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Women, Social Development, and Cultural Policy in the Cinema of Bahram Beyzaie: A Case Study of Killing Rabid Dogs and Bashu, the Little Stranger

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ABSTRACT

Bahram Beyzaie's cinema has consistently served as a space for rethinking the concepts of identity, history, and gender. Within this framework, women occupy a central position in his narratives—not as secondary elements or stereotypical figures, but as active agents possessing independent identities. This article, focusing on the films *Killing Rabid Dogs* and *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, seeks to explore the ways in which the social development of women is represented within Beyzaie's worldview. The research aims to analyze the role of women in Bahram Beyzaie's cinema and addresses the central question: how are women's social development and cultural policy represented in Beyzaie's cinematic discourse? This study employs an analytical–descriptive method, grounded in semiotics and gender studies, to examine the main female characters in the two films. It demonstrates how Beyzaie, through these characters, adopts a critical stance toward patriarchal and traditional structures. The findings indicate that Beyzaie portrays women as bearers of moral strength, seekers of truth, and symbols of resistance against domination.

Keywords: Bahram Beyzaie, woman, Bashu, Killing Rabid Dogs, cinema

Introduction

The representation of women in Bahram Beyzaie's works is an indescribable reality. In his cinematic creations, the camera persistently focuses and zooms in on the woman's character and presence as a central axis. This emphasis has led many critics to categorize his films within the domain of feminist discourse (1). Nevertheless, some critics such as Noushabeh Amiri argue that Beyzaie's works cannot be regarded as feminist in the conventional sense, since women in his films are not used as gendered instruments, but rather as meaningful presences that transcend gender representation or superiority (2).

Among the most successful writers and filmmakers who have portrayed the centrality of women in their works is Bahram Beyzaie. Through an authentic narrative language, he has continuously succeeded in portraying women as vital and influential figures both within their social environment and their family context. Based on Joseph



Campbell's monomyth model, the male hero usually undergoes ten stages in a journey toward perfection; however, Beyzaie subverts this structure by depicting the decline of male heroes and highlighting the emergence of female protagonists who embody strength and transformation in alignment with contemporary conditions (3, 4).

What is noteworthy is that the women in Beyzaie's films never exhibit shame or embarrassment about their existence; rather, circumstances often arise that render their actions and decisions mythic in dimension (1). Before addressing the core of this discussion and examining the position of women in Beyzaie's cinema, it is useful to explore the filmic context, gendered encounters between male and female, masculine and feminine discourses within the textual system, and the construction of the female as hero. Accordingly, the present study aims to analyze the role of women's social development in Bahram Beyzaie's *Killing Mad Dogs* and *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, seeking to answer the main question: how are women represented in the cinema of Bahram Beyzaie?

Research Method

This study employs an analytical–descriptive method grounded in semiotics and gender studies. It examines the principal female characters in the two selected films, emphasizing the relationship between symbolic structures, social agency, and gender identity.

Research Background

Azari and Taki (2011) conducted a sociological study on the representation of female identity in the films of Beyzaie and Mehrjuii, concluding that within the subcategory of personal identity, the values and attitudes of female characters are more salient in Beyzaie's films. In contrast, religious rituals are more pronounced in Mehrjuii's works. However, in dimensions such as fundamental trust, body control, and surveillance, no significant differences were found between the female protagonists of the two filmmakers. Moreover, the role of wifehood functions as the dominant identity in Mehrjuii's films, overshadowing other role identities, while the maternal role appears less central in Beyzaie's works (5).

Similarly, Shamian Sarouklai and Afshar (2013) examined myth and gender in Beyzaie's cinema and found that the structure and function of myth in his works are often transformed—particularly through the reconfiguration of the “hero” archetype. Based on Joseph Campbell's model, the male hero traditionally follows a ten-stage journey toward fulfillment. Yet Beyzaie, through the decline of male heroes and the emergence of female protagonists, redefines the traditional functions of this myth to reflect the sociocultural realities of his era (1).

Shahla Lahiji (1997) argues that Beyzaie has rediscovered the archetypal “eternal grandmother” from forgotten myths, cleansing her from the dust of time and rendering her luminous and compatible with the contemporary age (6).

