the

⁸⁶ Mid-Seventh century to Mid-Thirteenth century. Floor for example refers to a 12th century story from Attar's *Ilahi-name* about a prostitute from Mecca who was also a singer.

brothel, and prompts prostitutes and their pimps to rapidly camouflage the scene by feigning a wedding ceremony.

What is particularly interesting about Hatami's film is the way it depicts a rebellion against the traditional overpowering masculinity- delegated by Ghalandar- enacted in a setting that by definition caters to the masculine desire at the expense of female exploitation. To depict this deviant rebellion, Hatami once again casts the female superstar of commercial cinema, Foroozan who often appeared in the role of a female dancer. While she had already appeared in Hatami's *Baba Shamal*, her role in that film had little association with the luscious characters she presented in commercial cinema, save for her having been the object of desire for the both main tough guys (Baba Shamal and Luti Heydar). On the other hand, her role in *Ghalandar* falls back on some of associations and expectations built around her stereotypical dancer character.

To get a better grasp of the Eshrat's function in the plot, it is worth briefly revisiting the most common pattern of presenting women in Iranian cinema, a pattern inherited from Iranian literature. Generally speaking, the women in Iranian films fall under one of the two categories of stalwart, caring and moral-bound woman or her foil, the seductress, typically embodied in the figure of the singer/dancer. In keeping with the conventions of the cinematic representation in some other modernizing countries - such as Japan and China in the 1930, as explored by Miriam Hansen's piece on "Vernacular Modernism"⁸⁷- Iranian cinema soon enough exploited this bifurcated image of femininity to communicate a simplified model of the repercussions of a shift in values for which the new invasive culture was held as the main culprit. Therefore this split helped the

⁸⁷ This essay is published in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Natasa Durovicová and Kathleen Newman.

filmmakers to build up a distinct polarity between traditional and progressive women, respectively represented by their moral and immoral demeanour. This simplified model later underwent further alterations, as the flourishing portrayals of dancer/singer/prostitute in the 70s coincided with the relative glorification of this figure and her gradual shift to the object of sympathy. In a twist on their previous roles, the new singer/dancers were humanized through the committing of a commendable sacrificial act by giving up her love and helping the straying male protagonist reunite with his wife. In this revised model, it was now the traditional wife who is to blame for the hero's leading astray. This shift seems to be in line with the official policy in propagating and inculcating top-down social change in favour of the Western values (Eshghi, "Vasilei" 21-23).

An examination of Hatami's career reveals that he himself frequently wrought his own image of femininity around this divided model mentioned above. Two of his earlier films (*Hassan the Bald* and *Baba Shamal*) feature characters succinctly definable as "evil women" who scarcely draw out audience sympathy (Zamani 252). In contrast, *Ghalandar*'s only major female character is Eshrat, whose steadfastness in first pursuing her man, and then seeking vengeance for him, and the more complex reactions she elicits, separates her from the simplified models of either the ethereal woman or the prostitute (even though she would be carrying the latter title by profession). Even in the similar narrative of *Dash Akol*, marginalized femininity is congealed in the customary dyad of ethereal (Marjan) and earthly (dancer) woman, although in Marjan's wedding night sequence, Kimiai underscores the illusory nature of this boundary. This, however, differs

from the singularity of the female character in *Ghalandar* and her active participation in driving the narrative.

Of course Eshrat's transformation from the chaste, family-bound woman to a prostitute is in no way the only instance of metamorphosis of this nature in Iranian cinema. In fact, innocent girls who become fallen women had been deployed in profusion in Iranian commercial cinema. Earlier films had interwoven this transformation into the discourse of migration from village to the city, to reaffirm a shambolic and nightmarish vision of the urban space –the unmistakable locus of modernity- rife with vileness and deceit, which spoils the purity of the naïve country girl. These films, whether ending with the return of the girl to the village, or in those set in the city, to the safety of a family circle through the help of the a chivalrous hero, invariably depicted the woman's entrapment into the indecent profession as an unsophisticated fruit of a feminine blunder or folly, only to rehash the long-standing archetypical image of woman as the origin of trouble. The reason behind assigning such a simplified rationale to her action could be seen in accordance with proclivities of a patriarchal society that in Tahaminezhad's words "negates reflecting upon women's potential in taking on social roles" (Tahaminezhad, *Royapardaz* 172).

With regards to the theme of female truancy, Hatami's major intervention in *Ghalandar* is to ascribe a stronger motivation to his female lead character, transforming her action from one inspired by womanly gullibility or whim into an act of defiance and even more importantly, vengeance. Utilized as a prime motivation to organize the stories of films featuring tough guy characters, revenge in the context of these films was generally a masculine mission. In point of fact, it presented a pretext for the main hero to

set off on a quest of blood through which he could flaunt his masculine powers. In addition to the correlated concept of violence,⁸⁸ the customary tool used by these characters for exacting their revenge also served to further consolidate the connection between this theme and masculinity. The groundbreaking success of *Gheysar* set the conventions and iconographies for the new image of the tragic *jahel*, including the use of the switchblade knife as the prime weapon for settling scores. In *Ghalandar*, where the story takes place in a period prior to the enforcement of modern laws and proscription of carrying weapons, the knife is replaced by the traditional machete, which carried even stronger phallic implications, consistent with the firmer grip of patriarchal culture.

Even before *Ghalandar*, Hatami had worked around the theme of vengeance, unsurprisingly in his first cinematic rendition of tough guys, *Towghi*. In that film, he had to some degree remained faithful to the new conventions established by *Gheysar*, in that Morteza, the young *jahel* is ultimately drawn down the morbid path of bloody reprisal and has to use his blade against the killer of his young wife, making him pay for his crime with his own blood. Hence, the presentation of revenge in *Ghalandar* as a feminine undertaking is in itself a novelty within Hatami's own body of work, not to mention its peculiarity as opposed to the whole gamut of tough guy films, which all profoundly endorse masculine agency.

A prime motivation for Iranian movie tough guys in their embarkment on vengeance sprees was the notion of sullied masculine honour. According to the traditional frame of mind upheld and espoused by these characters, their manly honour

⁸⁸ The violence informing the actions of the character appears to be indicant of a shift in popular taste which then fed up with the sanguine fantasies, craved for a more morally ambiguous hero. (Sadr, *Iranian* 137)

was closely linked to the purity of their immediate female family members. This represented a double standard, gendered definition of honour intrinsic to traditional society in Iran as well as in many other pre-modern societies. While the sexual exploits of men were condoned, women were expected to strictly adhere to the imperatives of modesty and chastity, not simply for the sake of their own honour, but also for the reputation of their brothers/fathers/husbands (Sadr, *Iranian* 144). In effect, women, using Naficy's words, did "not have an autonomous identity" (Naficy, *Volume 2* 231). Even in *Dash Akol*, a product of the New Wave, the prominence of the male characters keeps the women in a marginal status. *Dash Akol* and *Kaka Rostam* invariably throw affronts upon each other by likening their rival to a woman, implying the inferiority of the female in the traditional hyper-masculine world the film depicts.

Looking at *Ghalandar* from this angle reveals an additional level of inversion of the formula in Eshrat's decision to join ranks of women of pleasure. By doing so, she usurps the position of the vengeful character, and then turns the image of avenging tough guy on its head by seeking her vengeance through resorting to a measure that in the habitual tough guy narrative is in itself the clarion call for revenge. Simply put, *Ghalandar* exhibits a reversal of the customary cause and effect relation between the loss of purity and vengeance. Of course, even in the more conventional tough guy narrative in *Towghi*, Hatami chose to desist from the prevalent discourse on masculine honour by eliminating any indication of sexual aggression in the crime the protagonist must avenge. In fact the victim of *Towghi* initially shows no real restraint in exuding sexual charms in her encounter with the main protagonist, Morteza, which in turn, drives him to betray his own uncle and take her as his wife, instead of fulfilling his duty and acting as marriage

go-between for his uncle. Therefore Sadr does not sound irrelevant in his observation that “For Hatami, revenge, which was the bread and butter of 1970s cinema, was synonymous with narrow-mindedness” (Sadr, *Iranian* 152).

This comment refers specifically to *Ghalandar*, and suggests that notwithstanding the ostensible deviation from the discourse of masculine vengeance on Hatami’s part, it would be too simplistic to construe such a reversal as a glorification of female rebellion or a call for female liberation. Eshrat’s decision to part with her family fails to lend itself to a more progressive interpretation, because this decision can be traced back to the intermediate situation of the film with respect to the commercial mainstream, with some of the traits of the latter subsumed into its structure. Hatami can also be viewed as another major source of reluctance about delivering and propounding a pungent message of feminine insurgence, even though the subversive content of his film was too strong for the cinema of that period to go unaltered. In fact Hatami- unlike a director such as Bahram Beizai- has never been considered as a filmmaker with an overtly feminist agenda and his female protagonists rarely took the centre stage of his stories, to the extent that at least one writer accused his films of misogyny (Jafari 291), while milder criticism made by a female writer, suggests he is simply unconcerned with female characters who display individual potentials (Zamani 264). Another female writer arrives at a similar conclusion by claiming that “women in his films are more than anything pitiable” (Bahrami 200), a shortcoming she blames on Hatami’s narrow knowledge of women, a problem she finds endemic among Iranian filmmakers.

