

Nov 04, 2016 by **Javad Rad**

The Public Diplomacy Aspect of the Iranian Oscar Win ^[1]

This year's Oscar for the best foreign film went to Iran, a country which is grappling with a tense international environment because of its nuclear program. Despite its small budget, *A Separation* has come to generate a considerable amount of discussion both inside Iran and abroad. One debate, always important to Iranians, is about the contribution of such movies to the Iranian image.

There is almost a consensus among scholars of culture and politics that cinema is a strong instrument to enhance the image of a nation on the international stage. It is through the instrument of cinema (and visual productions in general) that a nation's cultural heritage (history, values, religion, and society) is easily introduced to the foreign audience. Having a strong and appealing cinema industry means having a strong influence on the formation of global public opinion. We are all familiar with the magical role that Hollywood plays in representing America to the world. The question here is: what is the role of cinematic productions in Iran's public diplomacy?

Unlike many countries in its orbit, Iran has enjoyed a robust cinema industry for more than half a century. The support of the state has always been behind the industry, whether in the form of providing funds for the movies or cinema houses, or organizing festivals. IRIB, the Iranian state television network is in itself a gigantic company which funds or buys cinematic productions for all sorts of tastes, particularly those sympathetic to the cause of the revolution. Interestingly, Iranian cinema has also managed to gain the respect of film critics on a global scale. Today, well-known international film festivals choose to have movies of Iranian origin on their list of screenings because of their almost exclusive aura.

There are three particular major forces which shape the output of Iran's contemporary cinema:

- Religion: Reflections on the history and values of Islam: This has led to the production of movies such as *Kingdom of Solomon*, *Imam Ali*, *Saint Mary*, and hundreds of other movies and TV series.
- The market: The need for pure entertainment which emanates from ordinary Iranian audience demand for distancing themselves from the reality of their lives.
- Social dilemmas, reflections on socio-political dilemmas of Iran's intellectuals. *Glass Agency*, *Taste of Cherry*, *Children of Heaven*, and *A Separation* are answers for this particular demand.

An ongoing yet fascinating phenomenon at the present is the outpouring of all such productions beyond Iran's borders. While social dilemma movies (like *A Separation*) receive awards on the Western front by placating the 'white man's taste,' religiously-oriented productions capture the thirsty imagination of the Middle Eastern audience. IFILM, a recent

IRIB network launched both via satellite and internet, is dubbing and broadcasting hundreds of Iranian movies and TV series for the Arab population in the region with considerable success in countries like Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Morocco, and even Saudi Arabia. Such efforts show that redefining Islam and its history is almost as sacred for Shia Iran as the need for explicating Iran's contemporary society and politics to the foreign audience. Add to that the popular uprisings of the region where nations endeavor to find their new identities and you will see the significance of rewriting the history of Islam. As I write this short piece, Majid Majidi, who was once nominated for an Oscar, is finishing off his big-budget movie, *Prophet Mohammad*.

There has been much debate about the foreign reception of Iranian movies and whether they really help uplift the image of Iran. While some argue that the very recognition of Iranian movie makers in the West is in itself a glorious achievement, others believe that such recognition happens at the cost of painting an Orientalist picture of Iran by the movie maker. The success of Farhadi's, *A Separation*, for example, is interpreted from similar perspectives by its friends and foes. Calling it a *black realist movie*, some have denounced its very recognition at Iran's own Fajr Festival let alone an award from a Western academy. On the other hand, fans have come to adore the moment when the Iranian director takes to the stage, seizes the Oscar and the chance to call for peace among nations. As I said, it is an ongoing confusion and is rooted in the fact that Iranians find it very difficult to trust the Western judgment for a real award when their personal lives are touched by the West's imposed economic sanctions.

Although all this discussion is relevant and one cannot ignore the political overtones of such movies or the surprise reactions of the audience to see Iranians drive Peugeot, for example, I tend to view the phenomenon from a different perspective. The public diplomacy strength of Iranian cinema is not similar to that of Hollywood. It hardly attempts to depict perfect lives with happy endings. Unlike Hollywood, which is mostly about the "American dream," the best of the Iranian cinema has come to be about all human beings, the universality of their characters and values. In my understanding, what the famous Persian poets like Saadi, Hafez, Khayyam, or Rumi, had said about the universal struggles of humanity in their *poetry*, the contemporary directors of Iranian cinema are saying in their *movies*. This is what they are really offering to the world, whether they win an award or not. This particular brand for Iranian cinema and its cosmopolitan tone is something to cherish and nurture rather than despise.