The Image of Woman in Cinema

Cinema may be regarded as a condensed reflection of the social conditions, regulations, and ideals of any historical period. Anthropologists consider cinema as a crucial source that articulates cultural, social, religious, artistic, national, and local issues. From an anthropological standpoint, films are saturated with cultural actions, social relations, customs, and symbolic values, and thus can be considered as cultural documents of a society. It is generally accepted that just as a society manifests itself in its literature, music, and painting, so too can it be reflected in its cinema. In recent decades, global transformations have led to the emergence of a vast social force

known as women, whose active participation in all domains has redefined gender perceptions. Consequently, attention to women's issues—especially their cinematic representations—has intensified (7-9).

Comparison of the Female Image in Beyzaie's Screenplays and Plays with the Reality of Society

The female identity in Bahram Beyzaie's works serves a grander purpose—it acts as a mirror commissioned to narrate a historical reality of injustices endured by humanity, and particularly by women. Throughout history, women's share of suffering has often surpassed that of men. In Beyzaie's works, "woman" is not a symbol merely because of her gender, but because she embodies a reflective presence that enables the viewer to witness truth and reality. Interpreted from this perspective, even if the female characters exhibit a blend of light and darkness, their role remains that of a truthful narrator, not an emblem of feminine superiority. Beyzaie's attention to female characters arises from his recognition of women as more impressionable and receptive to historical forces. Hence, he often explores masculine relationships and social hierarchies through female subjectivity. According to Beyzaie's worldview, woman functions as an *astrolabe* through which the entire universe and its social relations can be observed (3, 10).

Beyzaie's films create imaginative and intellectually vibrant women who either fulfill or alter their destinies. His female characters accept the task of living meaningfully in each period, employing both determination and affection as instruments for shaping the future. However, this process is never easy: such experiences often emerge through hardship, mourning, or separation as women search for selfhood or others. Viewed from this lens, Beyzaie's women are active agents seeking truth; their restlessness operates as a form of *meta-motivation*, propelling them through successive states of becoming toward a state of being characterized by creativity, spontaneity, and acceptance of their own and others' realities (11, 12).

Beyzaie's cinema can thus be understood as a *visual translation of myth*. This feature aligns with the defining characteristics of both modernist and postmodernist narrative structures. His endeavor to contemporize myths, reinterpret ancient symbols, and at times, to create or deconstruct mythic structures reveals his distinctive contribution to narrative innovation (4, 13). The women in Beyzaie's films are typically powerful, idealistic, and—compared with men—display a greater capacity for growth and transformation (14, 15).

In general, the role of women in Beyzaie's cinema has been categorized as follows:

- A) The author's early experiments: woman as a conventional and ordinary figure.
- B) The experimental phase of integrating the woman's role with the author's viewpoint: a woman who seeks to stand on her own feet (a woman striving to make a living).
- C) The author's distinctive attitude toward women: woman alongside man (a woman who encourages the man to act).
- D) The author's strong conviction about women: the woman who rises alone (13).

Identity is among the most complex concepts. In essence, the notion of identity simultaneously enables two relations among persons and even things: similarity on the one hand and difference on the other. In a broad classification, identity is divided into "national identity" and "individual identity." At present, one of the core concerns of the Iranian family and of Iranian women is rooted in the concept of identity. Many married women and mothers grapple with this issue, and diverse studies attribute numerous women's issues across individual, social, and familial arenas to transformative, identity-forming contexts. Conflicts between family roles—especially motherhood—and

women's social participation have intensified under identity changes and women's reflexive rethinking of their identity dimensions (16, 17).

In Beyzaie's films of the 1980s, we encounter female characters endowed with independent, purposeful, and influential identities. He situates woman—and women—as a central axis of his narratives: women who decide how to steer the cycle of their own lives and, simultaneously, exert an influence that aligns the society in which they live with this position (14).

Today, the domains of tradition and modernity have been reshaped by women's entanglements in both spheres and by the emergence of varied formative elements in women's identities—heightening the importance of discerning and redefining women's identity (16, 18).

Social development. The United Nations introduces social development as the enhancement of the capacity of the social system—its structures, institutions, services, and policies—and the mobilization of resources for better living conditions. In a broader sense, it encompasses values oriented toward equitable distribution of income, wealth, and opportunity. Social development relates to issues such as improving quality of life, achieving equality and social justice, fostering social solidarity, establishing meritocracy, promoting cooperation through civil associations and institutions, and strengthening the capabilities and capacities of the social system (9).