An aspect of the film that particularly offsets a feminist reading of Eshrat’s dramatic measure is the fact that her character lacks the depth to explain her bold volte-

face against the values which have presumably governed her life since her childhood. Oddly and in contrast to what might be expected from a woman raised in a traditional society, and more specifically within a family patronized by an emblematic figure of patriarchal culture like Ghalandar, Eshrat even prior to her rebellion does not attempt to suppress the externalization of her feminine desire. Remarkably she dares the image of a tame housewife who has to ignore or moderate her own feelings according to her man's decision, by trailing Sadegh to the capital.

A sudden, unmotivated and drastic change in the behaviour of a female character with regards to traditional notions of modesty was not uncommon in the context of Iranian commercial cinema of the 70s, a fact relatable to the increased investment of filmmakers in sexuality in order to make films more saleable. According to Sadr, it was not uncommon in those films to see a heretofore traditional woman all of a sudden mutate into a westernized, lubricious figure by shedding her traditional chador (Sadr, *Iranian* 151). Arguably, Hatami's heroine does not entirely conform to this heavy-handed commercial model. Her desirous side has been evinced following her wedding, and more importantly her slippage into the cast of an immoral woman is not merely a surprise offering to titillate male spectators. Nevertheless, given the inconsistency of her behaviour with what one typically anticipates from a traditional woman, it is possible to conclude that her transformation might owe a debt to tropes of commercial Iranian cinema.

The film's ending also calls for further attention for the way it further blunts the theme of rebellion. Following Ghalandar's suicide - that seems to stir feelings of remorse in Eshrat, especially after her nanny reveals they were not blood relatives, in the modified

released version- and his burial, Eshrat is shown engaged to Davood who, given his close association with his boss, is not far from a diluted version of Ghalandar. Throughout the film, he is shown in situations that underline his difference from Ghalandar as the epitome of a righteous *luti*: he does not tightly follow his master's example in staying away from brothels- which brings him to discover Eshrat's whereabouts- even though this is justified as a way for him to overcome intolerable gloom- and obviously he is unable to strike the same awe in others as Ghalandar. He is even shown beaten up by roughnecks guarding the prostitutes, unable to heroically take Eshrat out singlehandedly.. Above all he is never shown in the homosocial environment where the ultimately fatal bonds between Ghalandar and Sadegh are developed. All the same, he still manifestly carries traits of a class exemplified by Ghalandar, even though his position is defined as inferior.

True enough, the profession of Eshrat and its strong negative connotations left the director with next to no option but to find a cogent reason for her to abandon her ignominious life. Yet, the current ending to a great measure reverberates the conventions of *filmfarsi*. Generally speaking, two major fates were envisioned in *filmfarsi* for the character of the fallen woman. She either has to give up her love, when the object of her affection already had a wife and family, or she repents and gets married to the man she loves - obviously not already married- and for all problems posed by wicked people- most likely a pimp or a café owner- she would manage to begin a new life within the family. Saving women from prostitution by marrying them and allowing them to repent, referred to as *neshandan*⁸⁹ in the case of prostitutes, proved to be a crowd-pleasing

⁸⁹ Literally meaning to "sit someone down"

formula. For example, Fardin, when questioned about the popularity of his films, explains: "Above all, Iranian film spectators enjoyed films in which a young man helps a cabaret dancer quit her indecent job and entrusts her with his mother" (Kianian 52). The ending of *Ghalandar* is a nod/concession to this popular formula,⁹⁰ although the promise of a new beginning for Eshrat through a return to family life can hardly ward off the bleak image of the family institution that the rest of film suggests. Throughout his career, Hatami had engaged in making films that envisioned the institution of the family in a somehow bleak light, which sounds contradictory for a director whose vision conspicuously gravitates towards traditions in a nostalgic vein (Sadr, "Tension" 101).

On the other hand, in depicting the main male character, Hatami prefers to treat him with ambiguity and resists picturing him as nefarious as the irate Eshrat in her raving describes him to be, the one that deserves such a horrendous- considering the dominant discourse of masculine honour- retribution. Instead, he prefers to keep feelings about this character more or less ambiguous. This ambiguity is comparable to Hatami's own mixed position towards traditions that runs through his work. On the other hand, this ambiguity readily puts *Ghalandar* among the new antihero type of tough guy that emerged from 1969 onward, presented to the spectator as "love-hate figures" (Sadr, *Iranian* 137). The film condemns his vicious act, but in the next breath shows his misery and asks for the spectator to sympathize with him, at least to some measure. One aspect of his character that works to redeem him, particularly with more traditional audience, is that his behaviour is defined by a wayward loyalty to his ethical beliefs, although to a tragic fault.

⁹⁰ Hatami's later film *Desiderium* offers a cleverer variation on this theme, as in that film, the prostitute becomes involved in a love affair with a retarded man and submits herself to the innocence of their love.

The image of his seclusion in a shrine further reifies this, emphasized by its juxtaposition with Eshrat's prurient endeavour in familiarizing herself with the hidden corners of the house of pleasure. Even the name Hatami picked for his character has strong religious connotations and connections with Sufism. It generally refers to a person devoted to an extremely ascetic way of life in order to achieve spirituality. What is more, in the first scene in the shrine, Ghalandar is greeted by two dervishes who later appear as the forefront pallbearers at his funeral. Not exactly clerics, these dervishes conjure up the image of Ghalandar as a pious man whose purity is clouded by a forceful desire that has driven him into bloodshed. Yet, he was not shown succumbed to his illicit desire.

Generally viewed as one of Hatami's minor films and being among the least discussed of his films by Iranian critics since before and after his death, *Ghalandar* nevertheless offers valuable insight to the position of its director in more than one respect. It exemplifies Hatami's adaptability to the conditions of production,⁹¹ as well as his ability to lend his distinct voice to a project that does not shy away from showing commonalities with the mainstream cinema, whether in themes or characters or casting. Emblematic of Hatami's authorial style in its careful and nuanced evocation of traditional life in its myriad features, *Ghalandar* exposes the director's project of being creative more or less within the limits of the conventions of commercial cinema, those conventions that partly speak to the traditional values of a community experiencing a drastic change of values. As such, in *Ghalandar* Hatami marshals the familiar stereotypes of mainstream Iranian cinema, underlies this by casting superstars with personas identified with popular genres, and then daringly positions them in a more complex

⁹¹ Intimated by Bahram Beizai on his obituary note for Hatami ("Moallem" 35)

situation with subversive consequences. He ventures to jeopardize the hoary, exploitive and strictly gendered relation of tough guy and fallen women primarily by defining their relation as one of kinship – although modified in the final version- and then by allotting equal agency to the female protagonist, not only in driving the plot but also in presenting a serious challenge to masculine authority. The break from conventions, nonetheless, remains incomplete for reasons not so hard to conjecture. A complete reversal of values propagated by the mainstream cinema would have displeased a mainstream audience expecting to see beloved stars in variations on their previous roles. Male spectators, in particular, were perhaps than delighted by being presented with a total ruin of values that continued to appeal to them. This reluctance was shared by the director whose questioning of traditions did not keep him from displaying an undisguised strong fondness towards a culture whose the very existence, he felt, had come under a serious menace. Hatami's position in this and his other films, then, can be best explained as a liminal one that paralleled the position of the society in transition he belonged to. Even in meticulous evocation of a pre-modern period that frequently caused his films to be denigrated as an antique store showcase, a feeling of ambiguity surfaces through the relations between his characters that infuses his films with their unique flavour.

Chapter Three- Where West is East: Chronicle of a Disenchanted Embrace in *Haji Washington* (1982)

Theories of modernity, through an extensive focus on the notion of acceleration and temporal and spatial shrinkage, are enmeshed in the rhetoric of mobility. Modernity, theorists such as Ben Singer insist, has inflicted its domineering impetus upon the quotidian rhythm of social and personal lives, propelling everything into a frantic motion. Yet, the connection between modernity and mobility could be approached on other counts, when the origins of the former are located elsewhere. The process of the importation of modernity, or its encroachment if seen through more cynical eyes, suggests a top-down flow from centre to periphery (topographical labels corresponding to the degree each nation is modernized). This deluge comes with an undertow, likewise provoked by a curiosity about the nature of modern life. The history of modernization⁹² in many third world countries is marked by names of travellers who had been spurred by a desire to explore this external and invading world- and sometimes by the altruistic intention of serving their home country. These travellers took advantage of the new means of travel to venture into the unknown. Iranian history is no exception and provides ample examples of this, specially in the 19th century, during the reign of Qajar dynasty, who jotted down their experience of meeting the *other* with mixed feelings of optimism, jealousy, inferiority and despair.

