



Transcending Borders: Identity and Self in Majid Majidi's *Baran*

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Abstract

Majidi's *Baran* (2001) is a never-never love story between an Iranian boy and an Afghan girl. With a sublime lyrical vision and visual artistry, the protagonist's personal journey towards his final act of self-denial is framed in the much broader context of the Afghan refugee crisis in Iran. While achieving a fine balance between the romantic sentimentality and a stark realism, *Baran* takes us into the microcosmic setting of the Afghan migrant workers in the Northern Iran. The relationship between two irreconcilable enemies is played out on the microcosmic level of Lateef's exchanges with Baran and other Afghan coworkers. He gradually probes deeper into the miserable existence of the Afghan refugees and gradually comes out of the kernel of his singular Iranian self. Thus, recurrently, the film addresses the possibilities that differences should not necessarily be antagonised but can be accommodative in perpetuating a broader humanism. His leaps are his attempts to evade boundaries between two antagonistic identities. And by the end of the film, he succeeds in rising beyond any imposed identity as he achieves a transcendence. Love evades all borders as Lateef's identity no more remains a *local* one in embracing the *global*. The film is all about this journey (having a spiritual overtone, given to Majidi's inclination towards Sufism; but this paper does not go into discussing that). This paper attempts to focus on the themes of identity and identification and the issue of self and other, chiefly highlighting on the journey of the central character.

Keywords: Afghan Refugee Crisis, Identity, Self-denial, Transcendence, Allegories.

Majidi's long-term engagements with the naive, simplistic and timeless tales drawing upon the essential human predicaments are well known to all cinema lovers. Peculiarly original, yet despondently universal, his stories are fables that always end up imparting life wisdom. It is with this characteristic naivety that Majidi's *Baran* (2001) envisages the possibilities of love and empathy between two ever-conflicting enemies. In an interview Majidi profoundly claims the power of cinema as an artistic medium to mitigate borders (national, linguistic, communal, racial, religious, geographical and so on) ensuing a peaceful cohabitation and achieve global humanitarian goals: "Cinema for me is a bridge between cultures. Cinema has great potential to bring different cultures together because cinema doesn't have any borders. It can travel around the world and have a great effect on human beings around the world". (The Siasat Daily, 2018). Majidi's 94 minutes long feature on a never-never love story between an

Iranian boy and an Afghan girl gives voice to the humane, breaking the rigid shackles of identity and self. Lateef's gradual transformation into a selfless human being (almost embodying an idyllic goodness) points to the transgressive possibilities to redefine the obsolete notions associated with self and identity. Several scholars have noted the influence of Sufism and Islamic Humanism on Majidi's cinematic ventures. However, this paper will strictly restrict itself in discussing the subjects of identity and self chiefly highlighting on the transformation of the central character Lateef. Michelle Langford, in her book titled *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance*, draws on the influence of allegories in shaping the poetics of Iranian cinema. This paper seeks to analyse the nature of transcendence by drawing references from Langford's discussion, while trying to locate the hidden political subtexts within the allegory.

The story unfolds on a wintry day in the city of Tehran. The central character Lateef (a seventeen-year-old) is a young Iranian gofer in a construction site managed by Memar. Lateef is a quick-tempered boy who is seen quarreling with the site workers every now and then. The site has workers from all parts of Iran (particularly from Iranian Azerbaijan and a large number of undocumented Afghan refugees who are employed illegally). Najaf, an Afghan worker falls from the building and injures his leg. Soltan, another Afghan worker brings Najaf's son Rahamat to replace his father. As Rahamat starts working, Memar observes that he is not fit for heavy tasks. Rahamat soon replaces Lateef to his utter resentment, since Lateef has to do all the harder tasks now. Lateef shows contempt for Rahamat and creates new hindrances for him every day. One day Lateef, to his utter surprise, discovers that Rahamat is actually a girl (Later he came to know her real identity. She was Najaf's daughter Baran). It is right from this point that Lateef's attitudes toward the latter start changing as he goes through a transformation in the course of the film.

