Reimagining the Cinematic Gaze: An Analysis of Iranian Mystical Cinema in Majid Majidi's *Baran*

Sarah Abdullah

Lecturer, Lahore College for Women University (LCWU), sarah-farooq@hotmail.com

Abstract

For the last few decades gaze as a theoretical concept has been explored from philosophical, political, and psychological perspectives. However, its exploration in media studies has been the most extensive where it has been used to explore the viewers' engagement with visual media. Theories of male gaze (Mulvey), female gaze (Lorraine Gamman, Margaret Marshment), objectifying gaze (Fredrickson and Roberts) and imperial gaze (E. Ann Kaplan) have explored the function of art and viewer's relationship with the views in the West. However western-centric theoretical frameworks that explore the role of gaze become problematic when one initiates a discussion on mystical cinema as it is developed outside the influence of mainstream cinematic thrust and its purely capitalist and consumer-driven markets. A case in point is Iranian mystical cinema that is theopoetic in tradition and provides a viewing experience distinctly opposed to scopophilia. Taking everyday ordinary protagonists, instead of larger-than-life heroes, this cinema takes us on a journey of their inner selves as they grapple with mundane experiences of life. The objective is not to depict the everyday life of individual characters objectively but to use the ordinary, banal, and everyday to ask philosophical questions about life, death, and the connection between the real and the spiritual. The need for a gaze theory that is steeped in Iranian culture is required to process these films. This paper argues for the idea of mystical gaze as a broad code with which to process these films and applies it to Majid Majidi's film, *Baran*.

Keywords: Iranian cinema, cinematic gaze, media studies, gaze theory, mysticals

The Gaze in Western Theoretical Perspectives

In the last century gaze as an idea gained a lot of prominence within the domain of critical theory. The meaning of gaze from one of staring or looking intently shifted to a dynamic meaning-making phenomenon that actively shapes one's perception of an object. As a subject of inquiry gaze has been defined by existential, psychoanalysis, and media theorists. From a phenomenological perspective, Jean Paul Sartre's (*Being and Nothingness*) position on the idea of gaze is one of objectification and tied to his idea of Being-in-itself. Gaze is important for realising oneself as a subject but at the same time, it robs the individual of their dynamism. "I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other"(302-303). From a socio-political perspective, Foucault examines the concept of the gaze in *The Birth of the Clinic*, where he analyses how positioning an individual within the medical paradigm erases their individuality. Similarly, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he explores the disciplinary gaze of an unseen authority that compels individuals to regulate their own behaviour. "There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze that each individual under its weight will end by [internalising] to the point that they are their own overseer, each individual thus exercising surveillance over, and against themself" (155). This idea of gaze is tied to Foucault's concept of panopticism, demonstrating how power operates through internalised surveillance, compelling individuals, under the weight of an omnipresent gaze, to self-regulate and discipline their behaviour. From a postmodern perspective Derrida in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* uses it to ask questions of pathos and ethics to delve into the ontology of man as a subject. However, the concept of gaze has been most extensively explored by theorists of media studies. These theorists, especially feminists, build on Lacan's conceptualisation of gaze in *Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a*. In describing the relationship between objet petit a and the gaze, Lacan brings in the idea of desire. Desire for Lacan is something that is nothing but a narcissistic projection, and the fullness that it promises is nothing but a misrecognition. The perpetuity of desire is ensured by the lack that operates at its centre which an objet a petit threatens to expose. Lacan's concept of desire, grounded in lack, is intrinsically tied to the gaze, as the *objet petit a* functions as both the object that incites desire and the reminder of the irreducible void at its core. In the context of the gaze, the *objet petit a* disrupts the subject's sense of completeness, revealing the gaze as a site of tension where desire and lack converge, thus shaping the subject's self-perception and their relation to power.

