

The Journey of a Mystical Filmmaker: The Influence of Mystical Thought, Poetry and  
Aesthetics on the Cinema of Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1991-2001)

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## ABSTRACT

The Journey of a Mystical Filmmaker: The Influence of Mystical Thought, Poetry and Aesthetics on the Cinema of Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1991-2001)

Gilda Boffa

The internationally acclaimed Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf has had a highly dynamic artistic evolution. When he first started making films after the Islamic Revolution, he supported his country's regime with his highly propaganda tinged work which carried a very dogmatic view of Islam. Gradually however, he became disillusioned with the politics of the Iranian government and his filmmaking shifted as he became inspired by the great Persian poets, namely Rumi. His films now make use of poetic and mystical imagery to convey more open and relativistic meanings. Much standard poetic imagery which is inspired by the Persian literary tradition has been translated to cinematic imagery to create his version of a poetic cinema. However, his films have remained imbued with spirituality, and his faith in God is as strong as ever, but in a more open sense. Western critics and scholars have often failed to see this dimension of his filmography, and this thesis attempts to shed some light on these aspects in five of the films he made between 1991 and 2001; *Time of Love* (1991), *Gabbeh* (1996), *A Moment of Innocence* (1996), *The Silence* (1998) and *Kandahar* (2001).

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This thesis is dedicated to all those who, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf and myself, have been transformed by the power of Art.

Gilda Boffa, September 2008

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## INTRODUCTION

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, one of the most prolific contemporary Iranian directors, has had a highly dynamic artistic evolution. As an anti-shah militant in his youth, Makhmalbaf was arrested in 1974 at the age of seventeen for attempting to disarm a policeman. He was released in 1979 at the onset of the Islamic revolution. At this time, Makhmalbaf had never seen a film because he believed it to be sinful (Ridgeon 9). He was, however, a prolific playwright, which brought him to consider creating an “Islamic cinema” (Barbera & Mosca 11). He worked for governmental cultural organisations attempting to reach this goal, and the films generated during his first period were, as he said it himself, extremely dogmatic and absolutist (Dabashi 210). During the first decade of his practice, begun shortly after the revolution, his propagandist work supported the ideological convictions of the regime.

Makhmalbaf has divided his films into phases that mirror his personal and artistic growth, and all his films made between 1982 and 1990 are part of his first and second phase, which he identifies as being governed respectively by absolutist, dogmatic outlooks on religion during the first phase and politics during the second (Dabashi 210). The first group of films deals with storylines such as repentance from misdeeds in the hope of attaining forgiveness from God (*Nasuh's Repentance*, 1982), the miraculous rewards offered to those who have faith (*Two Sightless Eyes*, 1984) and victory over temptations of the body (*Fleeing from Evil to God*, 1984). These films were propaganda for the theocratic regime and the message prevailed over the medium, resulting in poor formal and aesthetic qualities. Makhmalbaf has even repentantly mentioned later on that these films should not even be considered in his filmography (Barbera & Mosca 13). When he started making films, he had seen only

about fifty films in his whole life, all films that he didn't like. His first few films were thus in *reaction* to these. But eventually, he started seeing a wider variety of films from all over the world, and this he says, helped him change his filmmaking style (Barbera & Mosca 56)

The films he made during the second half of the eighties are part of what he calls his second phase, which was dominated by a narrow outlook on politics. He considers his film *Boycott* (1985), a film criticising leftist politics because of their evacuation of religion, as a transition between his first and second phases (Dabashi 186). If in the first period truth was defined by religion, in the second, truth is to be found in social justice. The poor are thus portrayed as good and the rich as evil (Dabashi 187). *The Peddler* (1987) denounces the miserable living conditions of the lower class. *The Cyclist* (1989) condemns the corrupt merchant class of the bazaars as well as the exploitation of Afghan refugees. As Makhmalbaf saw that the revolution did not put an end to poverty and corruption, he became increasingly critical of the politics of the regime (Dabashi 186). His last film of this phase, *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989) expresses a profound disillusionment with the revolution. Gradually, he left behind his dogmatism and began to see the multiple sides of reality. He used to say that "I would prefer sweeping the floor for a Muslim director than collaborating with a non Muslim artist, even one of high level." (Barbera & Mosca 11)<sup>1</sup> He has come a long way, as he later said that: "Cinema is cinema in its totality. It is not the one that you like, nor the kind that others like" (Barbera & Mosca 72)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation of: "*Preferirei spazzare il pavimento calpestato dai piedi di un regista musulmano, piuttosto che collaborare con un artista non musulmano, anche se di alto livello.*"

<sup>2</sup> My translation of: "*Il cinema è il cinema nella sua totalità. Non è né quello che piace a voi, né quello che piace ad altri.*"

After a progression in his ideological, spiritual and artistic development, Makhmalbaf went to Turkey to film what would become a highly controversial film in his native Iran due to its treatment of the taboo subjects of carnal love and female adultery; *Time of Love* (1991). This resulted in his alienation from state funded productions, and he fell out of favour with the regime. This film marked the beginning of his third phase. The director describes this period as being one in which he chose to explore themes from a relativist perspective (a perspective that he maintains during his current fourth phase), moving away from his doctrinaire preoccupations of the previous decade. This thesis will focus on the films he made from this point on up to 2001.

As Makhmalbaf left behind his inflexible approach towards religion and politics and became inspired by Sufism (the mystical branch of Islam) and the great Persian mystic poets, he integrated their teachings into what has now become a poetic, relativistic art cinema. However, “relativistic” must not be mistaken for the absolute relativism that can be created by Western postmodernism. What is meant here is rather a relativism of multiplicity within a basic unity, since Sufis believe that God’s supreme Oneness actually generates the infinite possibilities of life. This idea of God being the only holder of absolute Truth about existence can seem quite contradictory and even mind boggling, because if it supposes that humans cannot know the Truth, how can they affirm this truism about the nature of God, or even confirm His existence with certainty? Sufi philosophy is full of these contradictions, however, and even thrives on them, because attempting a resolution between dichotomies is for them a proof of the unity of God. Because God is the Creator of everything, He is present in everything, dissolving the multiplicity into the unity. However, it should be



noted that Sufism has often been mistaken for a pantheistic doctrine. Attempts at defining it rationally have caused this, but as such Sufism must be seen as an extra-rational phenomenon (Abdul Khalifa 153). Makhmalbaf is fond of reciting a fable by Rumi<sup>3</sup> which eloquently explains his relationship to relativism:

“...the truth is a mirror that shattered as it fell from the hand of God. Everyone picked up a piece of it, and each decided that the truth was what he saw reflected in his fragment rather than realizing that the truth had become fragmented among them all.” (Dabashi 212)

Makhmalbaf has said: “I no longer believe in absolutes and have accepted that I don’t have all the right answers.” (Ridgeon 17) Despite this position, he does still believe in the absolute existence of God: “I am more religious now than I was earlier. But my idea of God has become broader.”(Egan 101) What Lloyd Ridgeon has said about Rumi is also applicable to Makhmalbaf: “Rumi frequently oscillates between the absolute truth of God, and the relative truth of human endeavours to perceive God.” (Ridgeon 15) So though humans in Rumi’s fable seem to embody a relativistic perspective in each believing that their own “different” truth was The Truth, they fail to see that it is a part of the one Truth; that of God. The potential meanings of all the films by Makhmalbaf that I will analyse basically all have as their core this very idea. There are many poems by Rumi and several other poets that have influenced Makhmalbaf’s auteurist vision, yet the fable about the broken mirror seems like an important starting point in understanding the driving philosophy behind most of the films he made after 1990. Mirrors are omnipresent in his films. And though several readings have been made to link them to the narcissistic element of the cinematic experience, their spiritual symbolism has been ignored. This may be due to the fact

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<sup>3</sup> Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is the most well known Persian mystic poet.

that Western film scholars often know very little about mystical poetry and spirituality, and they thus have more often than not read Iranian films through an exclusively political lens and have interpreted their subtle poetics as being solely a strategy to circumvent censorship.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf is one of the most productive and internationally renowned Iranian filmmakers making films today. Since 1982, he has directed over a dozen features, half a dozen shorts, published numerous essays, plays, screenplays, books and short stories, worked in collaboration with several other directors and established a film school. His films have also won countless awards in festivals all over the world. It is therefore disappointing that so few serious studies on the work of this important director are available, especially if we consider them in relation to the quantity of writing that has been produced about that *other* important contemporary Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami. There are to this date only two English language publications devoted solely to Makhmalbaf; Eric Egan's *The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema Politics and Culture in Iran* and a short 48 page study by Lloyd Ridgeon, *Makhmalbaf's Broken Mirrors: Analysis of the socio-political significance of modern Iranian cinema*.<sup>4</sup> Both these books, perhaps because Western in origin, focus mostly on the politics of the Islamic Republic and how they affect Makhmalbaf's cinema while chiefly ignoring his spiritual evolution.