With a sublime lyrical vision and visual artistry, Lateef's personal journey towards his final act of self-denial is framed in the much broader context of the Afghan refugee crisis in Iran. While achieving a fine balance between the romantic sentimentality and a stark realism, Majidi's *Baran* takes us into the microcosmic setting of the Afghan migrant workers in the Northern Iran. The opening screen of the film reads:

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. By the time the Soviets withdrew 10 years later, the country had become a ghost of its former self. The devastation combined with an ensuing civil war, the brutal reign of the Taliban regime, and a three-year drought, prompted millions of Afghans to flee their country. The United Nations estimates that Iran now hosts 1.5 million Afghan refugees. Most of the young generation was born in Iran, and has never been home. (Baran, 2001)

Since the Soviet Occupation of 1979 and the subsequent Taliban regime the Afghans flocked in large numbers into neighbouring Pakistan and Iran (by 2013, Afghanistan was the largest refugee-producing country in the world). As most of these immigrants are unable to get 'authorisation' in the country, they are illegally employed at subsistence wages by construction contractors (one such is Memar). A DIIS report by Janne Bjerre Christensen draws on the condition of Afghan refugees in Iran:

While Iran does everything to deter Afghans from coming, at the same time, both the refugees and the migrants constitute a crucial part of the Iranian workforce. The Afghans who are only allowed to work in a limited number of fields- take on the menial, dirty, risky and hard physical labour, few Iranians want to do. Typically they work in the construction

industry, as well as in farming, cleaning, garbage collecting, brick-making, mining, and road building. The Afghans are a 'huge driver of the economy, because it is very cheap labour and you have unlimited manpower supply. So if you're not happy with your workers you can just change them immediately. (...) It's a well-studied strategy of the government to avoid the pull factor, but at the same time be able to have that workforce available at any given time', the former NGO official says. (Christensen, 2016, p.22)

Thus, the casualisation of labour continues in a country with a high unemployment rate. This results in a general rift between the Iranian and the Afghan whereby the former blames the other for scarcity in jobs. Amidst this ensuing conflict between these two groups, the film elegantly displays the personal transformation of the central character Lateef. The general treatment an unauthorised Afghan receives in Iran is reflected in Lateef's annoyance in a confrontation with Baran (disguised as Rahamat):

"I am warning you, Afghan. You're taking my job and one day I'll smash your nose into your brain!" (Baran, 2001)

At this instant, Rahamat is not called by his(her) first name but referred to as an 'Afghan' where Rahamat's national identity is a curse for her. Indeed, here Lateef represents the collective identity of an Iranian and Rahamat represents the Afghan. The relationship between two irreconcilable enemies is played out on the microcosmic level of Lateef's exchanges with Rahamat (Baran) and other Afghan coworkers. At another sequence, Lateef, on being enquired by the inspector, retorts in a jocular way that he is an Afghan pointing to the ill-treatments he gets at work:

"I work more than the Afghans and I am treated like dirt" (Baran, 2001).

In the earlier sequence, after a fight broke down between Lateef and Rajaf for Baran's inefficiency, Lateef annoyingly tells Baran:

"You are Afghan. It's all your fault." (Baran, 2001).

It is more of a taken-for-granted matter, as identities are often naturalised. In a half-serious occasion, Lateef's response to the site-inspector exemplifies the general Iranian attitude and perception towards an Afghan refugee. Being cheap and easily affordable, the Afghan labours are employed in large numbers by the contractors. They do the back-breaking work to build apartments where the wealthy Iranians may inhabit. On a metaphorical level, then, the Afghans back the foundations of Iranian society. As Memar tells one worker:

"They (Afghans) work more and for much less money" (Baran, 2001).

In fact the Iranians are repeatedly mentioned as 'fellow countryman' which immediately labels the Afghans as outsiders. This marked oppositions between the two identity groups set the tone of the film, further, we will find more such instances.

The plight of displacement and conflicted identities runs deep in the vivid portrayal of Afghan lives throughout the film. Once removed from the native country, and later denied 'authorisation' in a foreign land, the Afghans are perennially outsiders, devoid of identities. This seclusion is well noted as all Afghans come from the village, *Kan Sulerum* they don't stay with the Iranian workers at the worksite. No doubt that identity is a pervasive concern in

the film. The significance of identity and identification is emphasised in the very expository scenes where Lateef had to produce his identity card at the grocery to purchase essentials for the construction workers. This *Shenasnameh* or the Iranian identity card is indispensable for a person in Iran even to casually roam around. This is also a certification of the superiority of the Iranian workers over the 'illegal' Afghans in construction sites. The issue of 'identity card' will be elaborated in context to Lateef's denial of self in subsequent paragraphs.