Media theorists link the gaze theory with visual media to explore the possible connections between the viewers, the camera lens and the visual object of representation, finely pointing to the processes by which characters as visual images are objectified for the consumption of a gendered and capitalist market. Laura Mulvey, in this regard, ties up the Lacanian view of gaze to the politics of presentation. She contends that most stories in movies are depicted from the perspective of a heterosexual male gaze projecting their fantasies on a female image. This leaves no room for women viewers but to identify themselves as objects,

the same way they are presented on the screen. "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly" (11). This dynamic of the male gaze aligns with the perpetuation of desire described by Lacan, where the *objet petit a*—embodied in the stylised female form—both sustains the illusion of completeness for the male viewer and simultaneously reveals the lack at the heart of desire, reinforcing gendered power structures. Mulvey's theory is also inspired by John Berger's concept of the masculine gaze which he discusses in his analysis of visual art. John Berger's concept of the masculine gaze, as explored in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), underscores how women are depicted as objects of male spectatorship, their identities constructed through the lens of male desire. This gaze not only reduces women to passive subjects but also reinforces gender hierarchies by perpetuating the notion that women exist to be seen and evaluated by men. Bell hooks argues against Mulvey's position in *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* by positing that many Black women laugh at White people's representation of black women in the media instead of identifying with them. She labels this gaze of black women as a feminist gaze since it subverts structures of power by its refusal to identify with the presented image and its active exercise of agency. These Western-centric theoretical paradigms, despite being critical in their development, fail to address the thematic concerns of cinemas that have developed outside the influence of Western thought and its purely capitalist and consumer-driven markets.

Beyond Western Paradigms: The Gaze in Iranian Cinematic Narratives

Walter Mignolo, Hamid Dabashi and Kishore Mahbubani have, in their works, questioned the essentially orientalist epistemology that extols the Western mind as self-critical and analytical in comparison to the seemingly ossified mind of a non-western. Mignolo introduces the concepts of "delinking" and "disobeying" as techniques that help come out of the trap of colonial frameworks. In this sense, to read Eastern texts within Western-centric frameworks runs the risk of them being theorized from a forced perspective. That is not to say that one should completely disengage oneself from a Western philosophical tradition; rather it argues for departure, dissent, and plurality of perspective that operates outside the groundwork laid by post-enlightenment secular ideologies. Escaping interpellation, understood as a manifestation of ideological control, allows one to process Eastern texts within their own context, thereby avoiding the risks of dehistoricisation and decontextualisation.

A case in point is Iranian cinema that does not thrive on glamourised women or deified men. Although the global world's introduction to Iran has primarily been through print culture, in recent years, it has been replaced by visual culture especially the visual medium of film. Iranian cinema has also been gaining prominence amongst media studies theorists. Peter Decherney and Blake Atwood redefine Iranian film studies by examining its interaction with

global media flows, transmedia forms, paying particular attention to the heterogeneous nature of Iranian national cinema. Shiva Rahbaran provides insights into contemporary Iranian filmmaking through interviews with prominent filmmakers, emphasizing their creativity despite societal constraints. Hamid Dabashi in *Close up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* highlights Iranian cinema as a cultural currency that transcends nativism. He writes,

> Two crucial distinctions make Iranian cinema far more important in the range and endurance of its effects. First, its reception by millions of Iranians inside and outside the country (an audience that modernist poetry could never boast), and, second, its critical celebration by a global audience (an achievement inherently barred to Persian poetry because of the language barrier). As a quintessentially verbal culture, we exploded into a visuality that made our cinema a particularly powerful art. (4)

This visuality, however, is also, in many ways, steeped in the print culture of Iranian Sufi poetry. At times it is simply a translation of the poetic into the visual. Many Iranian films draw upon the mystical and symbolic themes found in the Iranian poetry, translating these abstract, philosophical concepts into visual narratives. This translation not only reflects the spiritual and emotional depth of Persian poetry but also highlights the use of metaphor, allegory, and visual imagery to explore themes that are central to Sufi poetic traditions. Taking ordinary protagonists, instead of larger-than-life heroes, this cinema takes the spectators on a journey of their inner selves using mundane experiences of life as tools to explore spiritual transformation. The objective is not to depict the everyday life of individual characters objectively as was the case with Victorian realism but to use the ordinary, banal, and every day to ask philosophical questions about life, death, and the connection between the real and the spiritual.