Given Hatami's persistent interest in this period of Iranian history and his concerns about the erosion of cultural traditions through unconditional capitulation to the

⁹² By this term, I precisely refer to the extensive changes taking place in the wake of enlightenment in Europe. Although scholars such as Bhaskar Sarkar have tried to diversify the concept of *modern* by highlighting its historical evolution across nations (Sarkar 44), it has been this recent incarnation of the term that has been numerously dealt with in a medium itself emblematic of the phenomenon.

oppressive thrust of modernity, it was predictable that he would have been drawn to stories that exemplify this trajectory. Aside from *The Love Stricken* with its story of doomed journey of classic musicians, *Haji Washington*, an earlier film in Hatami's career, also falls under the common "journey to the West" narrative⁹³. Unlike the musicians of the later film whose historical veracity is obscured through their fictional names, the main character of this film represents - albeit in compliance with Hatami's model- and carries the name of an historical figure, the first Iranian ambassador to the United States, Hossein Gholikhan Sadr-o-Saltaneh, better known by the nickname this journey earned him, Haji Washington. Assuming its title from this sobriquet, *Haji Washington* (1982) was the first feature Hatami managed to direct following the 1979 revolution. However, due to the controversy sparked by its premiere at the first edition of Fajr Film Festival in Tehran in February 1983,⁹⁴ a public release was delayed for a number of years.⁹⁵

⁹³ Pertinent to this theme is another movie by Hatami more concerned with what might follow for a protagonist returning from this journey. Regretfully this parody of alienation and its devastating impact on the home country- *Jafar Khan is Back from the West* (1985)- is not currently accessible in its original form. A screening permit was declined, until another director, Mohammad Motevasselani, was assigned to apply some changes by cutting certain scenes and substituting them with new ones scripted by himself. This revised hybrid version- released as a group directorial effort- however was a failure at financial and critical fronts alike. The censorship board justified its decision to ban the screening of the original version on its lack of quality. In a note that Motevasselani wrote right after the screening of the film in response to Hatami's objections to applied changes, he reverberates the censorship board's conviction. Even in a recent interview in May 2012, Motevasselani insists on crudity of Hatami's version and describes it as too chaotic and wild in a negative sense. However given that the original film has never been screened, it is difficult to fully trust the validity of these claims.

⁹⁴ Of five Iranian films shown during that year's festival, only two obtained public screening permits.

⁹⁵ In the late 80s a truncated copy of the film was screened in some provinces, but it was during the reformist government of Khatami and one year after Hatami's death that the film was officially granted a screening permit.

The representation of the West and its people has a long history in Iranian cinema and it goes without saying that this pictorial presence should have been permeated by the preceding literary traditions. In point of fact, there is a profusion of the image of the West and its denizens in Farsi literature which goes beyond the aforementioned tradition of the travelogue to extend to various forms of literary fiction. Also this presence by no measure has been limited to works from recent centuries. Nevertheless the hardship of traveling during the older days resulted in a dearth of knowledge about these far-flung lands, steeping them in an exoticized imagery of mystery that could be seen analogous to the exaggerated way the Europeans envisioned the mystic east (Ghanoonparvar 11). The term *Farang* (or *Farangestan*) – etymologically derived from “France”- has been an appellation commonly used in Iran to describe Western countries. While in its older usage, this term referred to the Christian world at large – with negative connotations inherited from the Crusades- as Ghanoonparvar points out it gradually found its recent application. By accommodating a whole gamut of European and North American nations, the term *farang* underscores its potential for defining the entire Western world as a monolithic realm of mystery, foreign to the experience of Iranian people.⁹⁶

This perception of the Western world as the unknown *other* apparently pervaded the collective psyche of Iranians, yielding a dichotomy -parallel to Iran-West divide- between tradition and modernity due to the imported nature of the latter. As a consequence of this association, modernity was perceived as the gratuitous gift from

⁹⁶ Unsurprisingly, this term pops up in the titles of some Iranian films that deal with the interaction between Iranian and foreigners, including an old title such as *Aroos Farangi/The Western Bride* (Nosratollah Vahdat-1964) and the recent *Soghat-e farang/A Present from the West* (Kamran Ghadakchian-2006). It is also used in the original title of Hatami’s film, *Jafar Khan is Back from the West* (*Jafar khan az farang bargashte*).

unknown *farang* and therefore a resource of menace. Due to this linkage, a director like Hatami in his quest to envisage a version of the modern medium of cinema tailored to the traditional sensibilities, with an eye kept on the historical background of cultural transformations, would have a special affinity with narratives dealing with the first exposures of Iranians to the resource of this invading force and how their lasting impressions influenced ensuing social and cultural changes (from the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1907 to the introduction of new trends in literatures such as plays).

In a broader view, Hatami's approach to scrutinize the encounter with the West in this particular film runs parallel to the efforts of a new generation of Iranian writers dealing with the issue of Westernization from a revisionist standpoint. According to Ghanoonparvar, in a departure from the traditionally hostile illustrations of the West in the works of those writers critical of westernization as the resource of impurity, this new group, including writers like Esmail Fasih, aimed to offer a more equitable evaluation of the problems created by modernity through highlighting the flaws and ineptitudes of their respective nations.

The Iranian film industry, particularly the commercial cinema, has had an inclination to churn out and rehash the rampant and simplified yet popular dualities of self and the other. In Iran's pre-revolutionary commercial cinema, Naficy observes endearing, almost "romanticized" images of a genuine Iranian are pitted against nearly-lampooned representatives of western values, with the former ultimately triumphing by virtue of attachment to traditional values that encapsulate "purity, authenticity and spirituality" (Naficy, *Volume 2* 230). In keeping with the escapist tendency of Iranian popular cinema, such films seemingly reversed the prevailing actual situation so as to

appease the public subconscious, although there certain films put slightly subtler solutions on the table (Naficy, *Volume 2* 231). This general trend which in Naficy's opinion served to "synchronize Iran with the west" (*Volume 2* 242) was obviously more pronounced in films that integrated the foreign characters into their plot, of which one major subgenre has been defined by Naficy as "the foreign travel" film.⁹⁷ In many cases the ultimate moral of these films was "the confirmation or reformation of an Iranian identity" (Naficy, *Volume 2* 242)

Before going into further details about the structure of Hatami's film and the ways it deviates from the widespread model in order to propound the director's authorial view of this encounter, it would be instructive to briefly examine the story behind the production of the film might in part - though not entirely- offer some explanation for its formal properties. During the last days of royal regime, Hatami had started working on a new TV series project, entitled *Silk Road* at that point, which aimed to showcase a slice of early 20th century Iranian history through the agency of his fictional characters. He started shooting some scenes, but before long the project came to a halt. The new management stipulated the revision of the script and removal from the project of actors blacklisted by the new regime. Despite these difficulties, Hatami strived to take the project off the ground and invested all his strength into its accomplishment. All the same, the combination of management instability and socio-political turbulence exacerbated by the war with Iraq led Hatami take nearly nine years to finish the series, and it was finally aired from March 1988 under the new title of *Hezardastan*. During the early years of the 80s, shooting came to a full stop. Then Hatami, fearing the dispersal of the cast and crew

⁹⁷ The "foreign bride" film is the other subgenre that features direct contact between Iranians and Westerners (Naficy, *Volume 2* 242).

he put together as they found work on other projects, came up with the idea of using them for making some feature films. This way he had fewer problems in recruiting them back when he was given the green light to carry on with the series. *Haji Washington* is the first of the three films Hatami made during this period with this group.

For a director like Hatami who invariably favoured his own version of history over historical accuracy, the central character of this film was an empowering choice. Although a historical figure, little is known about personal life of this emissary. Unlike other travellers to the West, Haji Washington did not pen his diaries, and the only book published on him simply presents a handful of documents that reveal little about his life and subjective experience. (Tahaminezhad, "Ghorbat" 427). Obviously, this scarcity of historical data posed no barrier to Hatami's figment of imagination, but instead gave it space to roam.⁹⁸

Obviously the crew had no chance of following Haji's trail and shooting in the diplomatic host country. By the early 1980s, the hostility between Iran and the United States peaked following the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran and the ensuing hostage taking crisis. It was therefore inconceivable for an Iranian crew to shoot in a country cursed in the slogans spouted from the government outlets on a daily basis. The immediate alternative for Hatami was to shoot in Italy. Aside from the promise of

⁹⁸ One noteworthy piece of information about the historical Haji Washington is the interest he had taken in photography. During their research, Hatami and his crew found an album of the photos from the United States, taken by Haji Washington, kept among the heritage collections in the Golestan Palace complex, the official residence of the Qajar Kings and the frequent shooting location for Hatami's historical epics (Dadgoo 100). However there is no documented indication of any possible inspiration Hatami and his team might have received from these photos for their visual treatment of the story.

working in the highly efficient and professional studio environment of Cinecitta,⁹⁹ he had already experienced a satisfying collaboration with Italian artists.¹⁰⁰ Shooting abroad however did not go according to plans and in some respect it put the Iranian crew in a situation not dissimilar to the despair and loneliness experienced by the film's main character - and later, the musicians of *The Love-Stricken*. Speaking of this project retrospectively, both the executive producer- Mohammad Mehdi Dadgoo- and the lead actor -Ezzatollah Entezami- remember the emotional pressure the crew had to sustain. According to Dadgoo, this adverse feeling was graver in case of Entezami who after work had to stay alone till late at night without receiving any emotional support (Dadgoo 101). The sudden cut in the budget cut the shooting in Italy short and the crew had to return to Iran and reconstruct the remaining foreign scenes there (Entezami 37-38).