In fact, development is a complex process and a form of social change that can take place at global, national, regional, and local levels, and across individual and collective dimensions—in economic, social, cultural, and political forms. Among the most important indicators for measuring a country's development is the average degree of importance and recognition granted to women. As half of the human resources, women are not only targets of any form of development but also agents who advance the aims of social development (8).

Cultural policy on women in Iranian cinema. Cultural policy is a conceptual approach to managing and planning cultural development, situated amid evolving concepts of culture and the strategic design of practical measures related to the resources, foundations, and challenges that arise from culture and progress across different domains. In practice, cultural policy concerns systems, processes, alternatives, and, consequently, the formulation of innovative solutions to developmental challenges facing cultural institutions and the promotion of public participation in cultural life (19). Scholars of cultural planning and policy in Iran have periodized cultural planning in contemporary Iranian cinema by political eras—e.g., Qajar, Constitutional, Pahlavi I and II, and the Islamic Republic. Thus, periodization of cultural policymaking in contemporary Iran emerges from a combination of legislative benchmarks and political-social transformations. The policy of women's presence in post-Revolution Iranian cinema aims to consolidate women's social standing and to counter the notion that woman is merely a source of diversion or entertainment; rather, she exerts a formative influence on cultural production. Although this era witnessed oscillations in the representation of women, it nonetheless inscribed a presence distinct from the pre-Revolution woman, in line with the period's social and cultural foundations. The representation of women's roles in the period under review underwent changes in such areas as: average screen presence, job quality, dress, social class, use of cultural commodities, personal skills, dialogic concepts, level of education, and beliefs (20). Some of Beyzaie's social works—especially those written in the 1960s and 1970s—are presented in allegorical form. He employs this form to articulate the socio-political events of his time. Allegorical stories are narratives that cloak a non-fictional thematic core in a fictional covering. Beyzaie does not confine his fiction to a single or limited set of subjects; rather, his expansive thinking across social, political, historical, and national-mythic contexts yields a wide thematic range.

He has written across multiple domains, but he has been especially successful in social, national, and political subjects, producing numerous works in these areas (21).

Representation and analysis of woman in *Killing Mad Dogs*.

The screenplay of *Killing Mad Dogs* narrates the oppression of a woman in a patriarchal society—an environment that, through the “woman-as-commodity” gaze, licenses men to exploit women as instruments for their own interests. Yet beneath this surface, Beyzaie exposes the baseness and vacuity of men who, trapped in a circle of unhealthy convictions and manic self-interest, are rendered bewildered—an exposure that becomes legible through the film’s representation of woman. This representation endures not only during the film’s running time but also after the audience leaves the theater, engraving a persistent revulsion toward men whose ultimate share is nothing but complicity in victimization (10). In *Killing Mad Dogs* (2001), Mojdeh Shamsaie plays Golrokh, the central female character. Beyzaie presents the true face of a self-sacrificing woman: Golrokh Kamali returns to Iran after the war and discovers that her husband is bankrupt and on the run due to promissory notes in the hands of creditors (4). The film foregrounds women’s simplicity, affection, self-denial, and courage. To save her former husband, Golrokh undertakes a dangerous task and infiltrates circles of predatory men—men who appear outwardly respectable yet conceal corrupt interiors. She mobilizes every effort to free her husband from the creditors, meeting them to repurchase his notes; each attempts to seduce and entrap her, but ultimately Golrokh does not yield. She emerges as a symbol of women’s oppression in society—women who become playthings for others and whose simplicity is exploited. Confronted with her husband’s disloyalty, she ultimately leaves him, while he plans to flee the country with another woman. Enduring harassment and assault in pursuit of her goal, she refuses to relent; with keen intelligence she manipulates the men to salve her wounds and to reclaim agency (3).

Representation and analysis of woman in *Bashu, the Little Stranger*

The plot of *Bashu, the Little Stranger* begins with Iraq’s attack on southern Iran. A boy named Bashu is forced to migrate to northern Iran—an event that signals the disruption of equilibrium. Because of the linguistic and cultural differences he faces in the North, Bashu is compelled to struggle, adapt, and dedicate himself to the new environment. A northern woman named Na’i takes him under her wing as though he were her own child, and equilibrium is restored as Bashu becomes part of this northern family (15).