In esoteric films, the Western concept of gaze poses a challenge in guiding the viewer's engagement with and interpretation of the visuals. The different experiences such films provide need a theoretical framework that is more context-based. John Truby expands upon the mechanics of screenwriting on three features of a protagonist: desire, weakness, and need and how the interconnection of all three leads to the self-revelation of a character within a screen narrative. Self-revelation as an important part of a protagonist's journey in Western cinema is primarily ego-centric in its drive. However, the same process takes on another dimension in many Iranian films. Bertrand Russell in *Mysticism and Logic* argues that in the West there have always been two different impulses to get knowledge, reason, and intuition. In the Eastern Sufi tradition however, the acquisition of knowledge has been first and foremost an intuitive process as the heart, instead of the mind, is considered to be a real source of knowledge. The highest form of self-knowledge is gained when one realises one nature as an infinite and never-ending self-disclosure of God. For Ibn Arabi *Insan-e-kamil* or the perfect man is one who sees himself as nothing but a reflection of God. This culturally steeped view of knowing sets Iranian cinema apart from Western cinema and in need of more context-based and indigenous theoretical frameworks (Austin 35).

This emphasis on a mystical understanding of love and self-revelation reflects a broader trend in Iranian cinema, where many films prioritise the exploration of the esoteric and spiritual dimensions of human experience, often through a mystical gaze that aligns with Sufi traditions. In Sufism, gaze is understood as a means of perceiving beyond the superficial or worldly layers of existence, enabling one to connect with higher truths or the divine. In cinema, the mystical gaze can offer a way of seeing that transcends the ordinary. It may be marked by a sense of contemplation, quiet introspection, or a deep search for meaning. The camera lens in such films does not focus on physical desire or sexuality; instead, it highlights elements that invoke mystery, spiritual depth, or the sacred. This gaze encourages the viewer to move beyond surface-level interpretations, inviting a more reflective, spiritual interaction with the visual material.

The Mystical Gaze: Exploring Spiritual Transformation and Divine Love in *Baran*

Amongst Iranian cinema, there is no other film that has gained as much prominence as *Baran* for its treatment of mystical love. Written and directed by Majid Majidi, this film is a coming-of-age spiritual drama. Majid Majidi, one of Iran's most renowned directors and screenwriters, has earned widespread critical acclaim both domestically and internationally. *Children of Heaven* (*Bacheha-yeaseman*, 1997), *The Colour of Paradise* (*Rang-e Khoda*, 1999) along with The *Willow Tree* (*Bid-e Majnoon*) are films that are responsible for his global acclaim. Nacim Pak-Shiraz writes on Majidi, "[t]he poetic language of his films could be read as continuing in the long line of symbolic Persian literature and poetry, in which mystics, Sufis and Muslim philosophers have written much about love, God and self-annihilation" (95). Known for his metaphorical approach and a style that avoids melodrama, glamour, and violence, Majidi's work examines the human condition from a mystical perspective. Many of the visual symbols in Majidi's work are primarily metaphorical, inviting mystical interpretations. Embedded in the act of visual spectatorship is a Sufi consciousness, where Majidi utilises various technical elements, such as camera angles, shot composition, sound, and editing, to position the viewer and shape their experience of the visual material. Hence, the experience of witnessing a love story in a movie like *Baran* transcends to a mystical exercise of exploring man's relationship to God through a love story. Although the visual act of viewing in the film does not translate into a mystical experience it does open up the possibility to view the human condition in mystical terms. Exploring the divine-human relationship through love between humans is not something new in Iranian culture. Even Mawlanā Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahmān narrated the story of Layla and Majnun to explore divine love. However, cinema, because of its potency as a very powerful visual medium, makes this accessible and palpable for the global audience.