Like most contemporary Iranian art cinema, Makhmalbaf's work has been called "poetic", yet this designation is given only superficially, thus denying a true understanding of his later work. As we have seen, many critics have dismissed the

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<sup>4</sup> Author's note: A third book in English about Makhmalbaf was published around the same time as this thesis; Hamid Dabashi's *Mohsen Makhmalbaf At Large*.

poetics of recent Iranian cinema as a political strategy to subtly express what would otherwise be censored by the theocratic regime, but as Rosa Holman has pointed out, Sufi lyricism is an important part of Persian culture and largely precedes Iran's involvement with visual culture. Thus its prevalence in the country's cinema is not simply due to its relevance in criticising the status quo (Holman). Stressing the importance of poetry in Persian culture, the director himself has said that: "...our tradition of image is not as old as our tradition of poetry" (Ditmars 13). Due to the fact that Western scholars often ignore this, many misconceptions have arisen about the meaning of his more "poetic" films because the symbolism in them is often misunderstood or not even perceived, since it uses codes that are very specific to Persian and Islamic culture. This results in scholars and critics approaching his work mostly from a socio-political perspective while leaving behind its poetic and spiritual associations. The resolution between the unity (or absolutism) and multiplicity (or relativism) that is possible with a knowledge of Sufi or mystical thought is also ignored or misunderstood, which has resulted in Makhmalbaf's being accused of having a "schizo cultural paranoia" (White). With this project I thus hope to dispel these misconceptions to aid in a better understanding of his films by Western audiences.

One of my goals for this thesis is to analyse his later films to demonstrate that despite his claim to relativism, many elements about Makhmalbaf's discourse in and about the films of this period contradict the concept of relativism. From this perspective, it is possible to see that an absolutist idea of Sufism is subtly conveyed in his later films, that of God being the only holder of absolute Truth about existence. This idea in itself can seem contradictory because if it supposes that humans cannot know the

Truth, how can they affirm this truism about the nature of God, or even confirm His existence with certainty? Sufi philosophy is full of these contradictions however, and even thrives on them, because the impossibility of attempting a resolution between dichotomies is for them a proof of the unity of God. Sufis often warn against using rationalism in spiritual matters however, and affirm that the truth about these questions cannot be grasped by the mind (Schimmel 1993 103). This is why they use analogies so often to explain their philosophy about unity, because they do not believe that spiritual Truth can be explained rationally: “Unity, according to Rumi, can only be illustrated through analogies, “...like the unity of Light in spite of the Variety and Plurality of Lamps...” (‘Abdul Hakim 13). As we will see, analogies are often used by Makhmalbaf as well in his later films as an important component of his cinematic poetry. There are analogies, but also what seem to be contradictions. Often, however, these contradictions only serve to illustrate the complex multiplicities which are resolved within the unity of God. This is not unfamiliar to mystical thought, as Rumi was notorious for contradicting himself all the time. This approach, despite the aforementioned absolute about the existence of God, is what allows room for relativist perspectives. It is furthermore interesting to note that the inventor of the theory of relativity, Albert Einstein, was a highly religious man, and also a big influence on Makhmalbaf (Golmakani). Makhmalbaf did move away from the religious dogmatism which is advocated by the official discourse of the Islamic Republic, however he has remained a deeply spiritual person and this is quite apparent in almost all his films made after 1990. Because his later films are so influenced by Islamic mysticism, Makhmalbaf’s persistence in calling them relativist can thus appear as a contradiction. Nonetheless his abandonment and even criticism of the religious and political rigidity he used to espouse is probably what has led Western critics and

scholars to apply a secular reading to his later films. However Makhmalbaf himself has said that he is more religious today than ever (Golmakani).

As is the case with Makhmalbaf's ideas during his third and fourth period, Sufism strongly stresses the multiplicity of experiences that are available to humans on earth to experience a direct union with God in an attempt to have a more tolerant perspective on the nature of life and on the correct "behaviour" that humans must abide to. However this multiplicity, they argue, is only possible because it is an intrinsic part of the unity of God, because everything is created by God and thus it is *of* God, therefore denying polytheism, as Sufism is after all under the banner of Islam, a monotheistic religion. A line from a poem by Rumi can sum this up: "It is because of God's utter incomparability, that He has so many comparisons!"(Burgel 45) So although Sufis acknowledge the importance of multiplicity (which is a concept close to relativism), it can exist only under the inclusive power of the divine unity possessing the ultimate (and thus absolute) Truth about existence. Makhmalbaf references ideas from several other religions, as we shall see, and in mystical terms, this may point to his belief in the essential similarity of all religions, creating another unity in the multiplicity.

Islamic mysticism, much like other esoteric systems, sees the possibility for many planes of reality co-existing at once. It furthermore sees the possibility for time and space being illusionary concepts that can be easily overridden in the context of a spiritual quest. Some writings by Rumi on this subject are as follows:

“You are in space but your essence is in the Spaceless Realm (...) This world (of space) has come into existence out of the Spaceless, and out of placelessness it has secured a place.” (‘Abdul Hakim 18)

And about time he has written the following:

“Thy thought is about the past and the future; when it gets rid of these two, the difficulty will be solved (...) In the spaceless realm of the Light of God, the past, present and the future do not exist. Past and future are two things only in relation to you; in reality they are one (‘Abdul Hakim 18).”

These notions are important to analyse the way in which Makhmalbaf uses space and time in a mystical way. In *Time of Love*, for example, the same story is repeated with three different variations while dream time, ghosts and the living all mingle together. In *Gabbeh* (1996), a young girl seemingly comes back from the dead to revisit the tragic love story of her youth, accompanied by older versions of herself and her lover. In *Kandahar* (2001), because Nafas never completes her journey, we get the strange sense that she is stuck in a place that is surreal and immobile. Makhmalbaf’s refusal to grant his characters true happiness and a resolution of their quests in these films is the foremost element that permits a Sufi reading of them, which can lead to the perception of the aforementioned absolute Truth about the love of God as being the only True love. After all, Rumi says that: “The ultimate quest behind all quests is God.”(Arberry 257) They cannot be happy if they have not found Him yet. This quest is an infinite source of inspiration for mystical poets, as their longing compels them to eternally sing the love that they feel for the divine Beloved:

“The soul is painfully conscious of a fall which is inexplicable. All life is an attempt at self-realisation which means the realisation of the original

identity or return to the Origin. Life is a journeying back to God; it proceeds according to a process of evolution; the minerals develop into plants and plants into animals and animals into men and men into superhuman beings, ultimately to reach back the starting point – a glorious interpretation of the Qur’anic verses “God is the beginning and God is the end,” and “To Him do we return.” (Abdul Kalifa 29-30)

This explains why so many of the characters in Makhmalbaf’s later films are on journeys that remain unresolved.

Makhmalbaf’s films are now structured in more subtle and ambiguous ways, but rather than this being solely a political strategy, it also mirrors ideas from Sufi thought. Whereas in the past he had often concluded his films with moralising messages, his new refusal to provide closure with his endings is another example of his use of Sufi imagery. This may be a reference to the fact that: “In all mythical philosophy and poetry the End is always synonymous with the Beginning.” (Bjerregaard 7) “The Quest is never over” is expressed in his use of multiple variations on one narrative or his skewing of reality to create a more poetic fiction. This idea of “The Quest” is recurrent in all his later films, as his characters are always on a journey to search for something, or someone, which they hope will complete them. In mystical terms, this is related to the fact that humans are always searching to be reunited with the unifying love of God. Sufism has produced a long tradition of ecstatic love poetry which expresses the longing for a direct union with God, a state called *fana’* (Baldock 224), as Sufis believe that they can achieve this while still being on the terrestrial plane. This is not an easy task, however, and often involves much struggle, hence the often unresolved Quests his characters embark on. These

narratives are thus not only a post-modern deconstruction of traditional storytelling; they refer to a spiritual tradition that is many centuries old. These themes are also another indication that Makhmalbaf has not completely abandoned his religious convictions, but has chosen to use them as a mystical, rather than dogmatic, inspiration in his filmmaking. He has said himself that:

“...my film style is inspired by the Koran, in so far as it moves from realism to surrealism...just as in our holy text the human and the divine co-exist, so in my stories the real and the surreal may be found side by side, resulting in a personal narrative technique.” (Totaro 38-39)

I thus wish to stress that the spiritual dimension should not be evacuated when discussing Makhmalbaf's later films, as has too often been the case. Though this aspect of them may not always be entirely obvious to the Western viewer, applying a purely secular, post-modern reading to his recent films is a mistake. Hamid Naficy, in writing about Makhmalbaf's and Kiarostami's use of post-modern strategies to question secular humanism and realism has said:

“Their post-modernism is to be differentiated from that of most Western film-makers by its gentle irony, not the neo-nasty cynical irony so endemic to American television talkshows and series and popular films. This sort of irony adds to their humanistic ethos, instead of undermining it. Nonetheless, such narrative strategies, which generated uncertainty, were deeply counter-hegemonic, for nothing is as subversive as doubt for a regime that insists on an official version of reality and on doctrinaire certainty, and which patrols all boundaries of gender and genre assiduously.” (Naficy 2001 182).