Dadgoo's reminisces of what followed direct us back to Hatami's directorial style discussed in the earlier chapter. His own reaction to the shot footage was one of consternation for he believed there was not enough to construct a feature film around, not to mention that it did not correspond to Hatami's earlier version of script. Against this was Dadgoo's quoting Musa Afshar, the editor of the film, who reassuringly said that Hatami is capable of making a feature film from a single image. (Dadgoo101) These comments hark back to my previous discussion about the crucial application of improvisation and Hatami's talent to manipulate his painting-like images in a manner of a

⁹⁹ As Tahaminezhad cites from Fakhimi, the cinematographer of *Haji Washington*, it was shot in Studio Paladina (428)

¹⁰⁰ A recognized Italian artist, Otella Fava served as the make-up designer on *Desiderium* (1979). Besides the Italian artists had worked on the earlier designs of his "cinematic town" erected for filming *The Silk Road* (Later *Hezardastan*) series. According to Aziz Sa'ati, Hatami initially came into contact with Italian artists through Hooshang Baharloo, a cinematographer who studied in Italy, who worked with him on *Desiderium* and during the very early stage of shooting *Silk Road*. (Sa'ati 51)

peep-show master. Both capacities were of utmost importance for a project of this calibre, which faced unforeseen obstacles that otherwise were insurmountable. Eventually and after checking out the footage from Italy, Hatami decided to revise the script once more and include the introductory chapter of Haji's ceremonial departure shot in the "cinematic town" sets (Dadgoo 101).

A question to ponder is whether or not America became the best choice to represent *farang*, given the rise of the United States as a superpower and decline of European countries in their international impact. Similarly one might try to speculate if the recent clashes in foreign policy had made the USA the best representative of the menacing force the public- with a renewed attention to the discourse of imperialism- associated with the West and by extension its modernity. Whatever the reason, Hatami's choice of this character and this story is confounding in the light of the exponential mistrust between Iran and the United States during this period, given that his film decidedly strays from the open condemnation of America as it was the order of the day. Even more confusing is that such a project was given green light and sponsored by no body of production but Islamic Republic of Iran National Television, which did not stop sprouting the hateful images of the so-called "Great Satan".¹⁰¹

Following its initial screening, the film and its director came under hefty censure specially from the writers and filmmakers affiliated with the new regime and its trumpeted Islamic values¹⁰². The new government had ideologically based its policy on ideology of a return to self – Islamic roots in this case -and peddled a demonized image

¹⁰¹ The moniker coined by Khomeini in reference to the United States.

¹⁰² Acclaimed filmmaker, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, at that time a hardliner Islamist is rumoured to have been among the protesters who after the screening chanted "down with Hatami" in the movie theatre.

of the West which needed be resisted and fought through the unity of downtrodden Muslim nations. For this government, the aforementioned split model of self and the *other* was a perfect pattern for laying the groundwork of their ideal revolutionary cinema (Sadr 183). This binary could easily subscribe itself to the model of a cinema of resistance idealized by the new cultural policy-makers in superficial manifestations of anti-western sentiment. As Hamid Reza Sadr mentions, this model was a far cry from the pre-revolutionary discussions in critical circles about how to resist Hollywood hegemony through conceiving a national cinema (172). Proponents of Islamic cinema, many of them lacking cinematic knowledge, however decided to thrash Hatami and his film – although it conformed to his idea of national cinema- for its deviation from what they deemed as revolutionary cinema. Dadgoo remembers the irate reaction of TV authorities who saw the character of Haji as an insulting portrayal of an Iranian (Dadgoo 101). Charges to similar effect were reiterated in an unsigned review published in *Ettela'at* newspaper –an example of negative responses- which ironically asserted that it suffices Hatami to depict Haji's lunacy instead of taking the role of an active interpreter of history and evincing the conspiring hands of imperialism at work. The writer even scolded Hatami for omitting a missionary physician who was in Haji's company from his narrative and then concluded that Hatami's distorted version of history better serves the goals of international masonry (another "enemy" figure abundantly attacked by hardliners) ("Ravayati" 20).

With this brief story of production and reception of *Haji Washington* behind us, we can now go through the actual cinematic text and examine how Hatami orchestrated this encounter that so much infuriated his hardliner critics. In structuring his film, Hatami seems to have followed the literary model of a travelogue, although his eponymous

protagonist did not, in fact, write a travelogue himself. To consolidate this impression, the film begins with Haji's voice speaking over a shot of the letter of his mission being written and sealed. Later in the film as Haji is overcome with loneliness following the departure of his translator- who leaves his company in order to study medicine- and the retirement of his hired staff, the voice over seems to dominate and steers the narrative. In a way, the monologues delivered by Haji in his solitude can also be taken as the extension of this voice over and suggest the voice embedded in a travelogue. The distinction between these two modes almost collapses during the scene of the ex-President's visit to the embassy in which the film cuts back and forth between Haji, who in monologue relates the details of the visit while writing in his report, and the images of the actual reception accompanied by his voice over.

In fact, by turning his camera to the past in certain of his earlier films, Hatami's cinema had already acquired the capacity of registering a visual travelogue of an earlier time. Bahram Beizai hints to the fact that in *Ghalandar* the film's images border on what had been pictured in travelogues by foreigners ("Moallem" 34). In *Haji Washington* it seems that Hatami's time-traveling camera has changed its focus from his native land towards the legendary *farang* by lending itself to the voice of its central character. In this alignment, the tendency of Hatami's camera to provide a fictionalized version of history seems a virtue, for the stories recounted by the travellers of the period had been analogously informed by a layer of fiction specially in their descriptions of the West for their curious readers (Ghanoonparvar 36).

In a similar vein, the United States as pictured in the film carries the indications of a fictional site, specially through the way the director –although partly inadvertently–

illustrates Haji's journey to his destination. Right after the opening titles, the director shows a procession in an old bazaar, which officially announces Haji's departure for his new mission. Throughout this scene, Haji does not utter a single word. The solemnity emanating from his silent glance against the march performed by a military band is tinged with a degree of gloom, although his sadness could be related to the fact that he has to bid farewell to his daughter. As the ceremony ends and Haji's carriage leaves off, the image changes to a tight tracking shot of train rails over which we hear Haji's voice-over summary of the journey and his traversal of foreign lands until reaching his destination. Again a choice imposed by the exigency of shoestring budget (Dadgoo 101), the near hallucinatory effect generated by these more or less abstract images works towards transmuting a historical journey to one into a magical adventure. The next shot depicting Haji's arrival is even more telling: the train arrives at the station in a long shot and we can see Haji peeking through the window and as the camera zooms towards him, for the first time in the film his face lightens up. Whereas the shot of rails constitutes a mysterious boundary between the old and the new land, the initially perceived difference between two worlds is communicated through Haji's change of mood from sobriety to joy. To externalize the sense of optimism taking over Haji, the steam of the train blows towards his face to insinuate the image of an earthly man sneaking into a cloud-surrounded paradise, while an English voice-off, with a "voice of God" implication, greets him. This is not an exaggerated reading, because the next sequence pushes the viewer further along a similar interpretation of Haji's experience. Haji is shown strolling in the courtyard of a hotel, conveniently named "Paradise", while his voice-over expresses his astonishment with the bliss and serenity he experiences. To visualize the

term “Paradise,” Haji is depicted in a white dress that contrasts the darker official outfit he donned in the earlier sequence, strolling across a setting dominated by light shades of colour and expressing his immense amazement towards this new country (Still 41). Visual cues are placed in profusion, from peacocks to dangling clusters of grapes offering themselves to Haji’s mouth. They all point- even to an exaggerated level- to a vision of “lost paradise” that Haji, under the effect of his initial infatuation, attributes to his host country. Nevertheless the director could not resist a somewhat crude verbal riff on this suggestive visual in Haji’s dialogue.

This initial, unrealistic and imaginative portrayal of the United States, due to its lack of specificity, conforms to the concept of the *farang* as a unified Western world, which is more or less repeated in Hatami’s later work, *The Love Stricken* in which he, again due to fiscal considerations, had to recreate early 20th century Paris in Budapest.¹⁰³ Through its conspicuous artificiality, this scene in particular effortlessly belies the non-Western origins of its creator. This scene and its visual enactment of a retrieved paradise also could be partly informed by another lasting source of influence traceable to Hatami’s childhood. He has hinted at his familiarity with Christianity-themed images, as there was a church in the vicinity of the print house where his father used to work (Heydari 21). Given the scarcity of visual presentations of Paradise in Iranian painting, Hatami’s familiarity with this imagery- hybrid by its nature, as they carried a religious culture

¹⁰³ In his review of this film, Hooshang Kavooosi mocks Hatami’s effort by referring to the substantial difference in the architecture style of historical buildings in the two cities (74). But Hatami was not concerned with this inaccuracy for as he asserted in an interview, his intention was to conjure up the image of *farang* and not necessarily a specific geographical spot like Paris (“Hadis-e Nafs” 8).

external to the Iranian society while targeting Iranians as a potential source of converts-might have its fair share in the design of this scene.