In a cinema that is theopoetic in its essence, the mainstream theoretical frameworks of gaze theory do not apply. That is why, I am laying the foundation for the theory of the mystical

gaze. Rooted in Sufi teachings, particularly those of Ibn Arabi, this gaze involves seeing beyond the physical world and engaging with the deeper, divine realities that lie beneath surface appearances. This gaze invites the viewer to explore the boundaries between the material world and the mystical dimensions that lie beyond it. Mulvey's gaze theory posits that the viewing experience is reinforced by already internalised patterns of perceptions that are socially moulded. In terms of the male gaze, the structure is determined by the phallocentric order. Since the image of a woman leaves a man with castration anxiety, he subjects her to a male gaze by objectifying her. The male gaze has two components: it objectifies women and it encourages the viewer to identify with the male protagonist. It is the linking of the two that turns the experience of spectatorship to one of voyeurism. There is an imbalance of power within this voyeurism as a woman becomes a spectacle to be looked at without being able to return that look.

Unlike other love stories where the female appearance is coded with strong visual and erotic impact, the female character in *Baran* invites spiritual introspection. Instead of enacting looked-at-ness the female character prompts a look-within. In Hollywood cinema, the male gaze is something that often halts the narrative of a film so that it can present a woman as a spectacle as the frame focuses on her physical features. This objectification is further enhanced by the camera framing which invites the viewer to partake of the voyeurism experienced by the male protagonist and consume the female character through his perceived objectification of her. Since in any film the protagonist is the primary causal agent and causality is the prime unifying principle, it prompts the viewer to process the visual experience by the use of various cinematic techniques. Gaze as the viewing principle is linked to the politics of form where the continuing editing, shots, reverse shots, line match or point of view shots are tied to different ideological structures. In *Baran*, these techniques serve a very different function from those in mainstream cinema. The point-of-view shot, where Lateef first sees Baran without her disguise as a boy, does not focus on her sexuality but instead on the dim silhouette of her hair. This moment discourages the viewer from consuming her sexuality; rather, it is her mystery that invites the audience to search for alternative ways of understanding her image. Throughout the movie, the camera lens refuses to let Baran be seen as a sexualised object. Instead of focusing on her physiognomy, it blurs it behind smoke or by creating vague silhouettes especially in the first few sequences. This aesthetic construction obstructs a conditioned consumption of the female subject and makes space for the mystical gaze to operate. Once this is established the viewer is made to process the narrative from a spiritual perspective.

Baran is about a seventeen-year-old boy, Lateef, who works at a construction site where many Afghan refugees work without a permit. Lateef is responsible for feeding the workers at the site and has frequent fights with them on account of his garrulous nature. When one of the Afghans is injured, he requests that his son be given work in his place. The boy, an adolescent who is frail and inexperienced, is assigned Lateef's work after the latter has a disagreement with the foreman. Lateef is outraged and spies on him, only to realise that he is

actually a girl in the guise of a boy. He falls in love with her and begins making a series of sacrifices to support her, including distracting the police during a raid to allow her to escape and selling his ID card to provide her family with some money. Throughout the movie, there is no direct contact between the two but it is through Lateef's love for Baran that the former transforms from a short-tempered, garrulous boy to a complete empath. The love for Baran actually leads him to the love of God. Instead of inviting a hetero-sexual male gaze on the object of its representation, *Baran* invites the viewer to consume the viewed from a mystical gaze, one that obliterates the male/female binary and processes characters as more than physical/sexual beings. Many Sufis, such as Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, and Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, were students of philosophy, but they did not believe in knowledge acquired solely through intellect. Rather they preferred knowledge conveyed through mystical unveiling or intuition. Hence, Sufis like Ibn Arabi did not convey their ideas as philosophical arguments but as visions and illuminations. This tradition of presenting knowledge as veiled images is also something that is taken up by *Baran*.