We can see that in his later films, Makhmalbaf has reconciled his faith with his love of art by espousing a more mystical approach to religion. Makhmalbaf's complex relationship with relativism in his artistic process has been commented on by Godfrey Cheshire:

“...for him, *relativistic* truth does not equal relative truth, does not convert into nihilistic or arbitrary values, and does not support oxymorons like “absolute freedom”, that chimera which has proved to be so corrosive to the West. What it does imply is a universe of endlessly expanding realities that are nonetheless governed by the laws of nature, laws that include the observer's- or artist's- transforming perception.” (Cheshire 70)

In mystical terms, these “endlessly expanding realities” are simply more proofs of the multiplicity expressing God's unifying infinite love, wisdom and creative power. So, though post-modern strategies are often employed by Makhmalbaf to explore his thoughts about relativity, there is one absolute which he does not leave behind: that of the existence of God as it is stressed by Sufis: “But God is the sum total of all existence and nothing stands outside of Him by contrasting with which He could be known.” (Abdul Kalifa 133)

Intertextuality, with his referencing of poems and poetic imagery, is one important post-modern strategy that Makhmalbaf uses. The intertextual approach is useful to express varying viewpoints in a film, as Robert Stam has noted:

Intertextuality is less interested in essentialist definitions than in the active inter-animation of texts (...) intertextuality is more pro-active [than “genre”]: the artist actively orchestrates pre-existing texts and discourses

rather than simply following a formula. [It] allows for dialogic relations with other arts and media, both popular and erudite (Stam 154).

The use of sound, silence and music (both natural sounds and sound effects as well as diegetic or non-diegetic music) are crucial components in the films of Makhmalbaf, and these can also be read as a part of his spiritual path. The first film that I will be examining, *Time of Love*, a film in which the imagery is highly influenced by Rumi's poem *The Three Fish* makes ample use of music and silence. Sometimes the audio is cut during the music, perhaps a reference to Makhmalbaf's fundamentalist youth when he refused to listen to music because he thought it was a sin (Karimi & Scognamillo 98). The value of silence, because of the insufficiency of language in expressing the love one feels for the Beloved (i.e. God) because this sentiment is beyond the limits of language is a recurrent theme in Rumi's poetry (Burgel 63). It is present in *The Three Fish* when he writes:

“Silence is an ocean. Speech is a river. When the ocean is searching for you, don't walk to the language river. Listen to the ocean, and bring your talky business to an end.”(Rumi in Barks 198)

One of his films is even titled *The Silence* (1998) and as we shall see, these ideas continue to be explored more in depth in that film.

### **Film Corpus to Be Analysed**

The corpus of films that I will write about include all the films that Makhmalbaf has made after 1990 except his trilogy on cinema; *Once Upon a Time Cinema* (1992), *The Actor* (1993) and *Salaam Cinema* (1995) because though they often also engage with relativism, they focus more on how this is used in the cinematic medium than on the

level of his spiritual concerns. Though they also include explorations of mystical relativism that would be relevant to this study, these concerns are not as prominent as with his other films. Thus due to limited space, I will omit writing about them. The following is a list of the films that I will write about, all of which exhibit elements than can be linked to my central argument about Makhmalbaf's mystical beliefs:

*Time of Love* (1991)  
*Gabbeh* (1996)  
*A Moment of Innocence* (1996)  
*The Silence* (1998)  
*Kandahar* (2001)

*Nights of Zayandeh Road* (1991) will also be omitted, unfortunately, as it was confiscated by the Iranian government for reasons of censorship and was not distributed (Naficy 2002 52). As this is being written, I have been unable to view the feature length films that Makhmalbaf made after *Kandahar* (*Sex and Philosophy*, 2005 and *The Scream of the Ants*, 2006) more than once outside festival screenings because they have not yet been distributed, so they will not be discussed, although they are both relevant to this study.

### **Methodology**

The methodological approach that I wish to use is interdisciplinary in scope. I will combine an intertextual reading between Makhmalbaf's films and the poems that have inspired him with a textual reading of his films to identify the symbols that he uses and make links between their original meanings in mystical poetry and religious ritual and how they are used by Makhmalbaf to express the ideas that he has been preoccupied with during the second half of his artistic practice. A formal analysis will also be included in the approach, as examining the imagery of Makhmalbaf's "poetry of images" will allow me to describe how the cinematic imagery he uses can

be compared to the imagery of Persian poetry. This will be complemented by the context that I will provide about the religious and cultural situation of Iran to familiarize readers with the points of reference necessary for a better understanding of Makhmalbaf's films. I will also explore how the director has used these elements to create a personal auteurist vision. The formal and thematic decisions that are recurrent in his films will be analysed to demonstrate how they relate to my main argument. There will of course also be elements of critical reading with a focus on ideological and religious beliefs, as I will be providing an interpretation that will at times contradict Makhmalbaf's desire to be relativistic, chiefly to demonstrate that his religious beliefs are still present in his films and that exclusively secular or political readings should not be applied to them.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Time of Love; Searching for Divine Love Through Carnal Love*

*This chapter is based on my essay "A Study of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's Time of Love's intertextual references to Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi's poem The Three Fish" published on Offscreen in Vol. 10, Issue 7, July 31 2006.*

[http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/phile/essays/time\\_of\\_love/P0/](http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/phile/essays/time_of_love/P0/)

*Time of Love* (1991) is Makhmalbaf's ninth feature film and the first film of what he calls his "third period" (Dabashi 187). Shot in Turkey, this film is a romantic trilogy which chronicles the consequences of a love triangle between a woman, Ghazal, and two men (her husband and her lover, who remain unnamed) from three perspectives as events are configured differently in three different versions presented back to back. The roles of the two men alternate depending on the version. Time and space are transcended as characters travel back and forth between life and death from one parallel universe to the other. All versions end either tragically or with no clear resolution of the conflict. Very little has been written about this film in comparison to his later works for a variety of reasons. One is perhaps because it was made before Makhmalbaf achieved international success. Furthermore, as it was filmed in Turkey and then banned shortly after its release in Iran for treating the controversial subject of female adultery, its distribution and exhibition has remained very limited. Yet, Makhmalbaf has called it, along with *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (1992) the best film he made during that period (Dabashi 188). It is thus unfortunate that there has not been more attention drawn towards *Time of Love*, not only because of its numerous narrative and formal achievements, but because it is very important in understanding the shift that Makhmalbaf made artistically and ideologically at this time of his filmmaking, especially as *Time of Love* is the film that started this phase. As we have seen in the introduction, the director describes this period as being one in which he chose to explore themes from a relativist perspective in contrast with his previous

periods which were dogmatic and absolutist (Dabashi 210). Western critics have repeatedly seen *Time of Love* as a call for more freedom in the Middle-East, especially for women, because it is a female character who is striving to be with the man who she truly loves, and she is not afraid to commit adultery in the process (Anquetil; Remy 44; Bottéon 9). Yet the film is not as “freeing” as they say it is, even though freedom is an important notion that it dwells upon. But as we will see, it is freedom on more of a spiritual level that is advocated. The previously mentioned poem by Rumi about the shattered mirror<sup>5</sup> has been quoted by Makhmalbaf who relates it specifically to what he wanted to express in *Time of Love* (Hurst 19).

I will briefly review the limited literature that has been produced about the film, while combining this approach with an intertextual study of Makhmalbaf’s use of the poem *The Three Fish* (Rumi in Barks 193-200)<sup>6</sup> by Rumi as a source of inspiration and imagery for this film. No English, French or Italian language publication has yet acknowledged this direct link to Rumi’s poem, probably because of the Western ignorance of Persian poetry, however reading the film through this angle adds many new dimensions to it as well as relating to Makhmalbaf’s ideas at the time. My goal in analysing the film in this way is to demonstrate that despite his claim to relativism, many elements of Makhmalbaf’s discourse in interviews about the film, as well as elements depicted in the film itself, can be seen as being in contradiction with the concept of relativism. When analysing the film from this position, it is possible to see that an absolutist idea of Sufism, and of many other monotheistic religions, is subtly conveyed in the film: that of God being the only holder of absolute Truth about

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<sup>5</sup> See Introduction p.5

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 1 p.102. Also note that this title has most probably been given to the poem by Barks, as Rumi often did not title his poems.

existence. As we shall see, this is a position that seems to be subtly maintained by Makhmalbaf in all the films that have followed *Time of Love* until today. So despite his insistence on the multiplicity of truth, this one absolutism is never questioned.<sup>7</sup>

Because they are so influenced by Islamic mysticism, Makhmalbaf's persistence in calling the films of this period, and particularly *Time of Love*, relativist can thus be seen as a contradiction. This is by no means a critical observation however, because, as Bertolt Brecht has said (and Makhmalbaf would certainly agree with this): "In the contradictions lies the hope." Though having remained religious, the multiplicity allowed in mysticism has permitted him to leave his fanatical thoughts behind. I thus wish to provide an alternate reading to the film's subtext of relativity, not to impose a reductive interpretation on it, but rather to add a new facet to the possible meanings that are conveyed in this film. Thus if I seem to contradict myself in this essay, it is a deliberate strategy to make a link to the Sufi resolution of the unity and the multiplicity, which I see reflected in *Time of Love*.