The film's unrealistic and imaginary representation of the United States, which even shades into a hallucinatory vision, as Kambiz Kaheh notes (233), serves to reiterate the over-the-top optimism haunting the ambassador. Adding some specificity to this scene is only attempted through the semblance of a metal bridge that can be seen in the background and alludes to the reputation of America as a cutting-edge site of industrial modernism.

A recurrent issue in the diary entries of Iranian visitors to the West during the Qajar era is the comparison of the social freedom cherished by the women to the situation in Iran. While their traditional sensibilities sometimes pop up in their criticism of what appeared to them as the prevalent immodesty and loose morality, their frequently salacious descriptions belies the titillating sway of this foreign landscape, which in Najmabadi's words, sometimes borders on a "porno-paradise" built through an accumulation of pleasures on offer and fermented through the flight of their depraved fantasies (84).¹⁰⁴ A critic aware of the centrality of love to the plots of Hatami's early films might expect such an eroticized context could have invited Hatami to stage another melancholic love affair, this time taking place across the national boundaries. Unfortunately Hatami made both of his "journey to the west" pictures after 1979 and therefore faced the imposed constrictions concerning the presentation of women and even amorous sentiments, which forestalled an overt visual presentation of the lure of relaxed

¹⁰⁴ Western femininity as the object of desire for Eastern man has also found its way into the most famous popular tale of the Qajar period, *Amir Arsalan*. According to Issari this tale also made its way into the *Shahr-e farang* peep shows (42-43).

social relations in the West. In the later film, *The Love-Stricken*, the image of “foreign land” as the site of sensual pleasure to the tradition-bound man surfaces in the farewell scene between the *tombak* player and his wife, where the wife verbally reveals her fears over the Western ladies’ spell on his husband that might keep him there ensnared and unconcerned about the destiny of their family. In *Haji Washington*, the initial scene of Hotel Paradise, the appeal of the Western woman is not totally lost, but had to be reconfigured to a degree that passed muster with the prudish censorship authorities. Here Haji’s walk in the garden is intercut with the images of a lady in a Western dress. While a few shots later we see her in a wider shot in the background of the courtyard, her sudden appearance in a tighter single shot with her white dress suggests an angelic appearance that reifies Haji’s illusion of bliss. But when Haji addresses his companion, Mirza Mahmood, we find the latter distracted from a seemingly pleasant chat with another lady sitting nearby. Despite its brevity and the fact that this moment remains the only presence of western women in this film, the image of these women as the dreamed object of desire is succinctly fabricated. Nevertheless the actual attraction- rather than a fantasy- is visualized in the case of the character who is eventually vilified as a traitor to their mission due to his willing subjugation to the alien culture.

Alternatively, both of Hatami’s “journey films,” albeit to varying degrees of plot significance, carry the image of valued transnational affections, but these affairs are not forged between Iranians and Europeans (or European descendents). In *The Love Stricken*, despite staying in Paris the young signer’s heart harbours love only to a Princess from the Ottoman empire, a country with strong cultural bonds to his own, and one that would shortly fall into decline. Transnational love is signified in *Haji Washington* in an

intriguing manner. While in contrast to his pre-revolutionary films, the central character's story is stripped from amorous predicaments¹⁰⁵ - as in the early scene in *Hotel Paradise*, no apparent interaction takes place between Haji and the ladies- a tinge of romance is mixed into the narrative by way of the surrounding characters. The love, however, is of a virtual nature, as one of the parties is present only as a likeness. This love surfaces in the infatuation of a fugitive Indian with the image of Haji's daughter. Needless to say, these two characters never meet each other during the plot, but the image stands vicariously for its subject, at least from Haji's point of view. Haji protects the image from the gaze of other people with a cover, analogous to the burkas his daughter and wife wear as part of their costumes, and then erupts into a rage upon discovering that Indian has been watching the image, as if the stare of a strange male onlooker towards his real daughter has defiled his honour. But then, in an act of reconciliation, he relents and gives the picture to Indian, as though accepting him as his virtual son-in-law. The Indian's reaction is all the more suggestive; upon receiving this gift he starts capering noisily and gaily, in the manner of a stereotypical comic Indian- but this almost animal-like reaction of joy insinuates a sexual pleasure has been attained through this gift.¹⁰⁶ The way the scene ends validates its erotic undertone; the Indian, as though exhausted from sexual activity, lies down on the grass next to the girl's portrait. By desisting from depicting a love affair between the Iranian hero and a representative of the West, Hatami rejects a romanticized chronicle of this historical encounter, though one should not lose sight of the fact that the

¹⁰⁵ As suggested by some writers, the love story of previous films is superseded by Haji's parental affections and a longing for his daughter.

¹⁰⁶ It is worth telling that in some Iranian romances, the quest for love is instigated by exposing the electrifying beauty of the object of love to the hero through a painted portrait. In his *Hassan the Bald*, itself a reworking of an old folk tale, Hatami uses the same vehicle to send his eponymous hero off to meet the spellbound girl.

filmic representation of the union of an Iranian with a Western, if depicted as an uplifting experience, would likely have ignited the disapproval of the regulatory body of Iranian cinema at that period.¹⁰⁷

Haji's hapless fate is contrasted to and made reciprocal with that of his translator, Mirza Mahmood Khan, who represents a more negative facet of that problematized East-West encounter, one that could be summarized as a self-negating fascination. To illustrate these two opposing tendencies informing this encounter, Hatami starts rather early in the film with a scene including an almost hackneyed comparison of their dining habits. Although both Haji and Mirza Mahmood are in the same room, Haji, believing in the superiority of the Iranian values and the traditions, prefers to squat on the floor and carry on with his old dining habits, while the translator eats his dinner sitting on the table. This scene also prefigures their final confrontation that similarly bursts into full flame in another dining scene.¹⁰⁸ To depict this alienated companion of Haji's- or in other words, the ambassador's foil- Hatami enlists a new reincarnation of the stock character from the

¹⁰⁷ In *Jafar Khan is Back from the West*, Jafar informs his father about his marriage to a Western lady, which sends him into a rage culminating in a nervous breakdown. Although she is never seen, the fact that Jafar is depicted as a Westernized figure who brings chaos into his family and then his home-village would make the film not appreciative of this marriage. An even more denigrating view is included in the printed script of Hatami's last project, the unfinished *Takhti, the World Hero*- although it is said that Hatami had composed several versions of this script and the one he began to shoot was different- in which Takhti is met with hostility by the American wife of his friend in the United States. This friend turns up later, back in Iran, divorced from his exploitive wife and done with his American life, even if he had to beg to be pardoned by Shah's regime for being a dissident.

¹⁰⁸ Later in his career, Hatami seems to be more lenient towards the characters embracing Western culture. In *The Love-Stricken*, the santoor (hammered dulcimer) player decides to start taking piano lessons, even if it prevents him from being punctual for the rehearsal of the group and at some point he makes an ironic comment about the inferiority of their music. Despite this and his choice at the end of film to stay in Paris, Hatami refrains from making him an evil character.

traditional theatre, the *fokoli*. Hatami had also done this in *Baba Shamal*, with its character explicitly named *fokoli*, and in *The Suitor* (1972) through the character of the capricious young man. While in these two films, the character of *fokoli* or *dandy*¹⁰⁹ - as Naficy uses in reference to characters of this stripe in the context of Iranian cinema- is defined by his lasciviousness, in *Haji Washington*, due to the change in regulations, Hatami had to tone down this aspect. What is retained of this character is his comic manner, evoked here through his tics. Naficy believes that a comic treatment of the dandy character can dispel social anxiety over this hybrid creature, but the heavy-handed treatment here, which has been seen by many writers as a flaw, can refer to the origins of this character in traditional comedies. At the end of the first scene in the Hotel Paradise courtyard, the abstruse comedy conferred on this character even shades into a surreal touch, when following a fit of facial contortion, Mirza Mahmood's top hat falls off and a pigeon flies into the air, an incongruity not foreign to the traditional comedy theatre of *taghlid* (Beizai, *Namayesh* 185).

Later in the film, when Mirza Mahmood returns to the embassy to find that the Indian has taken shelter, Hatami resorts to his typical symmetrical compositions to visualize a binary of oppositional interaction with the West, though both of these interactions are united in pointing to the exploitive attitude of the Western party. On the one hand Mirza Mahmood is shown arriving with a Western vehicle - a penny-farthing

¹⁰⁹ In his book, Naficy discusses the films that centre on a dandy character as a distinct genre (and even puts *Haji Washington* under this heading). According to him, the dandy is a borderline personage with respect to both his homeland and the West, who actualizes the menace of modernity through his hybridity (which inevitably inspires a fear). Of specific interest would be the fact that the first film exhibitor in Iran, Ebrahim Sahafbashi, was an example of a dandy character (Naficy, *Volume 1* 75) hinting to the role these characters in reality played as the purveyors of the new medium.

bicycle- which designates him as an alienated figure who has traded his identity for becoming a pawn at hands of the Western power. On the other hand, Mirza Mahmood is pitted against the horse-mounted Indian who has obviously flouted the Western law and delegates a nation already defeated and suffering under Western injustice.¹¹⁰

Ostensibly not appreciative of Haji's mission as an instance of initial fruitless encounters with the West, Hatami's critical retrospection cleverly distances the narrative from simplistically holding the West and Westerners as the sole culprits. In a spirit similar to those Iranian writers who added complexity to their study of modernization and the ensuing changes, Hatami's camera for the most part lingers on the Iranian party and his simpleminded ignorance of the true weight of his respective country on the international platform during that period. In imitating the format of travelogue by assuming an almost first-person narrative in which Haji is the only central character of the story, the film offers to its spectators a subjective experience of hope and despondency. The subjective tendency of the narrative grows stronger as Haji is eventually left by himself with no companion to share his feelings of loneliness and despair, save for a sheep he is going to sacrifice for the Eyd al-Adha.¹¹¹ This allows Hatami to organize one of his typical soliloquies scenes in which talking to an inanimate or non-human object gives vent to the deep feelings that are too deep to be spoken to another person. What singles out this scene from similar ones in Hatami's preceding

¹¹⁰ Though the original denizens of the West, the Indians – though not in Farsi- are stigmatized by a moniker that defines them as an Eastern nation.