The movie is titled after the girl's name, Baran. Baran is a unisex name meaning rain. R Zipoli explores the multiple meanings of rain in classical Sufi poetic tradition, renewal being one of them. Rain contributes to the rejuvenation of the earth in spring and the resultant blooming of flowers (197). On a surface level, the movie is a commentary on the plight of Afghan refugees in Iran and offers a deep insight into the problems of the illegal workers along with explorations of gender restrictions that impose young girls to dress up as boys in order to help their family with finances; aspects that have been touched upon by Gonul Donmez-Colin and Bert Cardullo respectively. However, the visual effect is focused on Lateef's spiritual transformation, his inner transformation or renewal brought about by Baran. The film is replete with many Sufi metaphors as represented in images of birds which are symbols for Sufis as explored in Attar of Nishapur's *The Conference of the Birds* or visuals of hair as mystic symbols. By presenting these visual metaphors the film invites the spectator to take an empathetic position with the protagonist and process his journey as their own. Situating these visual metaphors within the paradigm of gaze theory helps see how a film like *Baran* extends, contests, or problematises the idea of gaze in a cinematic study. The approach, as has already been argued with reference to Mignolo's argument, would be one of delinking and disobeying rather than of complete detachment.

John Truby maps a protagonist's story within a movie as one of desire, need and transformation. It is the protagonist's realization about something, a knowledge that was earlier hidden from him that brings about this transformation. The form of knowledge which with Iranian cinema is concerned is not centred on human consciousness as an ego-driven mechanism. In mainstream cinema male protagonist is in control of the film fantasy. The spectator identifies with his perspectives, dreams, desires, and hopes. What the viewer sees is aligned to that male protagonist. *Baran,* as a mystical movie, neither encourages sadistic voyeurism nor fetishistic scopophilia. In the absence of exhibitionism, the film invites the viewer to spiritually introspect through a careful use of framing techniques and point-of-view

shots. In the movie, the camera does not move from the male protagonist's point of view. Rather the viewing experience is constructed in a way where it takes on a completely different dimension as the unveiling of man's consciousness to realise the absolute within themselves. In Sufi thought, man is a copy of both the realities of the Divine Names and the cosmic realities. He is made according to two images: his exterior image, his body, is a copy of the cosmic realities, while his interior image, his powers, is the image of the Divine Names. (Ibn Arabi 233) In Sufism, love is one of the significant and semantically loaded terms used to describe the nature of a soul's transformation and leading to an awareness of the divine consciousness. True knowledge in Sufism comes as a result of this transformation.

For many of the orientalists, the idea of Islamic law in separation to the mystical path is something Sufi teachings manifest in their outward preoccupation with wine and dance. Carl Ernst in his book *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* explores how the fallible modern conception of Sufism has its roots in the teachings of early orientalists like Sir William Jones (d. 1794) and Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833). He argues that modern authoritative definitions of Sufism do not do justice to the concept of Sufism as it "is not a thing that one can point to; it is instead a symbol that occurs in our society, which is used by different groups for different purposes" (18). Within this attempt at homogenisation of the different and complex meanings of Sufism lies the newly made binary of religious fundamentalism and a peace-loving Sufism, an idea that severs the latter from its Islam roots. The fact is that the exoteric is never compromised in Sufism but esoteric is brought to the forefront as it brings about a spiritual transformation by conjoining the soul in complete harmony with the divine. This paper employs the mystical discourse within its Islamic context. It is not that the idea of mystical gaze has not been used at all as one finds a similar idea in Leonard's processing of Peter Weir's films.

> Codified in the act of cinematic spectatorship is a mystical consciousness within which the cinema apparatus—the technical elements employed by directors: camera angles, framing of shots, lighting, sound design, music and editing, as well the positioning of the spectator to identify with the action upon the screen—provides the preconditions for people to exercise a mystical gaze. (ix)

However, it is the secular dimension of the mystical gaze he is interested in exploring. In Iranian theopoetic films, such an analysis remains incomplete as it imposes a separation from the Sufi thought in which these films are steeped, disregarding the spiritual and philosophical context that shapes their content. In *Baran,* the sharing of codes within the cinematic space and the transformation of mystical language into iconography leads to the absorption of a mystical experience in the viewer that is steeped in Islamic philosophy.