Very few writers have commented extensively on the poetry inherent in *Time of Love*, and not a single Western scholar has observed the tremendous influence that Rumi's poem and Sufi thought has had on the film. This is perhaps in great part because Makhmalbaf himself has not mentioned this link during interviews about the film (though as we will see later the connection is more than obvious after one has read the poem in question). Perhaps he did not want to admit to having been so greatly influenced by another artwork, or maybe he simply wanted to avoid creating the

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<sup>7</sup> Exceptions could possibly be found in *Kandahar* (2001) and *The Scream of the Ants* (2006), however, atheism is seen as falling under the unifying will of God for at least some Sufi sects. See chapter 5 for more details.

possibility for his audience to make too direct associations with the poem to understand the meaning of the film thus limiting its relativist ambitions and apparent refusal to provide clear cut answers about its narrative and the fate of its characters.

Many film scholars seem perplexed or reticent in analysing the meanings conveyed in this first film of Makhmalbaf's third period, perhaps because with its three variations on the same story, none of which express clear resolutions of the conflict at their conclusion, it doesn't lend itself easily to rational analysis. This is why, however, a metaphysical approach to examining it may be useful. The only source that comes close to making this kind of analysis is Eric Egan's 2005 book; *The Films of Makhmalbaf, Cinema Politics and Culture in Iran*. However, though he writes about some of the symbolic elements of the film being reflexive of the Persian literary tradition - the birds signifying poetic love and the sea as a symbol of eternal truth and love, and drowning in it a reunion with God (Egan 132) - he makes no references to mysticism, Sufism or Rumi, so we can presume that he had no knowledge of the existence of the poem nor of course of the film's intertextual use of it. This is disappointing, because the chapter in which this is discussed is called *The Poetics of Contemplation*, yet he does not delve sufficiently in an explanation of the poetic symbols that Makhmalbaf uses in his films, something that would have been useful for a Western audience in appreciating his films more fully.

#### **Intertextual References to Rumi's Poem "The Three Fish"**

I will now write more extensively about this intertextual use that Makhmalbaf has made of Rumi's *The Three Fish*, to demonstrate that though *Time of Love* allows for different perspectives on reality to be explored, it still is potentially a carrier of one



absolutism; the belief in the supremacy of God in holding the Truth, thus making its claim to relativism a contradiction, because in essence relativism refuses fixed meanings. Countless elements in the film provide hints that Makhmalbaf was deeply influenced by mystical poetry in the making of *Time of Love*. The name of the main female character for example, is Ghazal. John Baldock defines the meaning of the word *ghazal* as follows; “a short poem of between ten and fifteen verses, used primarily for love poetry.”(Baldock 225) When she wears a wedding gown at the end of the film it can be related to the fact that “many a Persian poet compared poetry to a veiled bride” (Burgel 45). This was done to indicate that poetry should not be taken literally, that one should look under the veil to see its true meaning revealed. Makhmalbaf was presumably saying the same thing about the meaning of his film. Islamic film reviewers in Iran saw *Time of Love* as encouraging ‘carnal and earthly’ love, and all the criticisms it received after its screening at the 1991 Fajr Film Festival resulted in it being banned in Iran. However, other films about love from that year were accepted because they “exhibited attributes of ‘spiritual and mystical’ love” (Naficy 1999 60), but unfortunately the critics failed to see these qualities in Makhmalbaf’s film as well.

Moving more closely to the associations that Makhmalbaf makes to the poem of *The Three Fish*, many similarities to the film can be found. First, simply in their structure, both the poem and the film divide their narratives into three parts; Makhmalbaf by showing three variations of one story, and Rumi by expressing how three fish dealt with the same threatening situation of being chased by fishermen in three different ways, depending on their level of intelligence. The triangular structure of the film is not limited simply to its three distinct parts, but to many other elements that reinforce

it. Most evidently, we are witnessing the consequences of a love triangle throughout the film. The children who play music for the characters always come in a trio. Ghazal's mother makes an ambiguous statement during the first segment when she replies to Ghazal's question as to why she has forced her to marry a man that she did not love; "Love is not everything. I've had three experiences in life." The scene then cuts to the following one with no explanation to this odd utterance. Another reference to the number three could be read in the image of Christ that sits above the judge's pulpit, which may be referring to the concept of Trinity in Christianity. One of the oft praised elements of Sufism is its acceptance and high respect for other religions. Rumi repeatedly wrote about Jesus (considered to be a prophet in Islam) in his poems. Though the doctrine of trinity is refuted in Islam (Abdul Kalifa 127), the meaning of the Holy Trinity in Christianity is very similar to the Sufi concept of the multiplicity forming the unity. God, Christ and the Holy Spirit are often referred to as separate entities, yet they are understood as being all one in God. This brings us back to the idea of God being the supreme knower, possessor and maker of all meaning, thus another element to contradict the relativist aspirations of the film. As it has been previously mentioned, this film happens to be the first one of his third period. And finally an interesting quote by Makhmalbaf where he separates the nature of people in three distinct categories can add to this obsession with the number three. The first category is the kind of people who are constantly worried with the unending "little miseries" of their lives. The second is the kind that lives like children, with delight in living, and searching only for happiness. The last type is those who are burdened by human misery (Dabashi 199). For a man who claims to have moved into a relativist approach to life and art, these are very absolutist sounding statements. The previous is one example, but another quote from the same interview is even more striking in its

lack of objectivity, even though it is full of wisdom: “But the fact is that truth is not found in a single place.”(Dabashi 205) This statement, as relativist as it sounds, can become absolutist, especially if we change one word: “But the *truth* is that truth is not found in a single place.” However it is also a self-contained contradiction that proves its own point!

Much as Sufism was open to other monotheistic religions, Makhmalbaf seems to have encoded his film with many ideas from other religions, as we have begun to see with the references to Christianity. Another example is when at the end of the first segment the character of the brown haired man is sentenced to death, after the judge has told him that he can choose his own death sentence since he has delivered himself to the authorities, the man says that he wishes to be drowned in the sea because his grandmother told him that when one dies at sea, he is reborn. Particularly because of the image of Christ that hangs on the wall of the court, this can be a reference to resurrection, as the man does indeed “come back to life” in the following segments. It can also be seen as an allusion to the Hindu and Buddhist beliefs about reincarnation. Furthermore, it is an indication that Makhmalbaf’s religious upbringing is still an influence on him even if he no longer has fundamentalist tendencies, because he has said that it was his grandmother who taught him all about religion, as she would tell him bed time stories about the prophets when he was a child. He has said about her: “She was so kind that God and my grandmother merged into one in her stories. When I think of God, I think that this is still the case - the God that rests in the depth of my heart looks like my grandmother.” (Dabashi 165) Because his grandmother is like God to him, the feeling of safety that she provided for him can be related to the way Rumi writes about the ocean, the ocean being a symbol for God, or “the Divine

Unity” in Sufi poetry (Baldock 76): “...the edgeless safety of the sea.”(Rumi in Barks 195) Additionally, this is also a direct reference to a passage of Rumi’s poem *The Three Fish*. In Sufism, fish represent the individual human beings that can survive only inside the ocean (i.e. God) (Baldock 76). When the brown haired man in *Time of Love* is about to be sentenced to death for the first time, he reacts like the stupid fish when he is near his tragic end in the frying pan after the fishermen have caught him, as he thinks to himself: “If I get out of this, I’ll never live again in the limits of a lake. Next time, the ocean! I’ll make the infinite my home.”(Rumi in Barks 197) Well, in *Time of Love*, Makhmalbaf grants “the stupid fish” his wish in many ways. Another indication that the character of the brown haired man can symbolize the character of the dumb fish in the first segment, is that he gave himself in willingly to the authorities, similarly to the fish in Rumi’s story who did not dare escape towards the ocean and got caught by the fishermen. At other moments in the film there are references to this, as when Ghazal’s blonde lover removes the fish that she is cooking from a frying pan and brings it to the ocean and it magically comes back to life. These symbols all work on many different levels, as even if a viewer is not aware of Rumi’s poem or of the symbolic meaning of these things in Persian poetry, he or she can link it to ideas more familiar to Westerners such as resurrection. What Ghazal’s blonde lover says to her after giving back the fish to the ocean is very symbolic of the mystical meanings of this action: “It was the sea that made me fall in love. I was in love with no one to love, until I met you.” This is a recognition of the infinite love that God (the sea) represents. Yet it is perhaps also an indication that carnal love is inferior to that kind of love, because Ghazal answers: “But you have just lost me.” which is soon followed by the scene where Ghazal’s husband kills him. It can be seen as an indication that forgetting God’s love in favour of purely carnal love is a mistake.

And finally, however accidentally this has occurred, it is still interesting to note that the name of the actress playing the role of Ghazal is Shiva Gereede. Shiva is the name of the God of destruction and regeneration in the Hindu sacred triad (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 1997 1098). Shiva is furthermore considered to be the third great Hindu deity after Brahma (the creator God) and Vishnu (the preserver God of the sacred triad) (Le Petit Larousse 1994 682). This fact is reminiscent of our earlier examination of the Christian Trinity and another, however unintentional, reference to the number three, as well as an example of a multiplicity forming a unity.