¹¹¹ This scene –partly grounded in a true historical anecdote that lead into the inspection of the embassy building by the police- ironically connects to Haji's sobriquet. While the title "Haji" is regularly accorded to people visiting Mecca and performing the Hajj ceremony that ends with sacrificing an animal, the ambassador performs the sacrifice in a predominantly Christian land.

works¹¹² is its expansion into a series of shots that gradually intensify in tone and emotion and climax in the killing of the sheep, when the irate Haji eventually concedes to the inordinate calamities plaguing his own society and aggressively splits the carcass with his chopper. Except for two sequences- Haji meeting the President and delivering his introductory speech at the White House, and a later scene at a fairground- the rest of the action in the U.S. is limited to the embassy, which again visually reaffirms the idea of the main character's insular diplomatic existence. By closing Haji off from the external world, the film reduces chances for him to communicate an experience of alterity, which as Mottahedeh mentions, is mediated through the presence of the Western onlooker (Mottahedeh, *Representing* 209). Here the "cultural looking" predicated on an exchange of gazes is initially operative almost exclusively in one direction owing to the almost first-person mode of the narrative. The direction of this gaze eventually changes from outward to inward so as to magnify the affliction of the Iranian party.

The aforementioned subjective use of mise-en-scene to present Haji's feelings is not confined to the Hotel Paradise scene. With Hatami's decision to refrain from a realistic treatment- motivated by both his aesthetic ideals and the condition of production- the mise-en-scene suggests a more or less subjective world that, at times, echoes the devastating emotional changes weighing on Haji and externalizes the ruination of his dreams. Through a casually employed minimalism, this non-realistic treatment also gives the impression of a restricted view which, with regard to Haji's predominant presence in the narrative, intimates a similar short-sightedness on his part and his neglect of the

¹¹² Most notable scenes of this ilk include: The monologue of the drunk Morteza in front of his uncle's photo, (again drunk) Baba Shamal's monologue when he addresses a donkey in *Baba Shamal* and Majid's monologue in front of the mirror in *Desiderium*.

events taking place around him as he sinks into himself and wrestles introspectively with his mounting qualms. Undoubtedly a virtue of necessity here, the incorporation of paintings benefited the film in evoking an altered, unreal vision of the external world that dovetails with Haji's delusions. Hatami initially uses a painting in lieu of a general establishing shot of the White House to introduce the new location. Later, paintings are employed to suggest cityscapes glimpsed through the windows, a technique reminiscent of the use of *doornama* -"fixed curtains representing a landscape in the style of western prints" (Beizai 176)- in later versions of Iranian traditional theatre. In fact the use of these painted backgrounds appears to have been an informed decision, taking into account that later during the production of *The Love-Stricken* he disapproved of the idea of using an almost similar artifice, a painted background, to illustrate the back rows of the opera house- even when it was not supposed to be in focus, reasoning that the scene has to be credible (Hatami, "Lebasi" 17). This anecdote could offer an insight into his deliberate resort to artificiality in those sceneries.

Through Hatami's use of paintings, Haji's experience of the West is brought down to the level of an act of peeping through a *Shahr-e Farang* machine, not dissimilar to the way his daughter imagines his mission. Haji's image of the West becomes as much a construct of mind, as in the paintings his daughter peers into and mixes with her imagination of her father's distraught face. The placement of the *Shahr-e Farang* sequence underpins this parallel: as Haji leaves the embassy on an errand, film takes us to Tehran and shows Haji's daughter who rushes to the *Shahr-e Farang* hoping to behold the images of the land his father had been missioned to. As the scene ends with her mother taking her back to their place, the film cuts back to Washington and shows Haji's

carriage returning to the embassy. Obviously a cunning and thrifty replacement for Haji's actual tour of the city, the considerable presence of blatant artificiality in the scenes in the United States lends additional connotation to their juxtaposition with *Shahr-e Farang* scenes. Here, *Shahr-e Farang*, used in the capacity of a replacement for newsreel, brings the image of far-flung lands in a fantasized manner. Haji, despite his placement at the heart of the foreign land, experiences this country in an imaginative, mediated manner redolent of *Shahr-e Farang* imagery. This provokes ideas about the overbearing impact of the real encounter that hurdles an unmediated, head-on experience and forces the uninitiated Haji to retreat into his subjectively built world.

While obviously mesmerized by the novelty of what he encounters, Haji's initial amazement is not accompanied by a sense of inferiority and does not give the impression of having been overpowered by his host country. Explicit in the monologue over the images of rails is a faith in the dignity of his nation and his contempt for Iranians who have parted with their national attire as part of their culture, although he looks to be more charitable about his translator's tendencies for giving himself up to the signs of the new culture. Haji is bent on putting the superiority of his nation on display and as a representative of an ancient empire, he fosters the same imperialistic ambitions habitually attributed to the Western world. One way for Haji to flaunt his endeared traditions is through offering pistachios to every one from the hired staff to President Grover Cleveland in order to make himself, and by inference the nation he represents, look generous. However, this eventually leads into his miserable degradation from an ambitious but naïve politician to a "food salesman" (Khalili par21). The absurdity of this idea is divulged when in his next visit to the embassy and after being exceptionally

received by Haji who is alienated from the surrounding world, Cleveland reveals that his term is ended and shows this elaborate but laborious reception -meticulously recorded by Haji-has been pointless.

Haji's initial dedication to his mission and sense of national pride that shades into grandiosity is also manifested during his audience with the president, when in place of an introductory speech, he recites a long, eloquent text that approximates a poetic quality, as if he wishes to impress the president with the flourish of an unknown language, although his translator had already warned him about his own narrow knowledge of English. Again the ludicrous futility of this act is demonstrated through the contrast between Haji's evident excitement during the speech, conveyed by his dilated eyes and fixed stare, and the blank expression on the President's face. To further stress Haji's grandiose delusion, his recounting of the President's words is played over images of Cleveland, as though Haji is dubbing the president. But Haji is proven to be an unreliable dubber, when he takes the liberty of adding an exaggerated servile tone towards the King of Iran. A foreboding earlier scene had already signaled that these simplistic tactics would bear no fruit; when Haji rehearses his prepared speech, the wind blows the paper out of his hands, leaving him with no option but to improvise.¹¹³

In the absence of another major actor, it is the interior setting of the embassy that more than anything contributes to the illustration of Haji's marred ambitions and his decline into hopelessness. Typical of a Qajar aristocratic mansion, the highly adorned decor of the embassy gives the impression that Haji has tried to create a branch of the

¹¹³ The image of the letter, flying over a painting of White House- later also glimpsed in *shahr-e farang* peepshow- that connects it to the next scene in the president office once more testifies to competence of Hatami's style for use of editing as an economical means of cutting costs.

royal court in the United States as a token of his loyalty to his king and his mission to expand his reign. Central to this feeling is the curious presence of a painting that in the actual history of art was created years after the film's story is set and had never left Iran. The painting, which decorates the wall above Haji's desk, is a copy of "Halls of Mirrors" drawn for the royal court by Kamal-ol-Molk, the most famous painter of the Qajar era. One among countless diversions from the historical record in Hatami's career, this painting of one of splendid halls at Golestan Palace confers an imperious air upon the embassy and functions as a royal stamp ratifying Haji's mission to expand the range of his king's influence. As things go awry and the clutch of the bleak reality of the situation- including monetary matters- gets firmer and ironically drives Haji to withdraw from external reality, the embassy setting replicates his psychological deterioration and vacuity. Yet the chaotic state in which the embassy has slumped is still narratively warranted by the retirement of the hired personnel, which leaves Haji with no help in maintaining order in his assigned territory. The neglected state of the embassy is brought to our attention through the President's visit. The place looks empty, stripped of some of its earlier decorations, with cobwebs all over, especially surrounding the replica of the famous "Hall of Mirrors", which, as a rapt Haji recounts the details of his formidable reception, is shown in a slanted position. As Haji relates this encounter- in a scene interspersed with images of the actual visit- the camera glides sideways outside the windows to show curtains waving in the wind and hence adding to the sense of disarray already imparted. The wind also works as a visual motif that connects this scene to the earlier scene of failed rehearsal of the speech as well as the finale, when Haji is informed about the end of his failed mission.