Any Afghan without 'authorisation' is a problem in the worksite. Throughout the 1989s, Iran's refuge policy allowed Afghans seeking exile for religious reasons. These people received "blue cards" and got identified as *mohajerin*. If one doesn't have an identity card, one's existence is not authorised and validated. Thus, the Afghan workers are at perpetual insecurity of a raid by the government inspectors. In the earlier sequences, we see Memar lying to the inspectors that there is no Afghan worker at the site. However, the inspectors keep coming back as the construction managers would very often conceal the real account of workers. In such an occasion where the inspectors got suspicious about Rahamat's true identity, they start chasing him (her). We see Lateef running after them and engaging in a fight with the inspectors to help Rahamat (Baran) escape. Lateef's risking his own life to help Rahamat (Baran) from a police-capture is not only a self-less gesture but can be seen as a form of dissent too. Baran successfully escaped but it is revealed that Memar has employed a huge number of Afghan workers. After this incident, he has to lay them off. Consequently, now Soltan and the rest have to roam here and there in search for work. Dejected, Lateef now sets off for finding Baran. He somehow gets hold of Soltan and tries to track Najaf and Baran through him (Soltan). He gets to know about Najaf's financial crisis and decides to give off his entire savings to help Najaf's family. Lateef's love for Baran is not a selfish desire, but it makes him more sensitive to human plights. Quite remarkably, Lateef does not grieve his monetary loss when he finds that Soltan has left for Afghanistan with the money that Lateef had sent for Najaf. He forgives Soltan and rises above his narrow personal desires to a more collective cause. With this act of self-denial, Lateef attains a stature of spiritual generosity. As Lateef overhears Najaf lamenting for his brother and other miseries resultant from the Afghan Civil War, Lateef becomes desperate to help him at any expense. He put the crutches that he bought with his little savings at the doorstep of Najaf and leaves in silence, as he always does. Finding no other way to arrange the money, Lateef decides to sell off his identity card. In Iran, this is the ultimate act of self-denial- both in material and symbolical terms. In order to find a deal for his identity card, he makes a journey to the dark corrupt alleys of Tehran. This signals Lateef's stepping into the sinful adulthood from his idealistic and innocent boyhood. Lateef's descent into the dark terrain of the mafia world is a significant departure from the idyllic innocence he embodies. Michelle Langford finely opines on the scene where Lateef is selling off his identity card:

A close-up of the card signals the symbolic intensity of this moment, as the man removes Lateef's photo and metaphorically erases his identity with a quick flick of his grubby finger. This act of selling his identity card is a powerful gesture in which Lateef shows his preference for the fugitives above himself, even though this will certainly ensure his own poverty. (Langford, 2019, pp.164)

She further adds,

...by choosing to relinquish his identification/ identity he is effectively rendered a non-citizen, like the Afghan refugees, and therefore it is questionable whether he even

stands for the state after all, but rather becomes one of the many displaced people of the region. (Langford, 2019, p.165)

However, Baran never gets to know about Lateef's sacrifice in the film.

The grueling authoritarianism of an Islamic state is reflected even in the portrayal of the affectionate relationship between Lateef and Memar. Memar, the foreman in the construction site, is portrayed as somewhat an irascible man although not decidedly unkind. Memar's treatment to Lateef resembles that of a father to a son. Indeed, Memar is the paternal boss to Lateef and he keeps Lateef's 'ID' card and money. Though paternally affectionate, the relationship is not cleansed of its hegemonic implications in Lateef's bondage to Memar. And Lateef is frequently seen trying to overcome this servitude. In a sequence where Lateef is seen asking for his identity card to Memar, the importance of the identity card is reinforced: "Hell, get it? You think it is such a precious shit?" (Memar to Lateef), to which Lateef retorts, "You're right! In the past months, that's what has fed your stomachs" (Baran, 2001).

