



THE PROTESTING LENS: ELEMENTS OF THIRD CINEMA IN ABBAS KIAROSTAMI'S *TEN*

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ABSTRACT

Iranian films have a unique space in the realm of cinema. They are exceptional, simple, innovative and inspirational. Abbas Kiarostami is a prominent figure of Iranian cinema whose films received international acclaim. His extremely minimalist directorial mode, experimental style and unconventional narrative patterns make his films oppositional to the traditional feature films. He is one of the pioneers of Iranian New Wave cinema. Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002) is quintessentially an experimental film which has the form of a collection of conversations. This paper intends to analyse the film *Ten* in the light of third cinema which is originally a Latin American movement presently flourished all over the world. The film focuses on various aspects of Iranian life from different female perspectives. It maintains a protesting tone throughout the narrative and subverts many established social roles. The film has a novel plot structure, peculiar camera set ups and a fresh narrative style. All these features point out its lineage from third cinema.

Key words: Third cinema, Abbas Kiarostami, Feminism, Iranian cinema, Minimalism, Documentary

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A film maker who has opened up a path for himself and his followers; that is what is Abbas Kiarostami in Iranian cinema. He has proved his potential as a film director, screen writer and photographer. Worked in numerous films, he has introduced many innovative concepts to Iranian cinema. His films are known for their peculiar narrative style, individualism, metaphysical tone, visual enchantment and poetic images. *The Bread and Alley* (1970) was the first film by Abbas Kiarostami. It was a twelve minute film depicting a school boy and a dog. After producing a few more films in 1970s such as *The Experience* (1973), *The Traveller* (1974) etc he made some short films. His widely accepted Koker trilogy on the life on the village of Koker in northern Iran was released during

the period 1987 to 1994. His films like Koker Trilogy (1987-1994), *Close-Up* (1990), *Taste of Cherry* (1997) *Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), *Ten* (2002), *Five* (2003), *Shirin* (2008), *Certified Copy* (2010), *Like Someone in Love* (2012) etc enact serious discussions within the narrative structure. He got numerous awards and appreciations for his films including the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for his film, *Taste of Cherry* in 1997. He died due to illness on July 4, 2016.

As one of the prominent figures of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, Kiarostami's films can be taken as the tokens of the development of Iranian New Wave during 1970s to 2010s. Non-professional artists, minimal dialogue and nominal script; these basic traits of Kiarostamian films mark

him as the forerunner of Iranian experimental cinema. He cultivated a unique interactive filmic style that enables the audience to have a hold on the narration. His films mainly focus on the hitherto tangential subjects such as women and children. This paper examines the legacy of third cinema in his film *Ten* (2002).

Third cinema, an artistic and politically enthused project originated in Latin America in 1960s, still guides and inspires many filmmakers from Africa, Asia and Europe instigating them to squabble against the existing systems of exploitation. A group of Latin American film makers initiated the concept of third cinema in 1960s and 70s as a set of militant manifestos and low-budget experimental films and documentaries. They identified it as a movement emerged against the first cinema which consists of the mainstream cinemas with the best example of Hollywood films and the second cinema or the artistically oriented European art cinema. The rubric of third cinema encompassed some cogent themes and a transition occurred in the motifs of third cinema. Issues such as imperialism, globalisation, gender and racial problems surfaced and shift in focus necessitated third cinema to embrace novel thematic horizons. Teshome H Gabriel writes, "Another important recurring theme in Third Cinema is that of the struggle for the emancipation of women." (18) Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten*, however, proposes radical changes and approaches in cinema that is capable of undermining and redefining the existing gender roles.

Ten (2002), starring mainly Mania Akbari, consists of 10 conversations, happens within a car during driving around Tehran. It is obviously a feminist work. The film focuses on several women characters starting from the protagonist, a nameless lady driver, her sister, another woman friend and three other women passengers including an old woman, a prostitute and an unmarried young woman.

The first section of the film starts with a conversation between a mother and her son, Amin. At first only Amin is on the focus of the camera as he sits in the front seat of a car which is driven by his mother. It becomes clear that the boy is not happy

with his mother's divorce from his father and her second marriage. When he displays distaste with her choices she asserts them by saying: "I didn't get married again just to give you another father. He is a good companion for me, a friend" (00.04.02-00.04.10, Ten). This expression of boundless individuality and self-will displayed by the mother is pretty strange and revolting in a patriarchal background. But her son does not pay attention to his mother as he fervently defends his father and displays contempt and aversion towards her. Amin is both a victim and an ally of patriarchy. He displays all the restlessness and insecurities of children of divorced parents. But his mother, throughout the shot, succeeds to hold her principles tight and her determination surmounts the challenges and demands around her. She says: "You're like your father. He shut me away, destroyed me. He wanted me only for himself" (00.04.48-00.04.53, Ten). It becomes clear that she was bounded with restrictions in her first marriage and now she is contented and happy. Her divorce and remarriage is thus liberations from the clutches of patriarchy to the fulfilment of her urge for autonomy. She further says: "But don't call me selfish. Say rather, "I want mum for myself" but she belongs to no one, only to herself" (00.10.35-00.10.43, Ten). Thus Kiarostami introduces a fiercely independent woman, who transcends the limits of patriarchal systems such as marriage, family and motherhood in the film. Such an irrepressible free-will is rare and infuriating to Iranian society. Her enthusiasm on the sexual relationships of the prostitute, her convictions on marriage and divorce and her apparent feminist perspectives all make her characterisation an attempt of protest against traditional Iranian patriarchy.