The concept of gaze works on two levels. On the level of the viewer who accesses the film as a visual experience and on the level of its protagonist whose spiritual transformation is mapped in the movie through the gazing at self and the other in a series of visual metaphors. In mystical traditions reflecting surfaces reflect back to a mystic the primal innocence of the soul. What a mystic sees in the reflecting surfaces is not merely an external form but more of

an interior principle (Ibn Arabi 27). In mysticism the human heart is likened to a mirror in mud, whose dust once removed will reflect back the beautiful. In the context of spectatorship, the same screen acts like a mirror for the viewer. In the opening sequence of the film, Lateef is shown pruning his hair in the reflection of a glass door. This shows the narcissist self of a man who when he looks at a reflecting surface only projects his own desires onto it. At the end, when Lateef learns of Baran's family's decision to return to Afghanistan, he pauses by a pond and gazes at his reflection in the water. This moment of quiet introspection visually symbolises his journey of self-awareness. The act of looking at his reflection suggests an encounter with his own self, subtly implying a deeper understanding of himself and his connection to Baran. The simplicity of the scene allows the viewer to contemplate its metaphysical undertones, aligning with the film's mystical themes. Here the reflecting surface of water enacts the process of finding the absolute within one's spirit. Spirit, since it is the breath of God, is a site of awareness and the process of spiritual transformation is expressed through the reflective image of a mirror. Attar of Nishapur uses mirror as a symbol to illustrate man's search for meaning and his relationship with the divine as is allegorised in the bird's journey to find simorgh in *The Conference of the Birds*. The heart in the poem is compared to a bright and clear mirror where one can find the divine.

Ibn Arabi's idea of a union between man and God too is one of reflection rather than separation. For him, there is no lover and no beloved but God. Ibn Arabi sees God as wajud - existence. Since Islamic theology emphasises on monotheism, hence existence is also one. For Ibn Arabi, anything other than God is an illusion. Illusion does not mean that one does not exist but it means that one exists as a separate being from God. The cosmos is not God but it reflects God's attributes - every moment is the unfolding of God, only in a limited form. In other words, the cosmos is a reflection of God's attributes like the reflection one sees in a mirror. Linked to this concept is the idea of love as love is also one of the attributes of God. This idea informs the content of the film as it is Lateef's love for Baran that brings about his transformation. In Sufi thought, the idea of love is always connected with the divine and is signified by various words. Rabia al Basari was the first one to use the word *hubb*, the only way to reach the divine. This was later taken by Alhallaj and Ahmed Alghazali who identified the very essence of God with love. Rabia and early Sufis used both *hubb* and *muhabba* as words to express love for God and love for his creation. In the Middle Ages, *ishq* as passionate clinging became famous amongst Sufis like Attar, Rumi and Ibn Arabi. In Sufi poetry, God is some beautiful young woman hidden behind a veil.

Veiling is employed in two visual metaphors in *Baran*. The first one is of a curtain. The curtain that Baran puts outside the kitchen and the curtain at the entrance of the shrine Lateef enters are symbolic of the veil that separates an individual from the divine. The second dimension of this veil is symbolised in the trope of disguise. In Sufism, the face is *lawh mahfuz* as all divine knowledge is inscribed on the human face. Hence, veiling here becomes an important metaphor as it invites the viewer to be curious to look behind the veil of the visual images as concrete representations of abstract esoteric concepts. There are multiple shots of

Baran where her face is shown behind smoke. Her face without the guise or behind smoke is something that is only fully revealed to us at the end. This gradual shedding of illusion invites both the protagonist as well as the viewer to look at her from a mystical gaze. In the case of the viewing experience, the non-sexual and non-binary gaze invites the viewer to process the character of Baran as one inviting spiritual introspection rather than masculine scopophilia. Hence, the use of layering in terms of male disguise and physical presence is something the narrative time and again invites us to unveil.

In all esoteric traditions, knowledge is only limited to the initiated. Initiation is a very important ritual in mystical traditions and is known as taking a hand. It means an individual's commitment to a life of spiritualism but also an openness to the esoteric experience in a general sense. Although not entirely in terms of a serious or sacred pact, the film invites the viewer to engage with its visual metaphors, encouraging them to open themselves to the spiritual experience being represented.