The issue of identity is stretched in another reference where Baran has to switch her sexual identity for the male Rahamat in order to replace her injured father in the work site. In a Middle Eastern country, where women are strictly forbidden in male-dominated places, Baran conceals her identity to get the job. Undeniably, this switchability of identities and negation of *self* gives the film its necessary breathers in the face of state authoritarianism. While on the other hand, this particular incident also points towards the failure of the state in securing the basic survivals of the Afghan refugees whereby a migrant girl has to act beyond the Islamic moral codes in her desperate attempt to support her family.

Crucial to this matter of identity and identification is the gradual process where Lateef slowly moves away from being a state subject in his repeated negations of *self*. If, initially, Lateef is very conscious of his relatively privileged position over his Afghan counterpart Baran, in asking for his identity card from Memar -- the same Lateef is seen, in the latter scenes, to be easily letting go of his identity card in order to help Baran. Here, to be identified as a legal citizen no longer matters to him as he symbolically annihilates his *self* when he sells off the card. His journey from resentment to growing sympathy for the Afghans is a corollary to his gradual internal discovery. At a personal level, Lateef undergoes moral transformations as a human being almost achieving a spiritual transcendence. In this process of awakening, Lateef sets himself free from all rigid shackles. Lateef's adolescent impulses and quick temper is pacified by the suave and gentle presence of Baran (appearing as Rahamat) around him. Quite notably, Lateef's conduct towards the Afghans and fellow human beings start to change. We find him getting increasingly fascinated by the immigrant life and history and to grow sympathetic towards them. He probes deeper into the miserable existence of the Afghan refugees and gradually comes out of the kernel of his singular Iranian self. Thus, recurrently, the film addresses the possibilities that differences should not necessarily be antagonised but can be accommodative in perpetuating a broader humanism. (Here, 'humanism' is not used in its strictest Western senses, but it is more necessitated. Lateef's 'humane' gestures to Baran spring from their shared marginalised positions in society.) In fact, central to Majidi's cinematic tendencies is how his characters, as Langford writes on his another famous work *Children of Heaven*, "faced by personal challenges and dilemmas and their ability to overcome adversity tends to be linked with closely to their faith" (Langford, 2019, p. 75). In the present film, Lateef's repeated efforts to help Baran, in face of the authoritarian agencies at all levels, strikes the chords of universal humanism. Lateef identifies himself as one with his Afghan coworkers. His leaps are his attempts to

evade boundaries between two antagonistic identities. At the same time, being himself one from the blue-collared class, his every little gesture to lessen the hardship of Najaf's family is a stark reminder of the failures of Iranian civil society.

Indeed, the identity card is a potential trope here. Whereas the impenetrable barrier between two irreconcilable enemies sets the crisis, the truly selfless act of Lateef mitigates the distance between an Iranian and an Afghan. The annihilation of the *local* identity of being an Iranian immediately sets forth the possibilities of embracing a *global* one. Love is seen as a strategic mechanism to efface *self*. His little but earnest efforts without claiming any credit mark his transition towards being a selfless being.

Within this discussion of identity and identification, the issue of self and other is of great importance. Central to the construction of identity is that an awareness of the self necessitates the presence of another. Correspondingly, then, Afghan serves as a foil against constructing the Iranian national identity. The encounter with the Afghan other entails the identification and assertion of *Iraniyat*. Thus in the initial scenes, Lateef's shunning of Baran over a very trifling matter marks his desire for otherisation of the Afghan. Once calling Baran an 'Afghan', he clearly draws the territory between them. This singularity is called into question as soon as he starts sacrificing his self-interests and symbolically gives up his Iranian identity by giving up the card. What we find at the final scenes of the film is a transcendental form of Lateef. The following paragraph will draw on the nature of this transcendence.

Part of Majidi's ideological project is traced in his cinematic trends where the characters undertake a journey towards transcending into ideal figures. In the course of the films, the troubled, conflicted self attains an idealised stature which serves as a foil against the faulty state systems. Sometimes a general charge against Majidi goes against his too much idealistic portrayals of Iranian society ignoring more severe aspects. In *Baran*, the 'idealised' provides the model for the *desirables* that the society lacks. And this *lack* enables him to direct our attention towards the precariat.