Makhmalbaf has spoken about his trips to India as having greatly shifted his perspective on filmmaking. He says that his experiences there brought him "...moments of enlightenment, almost mystical ones..."(Dabashi 202) that greatly inspired his work subsequently. He speaks of Hindu mysticism as being more open than Islamic or Buddhist mysticism in the sense that it is more immediately available to the population. He says that the street beggars in Bombay taught him this. Despite their dire living conditions, he was amazed at how they were always dancing in the street, as in a celebration of life. He tells of how after asking for a bit of money to buy food, they will follow their request with that of a bit of money to buy a ticket to go to the movies. He believes that this is the case because the positive images in Indian cinema are like medicine to soothe their pain, a tool to help them dream. So he believes that filmmakers have the responsibility, and not only in India, to make films that do not dwell on the misery of the world (which he calls "black" cinema, and compares it to the kind he was making before his third period). He calls his new ideology "white": "...I slowly came to accept that I believe in nothing but the simple

fact of existence - living. And living is white.” (Dabashi 201)<sup>8</sup> He also credits his realisations about fatherhood as having provoked this shift: “...you begin to see all of humanity as being similar to your children. You begin to feel that you don’t have the right to stand in the way of their peace.”(Dabashi 200) Whereas in the past he supported an ideology of repression, he has now shifted to allowing multiple ways of seeing the world co-exist.

A symbol of this change in Makhmalbaf’s filmmaking in *Time of Love* that can be correlated to this is when the old man frees a bird from a cage at the beginning of the second segment. It is of course an ode to freedom, as for the Sufis the human body is seen as a cage for the soul that is compared to a bird (Baldock 131), but it can be read in other ways as well. The bird that he frees is black, yet in the following shot a white bird is seen flying over Istanbul. This is indicative of Makhmalbaf’s statement of having moved from making a “black” cinema to a “white” one, no longer seeing the value of the former. Though there are still elements of suffering in some of Makhmalbaf’s films made after *Time of Love* (in *Kandahar* (2001) for example), their colourful poetry seems to override the “dark” elements. Though it is an honourable aim for him to strive to convey hope in his films, this opposition between black and white has created a few potentially stereotypical symbols in *Time of Love* that do not sufficiently allow room for the grey areas of relativism. Another example would be how the blonde (light) haired man is depicted as more good in nature than the dark haired man throughout the film. One critic has seen Makhmalbaf’s refusal to give these two characters a name an indication of how interchangeable they are as they exchange roles from one section to the other (Thoraval 89), yet there are fundamental

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this idea of “White Cinema”, see Chapter 3

differences in their character that remain constant in every section that refute this suggestion. The dark haired man is always the killer in the parts in which there is a murder. He is much harder on Ghazal when he finds out about her affair, as he beats her savagely twice. However when the blonde man is put in the position of being Ghazal's husband, he is shown as somewhat weak and unable to confront her about her affair, as illustrated in the comical scene where he practices an angry speech that he wants to deliver to her, but upon her arrival he can only sheepishly ask if she needs help preparing dinner. In the last segment, the dark haired man threateningly uses a knife to spread black shoe polish on the blonde man's face, the polish potentially symbolizing his dark, negative characteristics. Under the influence of the speech by the blonde one about humans not being born to kill each other and about being ready to die rather than stopping to love Ghazal, the dark haired man does radically shift his position at the end by refusing to kill his rival and even allowing him to marry Ghazal. He seems to reach a higher understanding of the concept of unconditional love here. Perhaps, in Buddhist terms, this is an effort to regain the balance in the yin/yang pair that the two seem to make? The blonde man understands it much faster than he does however, as it does not take him three recreations (or reincarnations...) of the narrative to let go of his hold on Ghazal when he realizes that she no longer loves him. When at the end Ghazal says that she now believes that her heart is with the brown haired man, the blonde one runs out of the car to go get him back for her. The man he now finds is the mysterious character of the old man who was stalking them throughout the film, who is now also seen longing for Ghazal's love (whom he furthermore calls "my Ghazal"). This seemingly odd twist in the narrative is not necessarily another way for Makhmalbaf to blur the meanings of his film, as it can be interpreted in a very specific way that will be discussed in the following section.

The film makes sense in many new ways with the premise that the character of the old man is the ghost of the dark haired man (much of the action occurs in a cemetery after all) revisiting the tragic moments preceding his death by “going back in time” to stalk his wife and her lover. The indication that this reading is a plausible one is in the end sequence where, as we have seen, the dark haired character becomes one with the old man (much like the characters in *Gabbeh*, as we will see later). We can then read much of the action through the eyes of the old man. It is never explained why he is so adamant on “haunting” the young lovers. While spying on the couple, the old man has his hand on the tombstone of an unidentified young woman, perhaps she is his wife, who relives through the character of Ghazal. Following the end of the first part, after the dark haired man’s death, the opening image for the second chapter is the old man waking up in the cemetery. He is being given a second chance at reconfiguring events in a way more suitable to him. Hence this time the dark haired man is Ghazal’s lover, the one whom she truly loves.

### **Multiple Meanings**

If we want to dig even deeper in the possible meanings of the symbolic imagery of the film, we can use the associations that Makhmalbaf makes with mystical ideas about the transcendence of time and space to make sense of the absolute Truth that this at first glance very unclear narrative could be read as expressing. After considering this, if we start with the premise that the character of the old man in *Time of Love* is simply the ghost of the dark haired man revisiting the tragic moments preceding his death by “going back in time” and stalking his wife and her lover, the film starts to make sense on a more mystical level. This association, though of course not literally uttered in



the film, is very simple to make, although no Western writer has made the connection. The indication that this reading is a plausible one is in the end sequence where, as we have seen, the dark haired character becomes one with the old man. After we have realized this, upon a second viewing of the film we can potentially read much of the action through the eyes of the character of the old man. Many signs are indicative of this. The film starts with a shot of the old man, possibly implying that what we will see will be from his perspective. It is never quite explained why he is so adamant on persecuting, or "haunting", the young lovers. The theory of him being a ghost is further supported by the fact that much of the action occurs in a cemetery. When the couple speaks of their impossible love story, the old man has his hand on the tombstone of an unidentified woman. Her picture is caged under a metal frame, and though she looks young, the black and white photograph seems to have been taken several decades earlier. We can presume that she is the old man's former wife, who relives through the character of Ghazal, or perhaps these characters are only figments of his soul's tortured imagination, as it has never accepted the tragic murderous faith that fell upon him after being involved in the love triangle. Following the end of the first sequence, when the dark haired man is sentenced to death after expressing the wish of being drowned at sea as he believes that it will bring him back to life, the image that we see as an opening to the second chapter is of the old man sleeping in the cemetery and waking up to the sound of birds chirping. This is yet another allusion to resurrection or reincarnation. It can also be seen here as the old man (who is, we must not forget, also the dark haired man) being given a second chance at life, in an attempt to reconfigure events in a way more suitable to him. This is the case it seems, as this time the dark haired man is Ghazal's lover, the one she is truly in love with. This story ends tragically again however, with the dark haired man killing

Ghazal's husband who is now being played by the blonde man. Ghazal also commits suicide for a second time. This failure to reconstruct reality with a happy ending, or perhaps to "clear his karma" in relation to the murder he committed in the previous lifetime/segment, is alluded to by a reflexive statement made by the judge. He incredulously asks the dark haired man why Ghazal preferred him over the blonde man, as the blonde man was more attractive and had a better job. The dark haired man has no answer to this, yet in his last wish before being sentenced to death he tells God that loving Ghazal made his life worthwhile, and if he is to be given another life, he would like to come back to the exact same one. The judge responds, ironically and reflexively, that a law forbids convicts to die by drowning at sea. Thus the brown haired man is not given another chance to be reunited with the re-birthing power of the sea, and his wish to relive the same life is prohibited to him, as he comes back to the first situation in the final segment. This "punishment" may be due to the fact that he refuses to accept that reunion with God is the supreme form of Love, and that he should not regret the past as Rumi says in *The Three Fish* (Rumi in Barks, 196). Finally he will learn an important lesson about unconditional love in the last segment, as we have previously seen, yet the movie still ends in a somewhat tragic way, as none of the characters are happy. After a wedding ceremony to celebrate the union of Ghazal and the blonde man where both of them look more as if they are in a state of mourning, the couple is offered the taxi from the brown haired man as a wedding gift. After he leaves them wishing them happiness, Ghazal laments that she is still not happy. The blonde man asks: "What is happiness?" After replying that she does not know, Ghazal says that she now feels that her heart is still with the brown haired man. Her new husband rushes out of the car to go get the brown haired man for her. Yet when he arrives, he has turned into the old man, who sadly wonders "where is my

Ghazal?" The film ends with the same image that is found at the beginning of each section; that of Ghazal leaving her home alone to go visit her lover clandestinely in the cemetery, suggesting that there could be an unending series of variations on this story until the characters "get it", much as when religions that carry the belief in reincarnation tell their followers that they will be reincarnated numerous times until all their karma is released and they can finally return to God. This idea is further supported when we know that Makhmalbaf had initially set out to make nine variations of this story (Anquetil). He allegedly abandoned this more ambitious format because he did not receive permission to film so many versions of it (Anquetil). The use of intertextuality is furthermore another way to allude to the collapse of time and space, as a poem written several centuries ago becomes relevant to post-modern filmmaking. In Sufi terminology, the "endlessly expanding realities", to once more use the words employed by Cheshire<sup>9</sup>, that are represented by the parallel universes embodied by each version of the narrative are simply more proofs of the multiplicity expressing God's unifying infinite love, wisdom and creative power.