The defiance displayed by the prostitute, who has entered the car at night expecting a male customer is also remarkably protesting. As soon as she realizes it is a woman driver she tries to get off but the lady insists her to stay and they start a conversation. Throughout their talk, the prostitute shows contempt towards love and marriage. She speaks about sex openly, showing sacrilege towards the conventional codes of morality. She redefines the constructs of marital love and sex. There is

strong impudence in her words toward existing social structures of marriage and family. She displays her disapproval with marriage by accusing the married driver, saying: "You're the wholesalers and we're the retailers" (Ten. 00.47.07-00.47.11). Her insolent comparison of marriage to prostitution since both engage in the same trade of sex emasculates the conservative Iranian morality. Throughout the episode camera focuses the driver and the prostitute's face is not at all shown in the film. Possibly, it is a precaution to protect the artist, who played the role, from the anger of Iranian fundamentalists for her provoking observations about her profession.

Another passenger, who is evidently a close acquaintance of the lady driver, laments over her separation from her husband after seven years of marriage. The driver tries to convince her the importance of finding happiness in loving ourselves by saying: "We women are unhappy. We don't love ourselves. We don't know how to live for ourselves" (01.04.37-01.04.45, Ten). It is clear from her words that she has the opinion that too much reliance on another person is the core reason of women's unhappiness and misery. Through her, Kiarostami upholds a constant reminding of the need of self-reliance and resilience which is still a delusion to women all over the world.

Characterisation in Kiarostami's films is always exceptional and outlandish. Kiarostami does not use stereotypes but he employs individualistic characters. In *Ten*, he brings out insurgence through his weird selection of women characters starting from the bold protagonist to the prostitute. Their incompatibility with the patriarchal milieu initiates revolt in the film. The scornful observation of the heroine: "The rotten laws of this society of ours give no rights to women! To get a divorce a woman has to say that she is beaten or that her husband is on drugs!" (00.15.49-00.16.02, Ten) is an upsurge of protest against judiciary. The young woman who has shaven her head to overcome the grief over her broken engagement and the woman who turned into prostitution to retort her fiancée's infidelity are all tokens of such displeasures and squabbles with patriarchy. *Ten*, in that sense, is a journey to expose women's attempts to overcome their misfortunes

enforced by external forces. The old woman finds peace in prayer, the prostitute in her audacious job, the young woman shaves her head to triumph over the grief and finally, the dialogue between the woman driver and her son reveals her decision to admit her son's views as she also surmounts her feeling of guilt.

When Kiarostami transforms a casual car ride into a fascinating movie, the novelty in filmic style turns to be another feature of third cinema. Similar to the classic third cinema films, such as *The Hour of Furnaces* which are basically documentaries, Ten also has a documentary form. Nicola Marzano's observation, "...Third Cinema must reinvent itself in terms of gender, class and geographical identity and consequently in terms of narrative structure and aesthetics" is effectively materialized by Kiarostami in *Ten*, with his minimalist camera set-ups and with the hardly noticeable editing tactics. As part of his attempts to prevent audience from being manipulated by the traditional film making techniques Kiarostami withheld himself from the scene. Provided with a shallow background and unusual script, the audience are forced to deliberate the meaning of conversations that one can even slowly extent between the viewer and the film. The film generates a feeling of eavesdropping real conversations in the minds of spectators. The ostensible discarding of narrative does not affect the flow of the storyline of the film as it provides the audience with freedom to fill the void of narrative that otherwise make up for.

Another characteristic of third cinema that can be found in *Ten* is the innovative handling of camera. Beyond a mere machinery, camera has a vital role in third cinema, which is identified as an "inexhaustible *expropriator of image-weapons*; the projector, *a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second*" (58) by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanace in "Towards a Third Cinema". In *Ten*, there is no shift of location, only two camera set ups; one camera directed towards the driver and the other towards the front seat passenger. Yet the film succeeds to generate curiosity in the minds of spectators. Here more than being a handy machinery, camera assumes the role of a static witness when a range of social issues from veiling to

morality heaved before it. Counter to the traditional films, in *Ten*, the location shifts and the camera remains still set in the front of the car near the dash board throughout the film. But camera focuses the exterior once to address the actions of the prostitute. She gets out of the car seeking customers and camera captures it from behind her. Kiarostami uses medium close-ups all through the film to intensify the emotional aspects of it. In an Iranian context, Kiarostami's camera is impounded with the inexhaustible unresists such as the exhibition of a woman's shaven head and the provocation from the prostitute's disclosures.

Amateurism and activism are the two fundamental principles of character selection in third cinema. "Third Cinema takes a different approach to filmmaking, by subverting cinematic codes, embracing revolutionary ideals, and combating the passive film-watching experience of commercial cinema" writes Zainabu Davis. It demystifies the concept of stardom of actors that prevail in mainstream cinema by placing non-professional actors in the main itinerary of cinema. Kiarostami selected real life rebels to play the leading roles in *Ten*, main actress Mania Akbari is a famous Iranian director, artist and writer who was exiled from Iran for the revolutionary and provocative tone of her films. Mania's son Amin Maher and her sister Roya Akbari plays the roles of her son and sister in the film respectively. Roya is also a director and artist. There are many non-professional artists also involved in the film. It is such a creative manoeuvring of reality, besides the main characters, people from the street, who is walking and driving becomes a part of the film unknowingly. It is evident that Kiarostami consciously brought these artists for his film as part of his reaction against the mainstream cinema.

The disapprovals from Iranian government and the resultant banning of his films in Iran accentuate the activist disposition of his cinema. *Ten* deciphers anecdotes of protest in a variety of forms and in different degrees of cogency. Thus revolt, the core element of third cinema is perceptible throughout the film as different segments such as camera, characters, plot and dialogues and the

overall style of the film aim to challenge patriarchy and the mainstream cinemas.

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