During the shooting of *Baduk* (1991) near the border of Afghanistan, Majidi got a firsthand experience of the Afghan refugees and in squalid refugee camps. Afterwards, Majidi told in an interview: "I knew I wanted to make a film that would bring out the human dimensions of the people. I didn't want to make a political interpretation of their situation." (Majidi, SF GATE, 2002) The precariat, the plights, the crude realities of the sordid camps - all comes packed within his filtered allegorical representation. Through these idealised figures, then, Majidi tries to establish the *values* they embody, to pitch his particular ideologies as a counter-strategy. Lateef's character thus achieves something, I would call, an allegorical transcendence of the noblest virtue- *selflessness*. And by extension, this selflessness somehow points towards the social injustices done to the Afghans in the film as his films "promoting (promote) socio-cultural critique, prompting viewers to call the dominant ideology into question." (Langford, 2019, p.61) Iranian Cinema, as Langford writes in her book, has presented the repressed and the non-presentables using powerful cinematic tactics for strict censorship guidelines. And in doing that, allegory is one of such story-telling technique for so many of them, among whom Majidi is a front-liner. However, Langford finds it more than a strategy against the state censorship claiming allegory to be an integral part of the aesthetics of Iranian cinema. She draws on both how it functions as a strategy for both supporting and resisting dominant ideology. A strategy, something that Langford called a 'cine-poetics', one that "functions to support and at other times to resist dominant state

ideology. By resistance, I (Langford) mean(s) not only resistance to political or ideological agendas, nor simply to evade censorship, but also aesthetic resistance, a playful or disruptive use of cinematic form that renders meaning ambiguous and calls upon viewers to actively engage in the process of interpretation" (Langford, 2019, p.2).

The all-suddenly complete turnaround of Lateef and his embodied childish goodness sometimes seem very fairytalish, but within Majidi's cosmos, characters act more like allegorical figures. Thus, Lateef's idealised portrayal, almost to the extent of being idyllic, is the very strategy of Majidi that hides within it some deeper subtexts. And it keeps on unpacking its multiple layers of interpretation. Talking about another popular film of Majidi, *Children of Heaven*, Langford writes on how the film,

..beautifully exemplifies this tendency. Majidi uses a simple tale of two small children to promote certain key values such as patience, compassion, and forbearance. I demonstrate how this film functions as a didactic allegory that is closely aligned with the national project, but rather than *telling* the viewers what or how to think, it uses immersive strategies of focalisation to produce a highly affective form of personification allegory. (Langford, Bloomsbury, p.6)

Similarly, in *Baran*, this transcendence is achieved in Lateef's continual self-denial and his perpetual efforts in effacing the distance from his Afghan *others*.

This is remarkable that *Baran* does not abound in heavily-loaded dialogues. It voices what it has to voice in remarkable silence. And in doing this, it solely depends on evocative visuals and natural sounds. It seems that resorting to silence and not acting enough characterise Lateef's reluctance in 'achieving' anything. As if, to be ever denying his self and sacrificing everything with no expectation of rewards define his character. It is this quintessential silence by which Lateef somewhere registers his protests: denials give him an allegorical transcendence. He succeeds in rising beyond any imposed identity as he embodies the highest virtue of *selflessness*. It is very obvious, then, that a resigned yet a very peaceful Lateef will be seen standing in rain staring at the last imprint of Baran as she leaves forever until the shot fades in to black screen (the sound of rain-drops continues to play in black screen). Lateef's unfulfilled desire to come close to Baran is sublimated as he stands in rain in the closing scene. Indeed, this rain is cathartic: 'Baran' (literally stands for 'rain' in Farsi) washes away the borders- I think, no word could do justice to Majidi's *cine-poetics* than this closing shot which is one of the best poetries in Iranian cinemas. And, no matter how unsuccessful in reaching any destination, Lateef and Baran's love succeeds in reinforcing the power of human sympathy in a world full of hate-mongers. And here Majidi touches the universal chord.

Notes

1. I write this paper, not as a scholar of Film Studies drawing more on the cinematic techniques and devices. Like other art forms, cinema is also a text, and this paper attempts a critical study of Majidi's *Baran* as a literary text. I write on the themes, narrative style, symbols, characterisation, as I would write on any novel.
2. *Shenasnameh*: Iranian *Shenasnameh* is translated as a 'birth certificate' or 'identity certificate'.
3. *Iraniyat*: "being Iranian" or, "Iranness"

4. The reference of dialogues (originally spoken in different Iranian languages), is taken from the English subtitles in the film.
5. Italics Mine.

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