Lateef's act of selling his ID card to help Baran's family when seen from the multilayered representation of a mystical gaze transforms from an act of sacrifice to an act of divine love as it symbolises his conscious detachment from the last marker of social identity and worldly desire. Documents like ID cards as symbols of social identity are also something that is explored in other Iranian movies, *Marmoulak* (2004) being one of them. In this movie, a thief's inability to get a forged passport for himself leads him to an inner journey of self-revelation. The film is an exploration of the Sufi idea of plural ways to reach divinity. In *Baran*, the path of self-revelation is one of solitude. In the middle of the movie, Lateef goes to a cobbler to mend his shoe. Shoes as metaphors also occur in another of Majidi's films, *Children of Heaven*. There too a pair of shoes which a brother and sister share in school are anchored as the primary image to tell a tale of sibling love and sacrifice. The conversation Lateef has with the cobbler is significant. When Lateef asks him if he lives with anybody the latter simply replies that a lonely man is a neighbour of God causing Lateef to go into a moment of reflection. The halting of the narrative to focus on Lateef's sock being singed by the burning fire is significant. Divine love is a passion that engulfs one like fire. In the progression of the narrative, it foreshadows Lateef's solitariness in the movie and leads him towards the sacred space of an unidentified shrine. In the last sequence, Lateef encounters Baran momentarily only to see her off to Afghanistan. He endures the pain of intimacy and the sacrifice of parting, yet he is ready to return to a world filled with newfound enlightenment. In the final frame, just after Baran leaves for Afghanistan, it begins to rain and Lateef is seen smiling. Seen from a mystical gaze, Baran represents the transcendental signifier whose absence and presence are interplayed in the process of signification. The smile on Lateef's face is emblematic of an ecstatic experience that seeks to find the absolute in its very absence.

Conclusion

William C Chittik explores the three paths of reaching the divine as knowledge, activity, and love. These paths are not separated but unitary. Love is "God's underlying motivation for creating the universe and as the internal human response to God's love for creation. By following the path of love, human beings complete God's creative act" (4). Hence love is more of a revelatory act than an impulsive emotion. In one of the Hadiths, God asks Prophet David why He created the world. The latter replied that He was a hidden treasure and He loved to be known. So, He created His creatures so that He might be known. For Ibn Arabi all love is the love of God. Love is deceptive unless and until one realises the true object of his love i.e. divine.

> None but God is loved in the existent things. It is he who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover-and there is no existent thing that is not a lover. The cosmos is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to him. Although no lover loves any but his own Creator, the lover is veiled from him by the love for Zaynab, Su'ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words writing about all these existing things without knowing, but the knowers never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about God, hidden beyond the veil of forms. (Ibn Arabi, Futuhat II326.19)

The notion of the gaze and seeing is deeply connected to the idea of love and recognition. The relationship between man and God is depicted through the concept of the mirror, where God reflects man, and man reflects God. The lover'\'s gaze, initially directed at the superficial or worldly, ultimately finds its way to God, the hidden essence beneath all appearances. The same dynamic can be applied to *Baran*: the viewer's gaze, while initially fixated on the surface (the form of the girl), has the potential to transcend into a deeper recognition, where the object of vision is not just the physical world but a spiritual truth. Hence gaze is not something subjecting the other to a process of objectification. Instead, it is one where each recognises himself in the other. The same idea of the mirror when applied to the gaze theory turns the relationship between the spectator and screen from one of objectification to one of possibilities. It cultivates a new awareness within the consciousness that is beyond personal, social, or political realities and invites a transcending experience which although cannot be equated with a mystical experience can nevertheless be important in inviting to gaze at the visual experience in terms of mystical codes.

In conclusion, films like *Baran* problematise the conventional concept of gaze within cinematic studies. They invite the viewer into a process of spiritual introspection rather than offering a voyeuristic spectacle. By invoking the Sufi tradition's emphasis on divine love, reflection, and self-awareness, *Baran* challenges normative gendered and sexualised gazes, encouraging a deeper, more empathetic connection between the spectator and the protagonist's spiritual journey. The camera lens here opens a door to a more transcendental, mystical form of engagement with the audience, thereby achieving the initial objective of situating the film within a broader mystical discourse that is informed by Sufi thought.

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