Makhmalbaf's refusal to grant his characters true happiness throughout the film is the foremost element that permits a Sufi or mystical reading, which can lead to the perception of the aforementioned absolute Truth about the love of God as being the only True love. A Koranic love story that is often cited by Sufis to explain this concept is that of Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulaykha (Baldock 80). This story, set in Egypt, similar to the one of Joseph in the book of Genesis in the Bible, tells the story of Yusuf (considered to be a prophet by Muslims). He was the slave of the Vizier

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<sup>9</sup> See Introduction p.12

called Potiphar, whose wife Zulaikha, fell deeply in love with him from the first moment that she saw him. It is said that Yusuf was the most handsome young man who ever lived. She attempted in many ways to seduce him, but he always resisted her advances as he did not want to betray his loyalty to his master. Eventually after the Vizier's death, the Pharaoh freed Yusuf and appointed him to replace Potiphar. As time passed Yusuf became the most rich and powerful man after the Pharaoh. During this time, Zulaikha, still consumed by her love for Yusuf, had given up all her precious jewels to anyone who would bring her news of Yusuf. She was eventually reduced to begging in the street. One day Yusuf came across her as she had lost consciousness and was lying on the street. He went up to her and as he spoke her eyes opened, and he saw that they were filled with light. He told her that they now could be together. To this Zulaikha replied:

“My eyes have been opened. My all-consuming love for you was but a pale shadow of Divine Love, a veil between myself and the Beloved. But the veil has been torn aside. Now that I have found the Beloved, I no longer need your love.” (Baldock 82)

The love of the Beloved that she speaks of here is of course, the love of God. In Sufism, love for God is often transposed onto a human figure. In fact, human love is seen as a practice for the forthcoming love of the Divine (Schimmel 1982 68).<sup>10</sup> The consuming, even self-destructive love stories that the characters of *Time of Love* pursue can be seen as a direct reference to this story. In this light we can see how the film is stressing spiritual freedom, rather than simply sexual freedom for women. It is also another indication that Makhmalbaf still holds religious convictions even though he now experiences them in a mystical rather than doctrinaire fashion. In fact this

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<sup>10</sup> We will examine this more in depth in the following chapter.

longing which is time and time again expressed in mystical poetry is a manifestation of man's longing for the love of God:

“To love the eternal rose, which is protected from the unworthy by innumerable thorns, makes the nightingale eloquent, for his longing can never be fulfilled in this life (as is the case with man's love of God), and only unfulfilled longing makes the soul productive, induces it to sing without end about the beloved.” (Schimmel 1982 76-7)

Because of all these references to the Sufi notion of the Beloved that Makhmalbaf has subtly added to his film, the characters can be seen as being references to the character of Zulaikha, but before she reached her state of *fana'* (illumination). Because none of them are able to reach this state, it is thus obvious that the film never resolves its conflicts fully. It is then possible to see it not only as a relativist exercise, but also as a potential carrier of the latent absolutism about the Truth of the Love of God. The characters are never allowed to be truly happy because they have not yet reached the state of the “intelligent fish” that knows that the best and safest place to be, even if the journey to get there is a difficult one, is within the loving arms of the ocean. They never fully understand that what they are really looking for to fulfill them is the love of God. And truly the viewer who is not initiated to Sufism will not understand this either, which is why the relativist readings of this film have been the most popular ones so far.

Much like Rumi does in his poetry, Makhmalbaf has a forgiving attitude towards his characters' (and maybe as an extension his own...) inexperience and mistakes on their journey back to God. Because as Rumi says in the poem of *The Three Fish*: “...you'll

be forgiven for forgetting that what you really want is love's confusing joy." (Rumi in Barks 193) He says this after warning his readers that if they strive only for the rewards of visible reality or those of the unseen world without seeing the connection between the two, they are being foolish. This can be related to the Sufi idea that there is "...no other way to perceive the Invisible than through the visible, to contemplate the Creator than through His Creation." (Burgel 44) And after all, Rumi says that: "The ultimate quest behind all quests is God." (Arberry 257) So, the film seems to be saying that as humans we are all on our path to find God, and though on the way we may sometimes act like the stupid and the half-intelligent fish, we will eventually find our way back to Him (or Her!) because that is where we all come from originally.

Another important strategy that Makhmalbaf uses to convey these mystical ideas is achieved through his manipulation of the soundtrack of the film, which he often mutes or renders inaudible by disruptions such as a loud train passing by at crucial moments. Though this tactic has been called the film's only failure (Burdeau 76), it was undoubtedly misunderstood because of once again the Western lack of knowledge of Persian poetry. The value of silence, because of the insufficiency of language in expressing the love one feels for the Beloved because this sentiment is beyond the limits of language is a recurrent theme in Rumi's poetry (Burgel 63). It is present in *The Three Fish* when he writes:

"Silence is an ocean. Speech is a river. When the ocean is searching for you, don't walk to the language river. Listen to the ocean, and bring your talky business to an end." (Rumi in Barks 198).

This theme of silence is also explored in the 1998 film *The Silence*.<sup>11</sup> In *Time of Love*, the old man's odd use of a tape recorder and his constant need to wear earphones to hear what is going on around him is an indication that he refuses to hear the sound of the ocean, and that he is still concerned with terrestrial realities, though he is, presumably, dead if we want to abide by the reading that sees him as ghost. The symbol of the ocean is even restated by the actual physical presence of an ocean near the cemetery.

An additional important symbol of mysticism that is used in the film is that of children. There are hordes of children always playing in the street, or just walking by in the frame at any moment. The street musicians are also always children. Children are very important in Sufism. They can express contradictory meanings, not surprisingly. Though they are often praised for living in a perpetual present and thus transcending the artificial barriers of time and space, they can also be a symbol of spiritual immaturity, as is for example expressed in this verse of one of Rumi's poem: "If you haven't left the child's play, how can you be an adult?" (Rumi in Barks 4) The latter meaning is more acutely expressed in *Time of Love*. The character of Ghazal is sometimes seen as a child herself, or as attracting children easily. In the first segment, she waves to an off screen presence, and when she turns around to keep walking, dozens of children come running after her and follow her. The sense of wonder in her eyes when she watches the freshly caught fish being dropped in her basket, or the way that she skips from one row boat to another are examples of moments when this side of her is most apparent. This can also be related to what

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 4

Makhmalbaf has said about all humanity being like children to him after he became a father.

Another important message that is conveyed in *Time of Love* relates to the transcendence of national identity. To introduce this idea, we should go back to a passage of *The Three Fish*:

“Muhammad says, “Love of one’s country is part of the faith.” But don’t take that literally! Your real “country” is where you’re heading, not where you *are*. Don’t misread that *hadith*.” (Rumi in Barks 194-5).

Though Makhmalbaf shot the film in Turkey because he was not granted permission to make it in Iran, this location was certainly not chosen arbitrarily. It is furthermore set on the coast of the Bosphorus sea which crosses Istanbul and makes the references to fish and the ocean more evident. Rumi’s tomb is in Konya, Turkey (Baldock 173). Moreover, the poet wrote not only in Persian, but also in Arabic and Turkish. He would often mix the languages in his poems, and there are even some that were written using all three languages at once (Burgel 56). Much as Makhmalbaf has reached international fame and made films in many different countries using many different languages, Rumi did the same with his poetry and he appeals to people of all countries and religions. He is apparently even the most-read poet in America today (Barks, back cover). This transcendence of nationalism can also be seen as an expression of Makhmalbaf’s changing views about the Iranian revolution. Though in his earlier days he was a militant supporter of it, this is no longer the case, as he has often said it himself and expressed with the changes in his filmmaking. In many ways the film can also be seen as an allegory for Makhmalbaf’s own artistic “path” and its evolution, from that of the “stupid fish” that did not want to leave the confines of his



country (or more symbolically, the sometimes restrictive ideas that it presented to him), towards the more enlightened attitude of the intelligent fish that recognizes the value of undertaking a liberating journey towards the ocean.

### **Conclusion**

After all this has been said, we must recognize that though *Time of Love* may not be a completely relativistic film, perhaps it was made purposely in this way to avoid what happens when relativism is applied too radically: it becomes an absolutism in itself. Did Makhmalbaf recognize this and implant the possibility of reading an absolute meaning in his film as just another clever attempt to achieve relativity? Does it become another contradiction that resolves itself by proving its own point? Answering these questions is not necessary, as that would create the potential for labelling this analysis as absolutist... (And only God knows the answer to them, anyway!)