Despite brooding during his solitude over the meaning of his mission- or lack thereof- and articulating his doubts about the true status of the kingdom he represents, Haji still finds further grounds to put his nationalistic values to the test. The unexpected visit of the American President prods Haji to put his doubts temporarily under a lid and wakes him up again to his personal and official obligations as his nation's delegate. This visit raises another opportunity for Haji to put up a convincing display of the values of his culture. As the whole embassy looks like the reconstruction of a Qajar mansion in the heart of America, Haji finds himself in the position of inviting the President into his own realm. Neither the jeopardized state of the building nor the absence of assistance deters him from offering a decent reception. Not only does he take on the role of the cook and the waiter to treat his illustrious guest with Iranian cuisine; he also fulfils his hospitality to a tee by singing, playing *se-tar* and dancing. In some respect, Haji becomes both the king and the servant of his own mansion. Haji's almost ridiculous attempt to bring the President into his own world is best represented in a two-shot, where they both sit on the floor's only carpet, surrounded by the empty space, while Haji plays *se-tar* and mumbles nonsensical lyrics to entertain his American friend who, attired in a cowboy outfit, keep himself busy by eating pistachio and moving his head to the rhythm of Haji's music (Still 42). Positioning the President in an Iranian setting and feeding him with the Iranian cuisine obviously fills Haji with pride. But the illusionary nature of this fleeting success is evinced as the supposed President informs him of the termination of his presidency and embarrasses Haji for his ignorance of the changes happening outside the walls of the embassy.

In the wake of this failure, Haji is put in another occasion that could provide him with one more – and in effect the last- opportunity to prove his commitment to his mission and to exercise his power as the representative of a kingdom that desperately seeks international acknowledgement. This opportunity arrives when the Indian rushes into the embassy to seek refuge. Haji's initial reaction is in keeping with the nationalist project his mission was to accomplish and underscores a similar imperialistic desire cultivated by the emissaries of the East. His ambition to become a colonizer is revealed through his act of tying up the sleeping Indian with the hope of sending him over as a gift to the royal court. Now that Haji's attempts to make the American concede to the superiority of his nation have been met with failure, he alternatively decides to reclaim his superiority by exerting his power over the representative of a nation already branded as an underdog. To accentuate his claim over his new subject/slave, Haji goes further and covers the whole figure of the Indian with the Imperial stamp. In this crazy act, Haji seems to compensate for his previous failures by engraving the royal mark on an alien object. Even later, when the Indian easily extricates himself and Haji washes the marks off, he continues to prove himself as the man in charge whose rules should be obeyed by admonishing the Indian for breaking the traditional rule and peeking at his daughter's image. But this ultimate chance is spoiled again. Even when he redefines his relationship with this unwanted guest and adopts him into his personal circle by entrusting him with the image of his daughter, he is unable to protect him with the Indian eventually losing his life on the street, partly as a result of Haji's waning authority.

It is not difficult to discern how Hatami draws on iconic images from the Hollywood Western genre in order to construct Haji's experience of *farang*, even though

the story takes place in an urban setting. He separates these characters from their habitual contexts and associations and reconfigures them in a way that countervails their original image. The cowboy is embodied by the President, not merely because of his attire, but also through his association with the power. Hatami's version of cowboy is subversive in that his almost mythic status is undermined by the comic presentation, caused in part by the incongruity of his physical features with his surrounding traditional decorations, as well as his inability to understand Farsi spoken by Haji for the most part. On the other hand, Haji's initial feeling towards the Indian is consistent with the stereotype of a wild inferior population, whose threat can be warded off only by having them subdued by civilized people. Yet the film effaces this initial disparagement as a friendship burgeons between the Indian and Haji. Although the truth about the Indian's background and the reason for his escape is never explained, his act of defending Haji against the insults of his ungrateful and impertinent companion makes him an object of audience sympathy.

The film ends by revisiting the familiar courtyard of Hotel Paradise which is now enveloped by an air of gloom, as though stricken by a tempest. Once more the reversal of fate is visually underscored by the blowing wind. Despite his silence and his perplexed stare, Haji still has enough wits around to physically reveal the nature of his disappointment that by then has totally hollowed him out, a profound sense of failure that even the promise of appointment to the position of minister upon his return- which Mirza Mahmood amidst the rain of admonishments brings up- can not help him to cope with. As his last act before departure, he goes over the edge of the garden with a bulletproof jacket he had won at the fairground, now wrapped in the Iranian flag. From the earlier scene, we remember how fervently he had described winning this jacket as the prize of a shooting

contest, which also offered him a chance to boost his nationalistic feelings by showing his skills. He proved himself as the loyal subject of his king, both in demonstrating the shooting skills of an Iranian, and in obtaining a gift that could protect the king. But now that he is called back to his country, Haji is shown overtaken by serious doubts about the nature of his mission as well as the government he is serving. In an act of silent rebellion, Haji opens the wrapping and lets the jacket fall down, indicating the extent to which his faith in the King as the head of the country has been significantly shaken.¹¹⁴ While such an act strikes a cord with anti-royal sentiments that were still strong in the air at the time the film was produced, what follows is more surprising, for in unpatriotic gesture Haji also loosens his grip on the unfolded flag and lets it follow the jacket to the ground.¹¹⁵

Haji's wordless turnabout has historical grounds in many travelogues that are united in their writers' admiration of the technical progress of their host nations, and in their implicit repudiation of the defunct governing structure by dint of hailing the political system of the West (Ghanoonparvar 33-34). While some writers like Tahaminezhad read Hatami's film as a story of the estrangement of a country from the rest of the world due to its despotic rulers (Tahaminezhad, "Ghorbat" 428), the film does little to intimate a comparison made by Haji that could have revealed to him the incompetency of the system he delegates. Indeed the film remains ambivalent on whether Haji's insanity stems from his isolation from other people, or as a result of his political awakening. As Tahaminezhad himself acknowledges the film is best described as an

¹¹⁴ Worthy of note is the fact that Nassereddin Shah's long reign was eventually terminated by his assassination. Awareness of this fact, adds another layer to this act of *lèse-majesté*.

¹¹⁵ Though the lion and sun emblem in the royal flag was replaced by a new Islamic sign, in other respects the design of flag which is in use after 1979 is very comparable to the old design.

“internal journey” (“Ghorbat” 430). There is no indication that Haji’s investment in increasing his knowledge about the political system in the United States that brings him to make a comparison with politics in his homeland. In point of fact, Haji’s disenchantment is informed more by ignorance on his part than by any acquisition of knowledge.

Beizai once described Haji as a character who feels like a stranger on two levels; not only in relation to the foreign lands, but also vis-à-vis his homeland (“Moallem” 35). Beizai’s observation resonates with Haji’s state of mind at the beginning of the film, when with little knowledge of the West, he takes pride in his vain affiliation with the royal court, ignoring hardships of the nation. The scene of his procession in the bazaar before the official public announcement of his mission also contributes to the concept of his separation from the body of people, as the business owners are ordered to close their shops and stand on sides to witness his procession. At no time is there any verbal interaction between Haji himself as the representative of the system and these silent onlookers, as if they belonged to two different realms.

By eschewing the representation of Western culture, and instead choosing to focus on the Iranian figure and his experience of seclusion, Hatami cunningly steered clear from praising the political achievements of Western countries. In this regard, Hatami seems to have made an apt decision for the early 1980s, when ideologies associated with Western culture were strongly frowned upon in Iran. So in order for his central character to become aware of the deep cracks in the footings of the system he upholds, Hatami makes him look back, or look inside, as it might be a normal process for someone stranded in that segregated circumstance. One can however argue that the

function of such an internal process for Haji is not quite effectively presented. Notwithstanding the fact that Haji starts to articulate his doubts while butchering the sheep, his illumination specially with regards to the plight of his people seems suspect as he is still surrounded by the same luxurious decoration, unless we attribute such comprehension of the experience of ordinary people as a result of his taking over the maintenance job after sending the staff away.

Haji's decision to dispense with the flag, however, takes the described scene beyond a simple anti-royal statement. Hatami's deep identification with his country, which had served as the main motivation for developing his unique style, makes depiction of this act somehow surprising. One possible reading could be predicated on Haji's ignorance, which brings him to myopically associate the king with his homeland in a way that his loss of faith in the former mandates his alienation from the latter. This reading calls to mind Beizai's idea about the double strangeness to which Haji is fated. On the other hand, this scene also can be illustrative of Haji's eventual concession regarding the failure of his mission to glorify his culture in the *West/farang*. Here, the failure is not simply blamed on a bungling government, but also stems from Haji's intransigence in his naïve belief that the traditional values and virtues associated with his culture would be sufficient to elicit respect and recognition for his nation on the international stage. The stance Hatami's camera takes in connection to Haji's character falls somewhere between sympathy and reprehension. As the fulcrum of the film's narrative, Haji is supposed to garner the audience's sympathy- as opposed to the westernized figure of Mirza Mahmood. But Haji's dedication to the traditional values is revered and ridiculed in the same breath. Personally displaying a strong attachment to his

cultural roots, Hatami still intimates, in a more or less tragic tone, that mere reliance on traditional Iranian culture in a preening manner would be conducive to nothing but a wretched downfall, which in turn could reciprocally yield its opposite in way of compensation. Through highlighting Haji's loyalty to his king, which could be interpreted as an extension of the patriarchal ideology informing Iran's traditional culture, the perils of an uncritical self-indulgence in traditions is set into relief. In effect, Hatami, although with some degree of reluctance suggested by his nuanced decoration of the interiors and flourish of his dialogues, attributes the downfall of the old world in this encounter to its sole reliance on the rules of a traditional world. The new world has changed the rules of the game, and these changes must be accordingly considered. A critical understanding of the nature of the assailing culture would seem to be imperative, but it only works in tandem with a similarly critical inspection of the traditions and their true value in face of the far-reaching large scale changes.