Here, Na’i, the northern woman, seeks—through various means—to communicate with Bashu in ways that enable his recognition at the ethno-cultural level. She also endeavors to persuade her husband and relatives to shelter him. In one scene, Bashu hides behind a wheat field, watching Na’i feed herself and her children with morsels she prepares—a moment that positions her as a mother, one of the fundamental pillars in the creation of social identity. As Bashu cautiously approaches, a dog’s bark sends him into a panic; Na’i shouts the animal down, then leaves a piece of bread for Bashu and exits the field—a gesture that furthers the mothering dynamic (15).

The title *Bashu, the Little Stranger* foregrounds Bashu as the “other” who is drawn into the center of the dominant discourse. His encounter with Na’i—across their differences—constitutes a cultural semiotic of resolution. If we read Na’i’s quasi-mythic role as mediating identity conflicts, we acknowledge the positive cultural dimensions of identity in the turmoil of national or social identity (15). Beyzaie’s choice of the name “Na’i” signals his mythic attention: Na’i derives from “Nahid/Anahid,” an ancient Iranian goddess associated with beauty, strength, and wisdom, often manifested as a deity of love and fertility, from whom the spring of life flows—hence, the figure of the mother-

goddess (12). Bashu, despite himself, becomes estranged from and then returns to himself; these transformations arise from the central, mythic role of the mother-land embodied in Na'i, the active rural woman of the film. It is Na'i who first discovers Bashu; her large, penetrating eyes signify that she alone truly sees him and forges a bond. She bestows maternal love on him without expectation—the love that re-establishes the story's equilibrium (22).

Put differently, the sustained depiction of encounters between Bashu's mother and Na'i—across multiple events—enacts the movement of the “other” (Bashu) toward the “self” (Na'i), emphasizing Na'i's efforts to make Bashu her own and to cultivate a maternal bond. In another subplot, the northern woman again evokes the memory of Bashu's southern mother, and these recollections ultimately facilitate Na'i's acceptance as mother (15).

Conclusion

Bahram Beyzaie is one of Iran's most distinguished artists. He stands among the rare filmmakers who have consistently been concerned with awareness and understanding through the lens of history. His continuous endeavor to explore profound concepts within his cinematic, theatrical, and scholarly works—and his tendency to invite his audience into constant questioning—has made him an artist of distinctive vision and style.

In response to a question by Saeed Zeidabadi-Nejad, a professor at SOAS University of London, regarding the distinctive presence and role of women in his films, Beyzaie remarked that he grew up in a household where men and women were regarded as equal—two wings of the same bird—and that he was raised with the belief in equality among all people regardless of race or language. In his films, Beyzaie has been remarkably successful in employing mythic heroism as well as national and political themes, integrating them into the representation of female character and gender identity. The two films analyzed in this study illustrate different yet interconnected reflections of this vision.

In *Killing Mad Dogs*, the protagonist Golrokh returns from exile to find her husband bankrupt and powerless. The narrative transforms her into a heroine who battles men of various classes—each corrupt beneath their respectable façades—to redeem her husband's dishonored checks. Despite betrayal and injury, Golrokh emerges victorious, symbolizing endurance and moral strength.

Conversely, in *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, set amid the turmoil of the Iran–Iraq War, a displaced southern boy arrives in the northern region, where he encounters Na'i. Like Golrokh, Na'i embodies the archetype of the heroic woman—nurturing, resilient, and divine in her maternal compassion. She shelters Bashu, accepts him as her own, and restores balance and belonging. Golrokh and Na'i thus become emblems of rebirth and continuity. In both narratives, the recognition of individual identity—male and female alike—plays a vital role, as each character's performance reveals dimensions of their social identity.

At a broader level, the advancement of social development, the acceleration of economic growth, and the fulfillment of social justice are all contingent upon acknowledging women as active and constructive forces. Viewing women as agents of change and productivity undoubtedly enhances both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of human capital. The role of women in development is inseparable from the goals of social and economic progress and constitutes a fundamental factor in transforming all human societies.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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