## CHAPTER 2

### Gabbeh; Love is Colour, Colour is Light, Light is God and God is Love or; Human Love as Practice for Divine Love

*Gabbeh* (1996) continues with the thematic investigations begun in *Time of Love* about the mystical character of The Beloved. *Gabbeh* is the name of the colourful rugs woven by the nomadic Gashqai tribe (Barbera & Mosca 147) as well as the name of the main protagonist, a young woman who impatiently awaits the moment when she will be allowed to marry her suitor, a mysterious horseman from another tribe. *Gabbeh's* father, the patriarch at the head of her tribe, keeps finding excuses for putting off her marriage. Finally *Gabbeh* will run away with her lover, causing her father to go after them with a shotgun. He pretends to kill them to make sure that *Gabbeh's* sisters will never follow the same path. Parallel to this development, we see the young *Gabbeh* meet up with a version of herself 40 years her senior, along with the woman's old husband in the role of the aged horseman, a narrative structure very similar to that of *Time of Love*. This encounter is set in a dream-like afterworld where seemingly different times and spaces can collapse and interact. The young *Gabbeh* recounts to the older version of herself all the strife the pursuit of her lover has caused/is causing her while witnessing the bickering that awaits her lover and herself in the future. Though *Gabbeh* may seem like an exercise in post-modern rhetoric, in Sufi terminology, endlessly expanding realities, as we have seen, are proofs of the multiplicity expressing God's unifying infinite love, wisdom and creative power. As we shall see, Makhmalbaf's exploration of co-existing multiple realities and mystical Sufi notions of the pursuit of the Beloved is prolonged in this beautifully lyrical and colourful film that propelled this filmmaker to international acclaim.

If the multiplicity expressed in *Time of Love* was staged as a concurrency of parallel universes, with *Gabbeh* it is rather a collapse of time and space and of heaven and earth that is presented to elaborate on the theme of several realities co-existing. Hence, the young Gabbeh exists simultaneously in the time/space of her tribe at the time of the pursuit between her lover and herself as well as in the dream-like alternate dimension of their life together forty years later. We see her interacting with her family members in the “present”, and we also see her in the afterlife interacting with older versions of herself and her lover. Simply by extending a hand off-screen, with the magic of a cut, the characters can exchange objects between earth and the realm of the afterlife. They interact between the planes of past, present and future and heaven and earth. For example when a hen lays an egg (on earth), a child passes it on to Gabbeh who is in the realm of the afterlife. We see the child extending her hand off screen and in the next shot the egg falls into Gabbeh’s hand. Gabbeh (while in “heaven”) hands over a bouquet of yellow flowers to her uncle on earth to congratulate him for his wedding. When Gabbeh’s uncle is explaining colors to the schoolchildren, he reaches off-screen to other locations which are shown in the next cut (the sky, a field, etc...). In the following shot, he returns to the classroom with his hands painted with the color that he is describing. Furthermore due to her father’s constant refusal to let her marry before other familial matters are resolved (her uncle’s wedding, her mother giving birth, etc.), the longing Gabbeh seems to be stuck in an eternal present which consistently denies her the fulfillment of her wish. To engrave significant events of its history in its memory, the Gashqai tribe is inspired by the events in their lives to create the narratives woven onto their rugs inscribing them permanently on these beautiful works of art.

*Gabbeh* was originally supposed to be a short documentary about the tribe (Barbera & Mosca 48). Makhmalbaf then decided to make it a feature length fiction film instead. Considering the Sufi and Koranic notions about the co-existence of multiple realities, it is possible to establish new reasons for the prevalence of the merging of documentary and fiction conventions in contemporary Iranian cinema. It is not only a post-modern strategy, but also a convention that is deeply rooted in domestic art forms and inserts itself in a continuity of centuries of artistic and religious tradition. In this light, it is not surprising that Iranians have innovated so brilliantly, perhaps as no other national cinema has been able to do, in blurring the boundaries between documentary and fiction. Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, Samira and Mohsen Makhmalbaf have all done this quite masterfully in several films. Kiarostami believes that these distanciation techniques were arrived at independently of Brecht and that they are present in pre-modern Iranian storytelling forms such as the *Naqqali*, *Rou-Hozi* and *Taaziyeh* (Fozooni 78). For example, with the *Taaziyeh*, the passion play that re-enacts historical religious events, audience participation is necessary to render the narrative flow transparent. The example cited by Kiarostami is of how the performance may be interrupted to straighten a character's bent sword without the public being disrupted (Fozooni 78). The poets made the heavens and earth merge with their words, and filmmakers now make reality and fiction merge.

### **Poetic Imagery**

It is significant that we never see a close-up of *Gabbeh*'s young lover. He is always shown as a mysterious figure on his horse in extreme long shots at the top of mountains or as a blurry silhouette in front of a raging fire. These stylistic choices reinforce the poetic conventions of the gruelling mystical Quest for the Beloved being

a long, painful endeavour that for most people is only resolved in the afterlife when they are reunited with the one and only, real Beloved; God. The image of the fire is a recurring one in Sufi poetry. Annemarie Schimmel, prominent scholar of Sufi poetry, explains how the allegory of the moth and its self-chosen immolation as first described by Al-Hallaj became a standard topos in Persian poetry by symbolising the union with the divine (Schimmel 1982 71). In this story, several moths set out to understand the truth about a candle's light. According to the wise moth who was presiding over the gathering, the only one who truly succeeded in the mission is the one who, having become intoxicated with love for the flame, threw himself in it to become united with it. The wise moth said: "He has learned the truth about the flame. But only he knows that of which we cannot speak." (Baldock 153) The love for the figure of the Beloved is always a consuming, all-encompassing one, so much so that the one who is inhabited by it becomes so entranced that nothing else matters. It is, of course, a reference to the overwhelming longing one can feel to be reunited with the immense, eternal and unconditional love of God. This state is one of unity with God, where individual consciousness no longer exists; hence the image of the insect becoming annihilated by the flame. The fire here of course being a stand-in for the all-consuming loving light of God. Fire is reminiscent of Zoroastrianism, the religion that was prominent in Iran before the Islamic conquest, however, the idea of annihilation was probably influenced by the Buddhist doctrine of *Nirvana* as Sufism originated in an area saturated with Buddhist ideas (Abdul Kalifa 117). This idea is further corroborated by Schimmel:

"Mystical ideas and feelings had been alive in Iran from the early days of Islam; eastern Iran, Khorasan, and present-day Afghanistan were the homes of the first ascetic movements in Islam, which perhaps were

influenced in some way by Buddhism, whose old center was Bactria.”

(Schimmel, 1982, 51)

As with most of his films made after 1990, one of the ways in which Makhmalbaf explores relativity while remaining faithful to the absolute truth of the existence of God is by referencing other spiritual traditions, even if indirectly. Sufism is a useful tool for this as it is on some level inspired by ideas from several other religions that preceded Islam. One of its ideas which is used as the basis to justify the mediation between two worlds in this film is actually an idea from Christianity: “Love as a mediator between the two worlds. (An idea taken up and developed by Christian dogma.)” (Abdul Kalifa 47) Much like the elusive nature of the Beloved, Gabbeh’s suitor is almost like an intangible presence that seems to be more from the realm of dreams than of reality. Gabbeh even says: “He had a strange voice. As if he were an illusion.” When Gabbeh’s father pretends to kill her and her lover to scare her sisters so that they won’t follow her path, this symbolic death is a bit like the annihilation of the moth by the flame. The lovers’ consuming love for one another has merged them into one in death. Without the possibility for this passionate, rapturous love, life becomes dark and insipid, as implied by Gabbeh in her final narration:

“My father didn’t really kill us. It was only a rumour. He just said it so that my sisters wouldn’t run away and so that they never answered the wolf’s call. That is why, for forty years now, no one has heard the canary’s song near a spring.”

As was the case with *Time of Love*, the meshing of life and afterlife is necessary to come to a full understanding of the spiritual experience, as it is for mystics: “Life in its immediacy can only be lived and felt but not described. Analysis of life is a *post mortem* examination of it.” (Abdul Kalifa 52) This again relates to the illusory nature

of time and space: "In the spaceless realm of the Light of God, the past, present and the future do not exist. Past and future are two things only in relation to you; in reality they are one" (iii, 1151-1152). (Abdul Kalifa 18)

In this film Makhmalbaf also uses sound in a manner that can be related to mysticism. Often the sound we hear does not correspond to the temporal order of the images we are being shown on screen. For example, when Gabbeh's uncle finds out that his mother is dead, he is looking at a half finished carpet and while an off-screen voice tells him that his mom was making it for him, for his wedding, we hear the sound of a weaving machine in motion. This is immediately followed by a bird flying into the sky. Time and time again the image of the bird has been used to symbolize the human soul that is imprisoned inside the carnal body which acts as a cage. Ghazali wrote:

"A bird I am: this body was my cage

But I have flown leaving it as a token." (Baldock 131)

This is followed by the poetic image of Gabbeh ripping a petal off of a poppy, another image of longing for a transcended death. Additionally, the sounds of voices and of the water flowing in the spring is often manipulated to sound like that of an echo, as if to show that as the vibrations of sound travel back and forth in space and time to create an echo, so do the people from which these sounds emanate have the potential of doing this.