In probing the direct impact of Western culture on his cherished traditional values, Hatami's camera takes us on another retrospective journey to point towards the faux pas that was made in the past with lasting negative repercussions. However even when venturing to a foreign land, his camera is accorded with a strong sense of interiority that makes it ignore the surrounding unfamiliar landscape in favour of dealing with the emotions of the Iranian protagonist. Put another way, in Hatami's version of "journey to the West," *farang* for the most part is relegated to the position of a mirror that allows *the viewer* to reflect on deformities on his/her own side. This focus in turn clarifies that the *viewer* Hatami was hoping to reach and address pedagogically is primarily located within the cultural boundaries to which he himself belonged. Asked once why his films have not

been invited to international festivals, Hatami simply replied that he had not thought about it, and neither was it his concern. (Talebinezhad, “Miras” 48). Even with a domestic audience in mind, Hatami opted to reverse the conventional populist gaze into the *occident*, with its both positive and negative association, and instead alert his own people to their historical stance as beholders with faults on their own side. Elegiac, as one expects from Hatami, and yet alarming, *Haji Washington* is a highly critical peep-show of the demise of a period of innocent ignorance, which failed to yield a smooth transition to the modern world due to the naïveté and hubris of those allocated the role of mediators.

Conclusion

The understanding of the term Art Cinema in the discipline of Film Studies is to a great extent shaped by David Bordwell's instrumental piece on this topic which, to take Galt and Schoonover's words, was meant to flesh out attributes of an "aesthetic practice" (Galt and Schoonover 16) distinct from classic Hollywood cinema. Understood as a universal model, this scheme has found its application at hands of scholars as a yardstick to evaluate films coming from all across the world and to mark those believed to be art films out of a whole, much larger bunch of films indiscriminately branded as popular cinema. The understanding of national cinemas on the basis of a binary model of art cinema versus popular cinema- founded along the lines of confrontation between art cinema and Hollywood cinema- looks to be the order of the day, clung to ostensibly for the sake of simplicity. However, this model leaves unclarified the position of those films made as attempts to bridge the rift in this binary, and hence it remains unclear under what rubric they should be discussed. To further complicate the matter, art cinema has turned out to become a limiting category; while operating on a global scale, it only recognizes films that exhibit certain aesthetic choices and thereby gain entry into film festivals, which play a major role in deciding what art cinema amounts to. Restrictive definitions of art cinema, which in turn modulate the conventional understanding of world cinema, hedge the reach of films incompatible in style and hence narrow down the opportunity for their discursive examination in critical and academic set-ups. As the example of Hatami and his formalist style illustrates, authorship as a criterion once used to solicit prestige

and attention for films has become secondary to the affiliation films show with art cinema, in which formalism and realism comingle (Galt and Shoonover 17).¹¹⁶

In the case of Iran, especially in recent years, attempts have been made to anchor the idea of national cinema in the criteria of art cinema, hence excluding those Iranian films deviating from the familiar tropes of art cinema. In this case, the tendency of Art Cinema to become a genre, as it were, is appropriated in order to conceive a generic image of a national cinema. Recognizing local specificity only when contingent on “universal legibility”, art cinema in this context functions as an assimilationist model (Galt, Schoonover 13) and thus, in effect, closes the door to works that, despite not uniformly being made for commercial ends, demand a more in-depth understanding of local culture instead of a sightseeing glance wandering on the surface.

My attempt through different chapters of this thesis has been to explicate how Hatami’s cinema ran afoul of the concept of art cinema, as the term has been elaborated in Film Studies, and exactly here one can identify a reason for his banishment from discussions of world cinema. Hatami’s experiments in diversifying the cinematic language made it hard to assign his works to the Art Cinema category. In choosing to conceive “works without models” and envisioning a film aesthetic aligned with local sensibilities, as I tried to describe in the first chapter, Hatami’s films not only resist subsumption into a bigger picture either at the national¹¹⁷ or global levels, but they also challenged the idea of universal legibility so crucial to the concept of Art Cinema.

¹¹⁶ Chaudhuri and Finn identify a similar pattern in the New Iranian Cinema that takes the film beyond a strictly realistic representation and mixes it with subjective elements (168), which spurs these writers to bring in Pasolini’s theory of ‘the cinema of poetry’ into their discussion.

¹¹⁷ No wonder that among filmmakers associated with the Iranian New Wave, his films have generally received the least share of critical attention in discussions of movement.

Instead, what Hatami proposed through his films was to present local differences by complicating the grammar of cinema and blending it with principles derived from aesthetic tenets that by nature were foreign to the rest of the world. What is more, he disregarded the well-defined distinction between art cinema and popular cinema and lent his experimental approach to commercial cinema particularly in the earlier part of his career- resulting in the dismissal of some of his films from this period by Iranian critics. In doing so, he tried to expand his outreach in a society more receptive to his language. However, this local appeal should not be mistaken with unconditional assignment of his works to popular cinema, since at the same time Hatami's artistic ambition was growing to distinguish himself more pronouncedly from Iranian mainstream cinema.¹¹⁸

With their universal legibility complicated for spectators habituated to equate a national cinema with a consistent film style, filmmakers like Hatami might pose special challenges to domestic critics for presentation of their works to the rest of the world. Despite the plaudits raining upon Hatami's filmmaking career in recent years in Iran, little attempt has been made on part of Iranian critics to share this surged enthusiasm with the rest of the world. The neglect stems partly from the widespread belief that his films address viewers of a specific ethnicity. Iranian critics seem to follow the same model as foreign festival and writers, that of the simplified binary of films made for the domestic audience and films created for international distribution. Their reaction about the films celebrated on the festival circuit reveals how much their evaluation might also be swayed

¹¹⁸ or *Sinama-ye badane/ The corpus cinema*, the term recently gained currency among Iranian critics in reference to Iranian popular or commercial cinema.

by their international reception,¹¹⁹ although there are still writers who try to maintain their individual, often oppositional, ground.¹²⁰ Another major impediment to the internalization of their discourse is the language barrier. Much of the coalesced discussion around Iranian cinema that could be of scholarly interest goes untranslated, with only one Iranian publication on cinema in the English language, and it is published only at 4 to 6 months intervals. All the while, the unavailability of the majority of Iranian films made before 1979 in decent English subtitled copies pre-empts a historical appraisal of Iranian cinema and instead works towards a concept of disjunction between pre- and post-1979 filmmaking in Iran, which according to Gow informs the term “the New Iranian cinema: (Gow 4). Lack of access to pre-revolution films would further affect the evaluation and study of directors like Hatami with a career spanning across this historical event.

Against this murky background, my intention throughout this thesis has been to reveal aspects of Hatami’s filmmaking that underscore his position as a unique author, while acknowledging that the equivocal stance about tradition that pervades his films, unites him with other directors of his generation. While not trying to excise Hatami’s films from the circumstances surrounding their production, my study has been first and foremost driven and orientated by questions of aesthetics and film history. I have tried to show that his films should be approached in more than one way. One possibility concerns the thorny area of history and historiography. Hatami’s frequent recourse to historical

¹¹⁹ A case in point is Amir Naderi’s *Davandeh/The Runner* (1985), one of the first films that brought Iranian cinema back to the spotlight in the 80s. The film initially received devastating reviews in *Film Monthly*, the only Iranian cinematic magazine back in the day. Years later, and after the international success of the film, some of those critics expressed their regret about their harsh judgements.

¹²⁰ Such as writers of *Paris-Tehran*.

subject matter, despite his self-proclaimed disbelief in history and the discrepancies between his films and official accounts, merits critical examination. His films also exemplify the imbrications of popular and art cinema which are habitually conceived as two separate entities and thereby provoke a need for rethinking of national cinema discourses along more nuanced patterns. Recently an attempt has been started by scholars to revisit the idea of world cinema and re-draw its contours in such a way that transcends the limits of art cinema. Inspired by writings of Ella Shohat and Robert Stan, and to some extent in response to an increase in transnational trends of filmmaking, this new project is a departure from the binary models that haunted Film Studies, and by refusing a centre for cinema (US or West) that provokes formation of its rival in the periphery, offers a “positive” and “inclusive” approach in studying world cinema (Nagib 35). Bringing works of an overlooked auteur like Hatami back to the table of critical examination certainly fits into this expansive project of “remapping world cinema”. Above all I hope this study will kindle an interest into unexplored areas of Iranian cinema and to inspire critics and scholars to look beyond the comfort zone of festival presentations of Iranian films.

Stills

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