The fact that the old couple quarrel relentlessly is, aside from a criticism of chauvinism, as Makhmalbaf has pointed out (Ridgeon 29), also a reference to the imperfection of human love which is in fact "practice" for divine love, as it was in

*Time of Love*. Sufis believe that the value of human love is mostly “educational” and is a preparation for what will come next. Schimmel has written:

“...the Sufis knew that love of a human being is the ladder leading to the love of the Merciful. Hence human love was called *‘ishq-i majaazii*, metaphorical love, in contrast to the pure, true, Divine love, *‘ishq-i haqiqii*. The soul needs the wings of human love to fly toward Divine love...” (Schimmel 1982 68)

However, as once again a testament to the unity of all things, discerning between human love and Divine love can be quite difficult, even impossible:

“The constant oscillation between the two levels of experience often makes it next to impossible to translate or even to understand a poem correctly. It is this ambiguity between the human and the superhuman levels which makes the Persian ghazal so delightful, like a two-faced brocade.” (Schimmel 1982 68)

The unity of God as demonstrated by his presence in all things is also a main theme in this film. Gabbeh’s uncle falls in love with a woman who has written a poem on this.

It goes as follows:

“Above the spring I stand.

Below the spring I stand.

The pebble in the spring I am.

When my beloved passes by

the canary he holds I am.

I am in three parts...”



Again the unity and the multiplicity are one. She is present in all things (above the spring, below it as a pebble, and in a canary in the hands of her beloved) yet she is also separated in three parts. Note again the reference to a trinity. The motif of the trinity is present in other elements of the film as well. There is the triad of past-present-future in which the characters go back and forth. Gabbeh's uncle also courts and wins the heart of his wife-to-be with a poem he has written:

"I am thirsty, you are pure water (repeat)

I am weary, you are energy

I am tired, old and withered

You are youth, you are a bud"

Usual poetic imagery is used here, such as water, youth and a budding flower. All evoke the life giving force of love (i.e. God). The inseparable complementary lovers (once again a reference to the ultimate unity of all things) and their consuming need for one another is expressed in every line.

The transcendence of borders and ethnicity is also present here as it was in *Time of Love*, as the young woman recites this poem first in a Turkish dialect and then repeats it in Persian. *Gabbeh* was also controversial in Iran for, among other things, including too many close-ups on the face of an attractive young female, and its depiction of a nomadic ethnic minority that has resisted government efforts to get them to settle. If on a more earthly and political dimension space is transcended to move beyond the rigid borders of the Islamic Republic, on the mystical level it remains an illusionary value (which ultimately can be an additional incentive to wish to transcend it on the terrestrial plane). The collapsing of times and places is reaffirmed in the premonitory dream that Gabbeh's uncle has about his beloved before

he meets her. He dreams that he will marry a woman who could sing like a canary that he would meet near a stream and then set out to find her in the realm of waking “reality”, which he does.

The beautiful array of brilliant colors featured in the costumes and settings of Gabbeh are also a comment on the multiplicity contained within the unity of God. Schimmel writes:

“In short, everything in the world is in some mysterious way connected with Love and expresses either the longing of the lover or sings of the beauty and glory of the eternal Beloved who hides His face behind a thousand forms. He hides because the pure light is too strong to be seen; it has to be reflected in various colors—in the red of fire and blood and roses, in the green of grass which is reminiscent of Paradise, or in the gold of the lover’s emaciated cheeks.” (Schimmel 1982 78).

The abundant beauty of colours is thus necessary because the divine light would be an unbearable sight for most, and like for the moth that flew into the candle’s flame, it could be potentially dangerous for humans to witness it in its full-fledged glory on the terrestrial plane. When Gabbeh’s uncle is teaching the schoolchildren about colors, he reaches off screen to the sky, and his hand returns painted in blue as he says “The blue of God’s heaven.” He then also points off screen to a blue sea and his hand returns all wet. To speak of the color yellow he refers to one of the most important images of mystical spirituality, the sun; “The yellow of the sun which lights up the world.” He then puts his yellow hand and his blue hand together over a field of grass to explain the color green, a simple illustration of how the union of love operates on all levels in the cosmos to generate life, and also significant when we know that green

is the symbolic color for paradise. To introduce the character of his mother named Narendj (meaning “orange”) the uncle pulls some red poppies from a field and mixes them with the yellow of the sun.

Other familiar images from Sufi poetry are repeated in this film, such as the regenerative power of water (which is certainly so with several other religions), which is expressed when Gabbeh (who transforms herself periodically into the rug of the same name) wishes to be washed in the pure water of the stream. The recurring figure of the bird is used when in the classroom the uncle is asking the children what sound they are hearing (that of a sparrow). We then see the old horseman in “heaven” playing with a sparrow. Gabbeh tells him: “Old man, let it fly away, so my uncle gets married quickly.” In the next shot he does let it fly away and we see the uncle on earth catch it and hold it in his hands. He shows it to the class while saying: “Thanks to the yellow the sparrow has become a canary.” While he is saying this, there is a cut-away to Gabbeh in the afterlife plane, and when we return to earth the bird has become of a brilliant yellow and the uncle lets it fly away to its freedom. His hand is still tinted with the “blue of heaven” at this point again referring to the sacred nature of all creation and to the metaphor of the bird as human soul and its irrepressible desire to fly towards love and freedom.

The important mystical figure of the child is used in this film as well. To celebrate his upcoming wedding, Gabbeh’s uncle dances while saying: “My body is like a cold, silent dungeon, but my heart is like a happy child.” This can be seen as a reference to the immortality of the soul and the importance of living in the present moment like children. At this point, all the children start dancing around him and we see them

waving around their colourful costumes and scarves. This happy event is then woven onto a colourful rug. Meanwhile, in “heaven” the old man is dancing as well, as the young Gabbeh claps to cheer him along. Then, during their honeymoon, the uncle and his wife are surrounded with images of red (poppies and red wool being dyed) an obvious image of the passion of sexual love. This is also metaphorically alluded to in a not-so-subtle image when right before the wedding the future wife is milking a goat and her future husband comes to talk to her while standing with his hips right at the height of the mouth of the animal who he is stroking gently. Later on, when Gabbeh’s mother is about to give birth (a lovely scene in which the woman is played by Makhmalbaf himself in long-shot) an allusion is made to the fact that human life is often bound by the temporal dimension. Watching down from “heaven”, Gabbeh says (about the birth): “It’s time!”

Nature and the animal realm are profound sources of inspiration in mystical poetry. So is the case with this film, a perfect setting, of course, due to the fact that nature is so central to the way of life of this tribe. Schimmel describes this as follows:

“Not only human figures served the Persian poets singing of their love and suffering; even the most insignificant parts of nature became symbols for them:

Rose and mirror and sun and moon-what are they?

Wherever we looked there was, indeed, Your face!

Since the Koran states that everything was created in order to worship God, early Sufis listened to the trees and the flowers, the birds and the fishes, each of them speaking in *lisan ul-hal*, the “tongue of its whole being.” (Schimmel 1982 75)

As we have seen, images of flowers and birds are constantly used. We are shown how the colourful flowers serve to dye the wool used to make the *gabbehs*. Strikingly beautiful images of fields of grass, wheat and flowers are consistently shown in a surreal aesthetic due to the highly saturated colors. Gabbeh mentions how her grandmother would use a majestic tree to remember her family history; every time someone died, a branch was cut off, and every time someone was born, a branch of the tree was named after them. Gabbeh's lover communicates secretly with her by using the howling sounds of a wolf (and at one point, during winter, Gabbeh interacts with an actual white wolf amidst the snowy mountains). As the wolf howls at the moon, so does the horseman howl his longing for Gabbeh. And at one point the old man says to Gabbeh that her beautiful face is like that of the full moon, a recurring image used as a metaphor for beauty in Persian poetry (Schimmel 1982 75). When Gabbeh's mother gives birth, her screams sound like those of an animal in agony.

Gabbeh's suitor also experiences his longing for her in a consuming fashion. He tells her, with the voice of a wolf, when it is taking her too long to make her mind up about running away with him: "I can't bear it, why don't you come?" Wolves are, appropriately, symbols of sensual lust or separation in Rumi's poetry (Schimmel 1992 97). Towards the end of the film, when Gabbeh has not yet run away with her lover, the old man has a fit of rage and seems to be expressing what the young lover in him was feeling forty years previously. He is alone next to an apple tree from which the blue *gabbeh* (tinted in the same colors as the dress worn by the young woman with the same name) is hanging. It is the central rug used in the film which depicts Gabbeh and her young lover running away together on horseback on a blue background, "blue like God's heaven". In this scene the old man is howling like a wolf, and he is crying

out almost like a madman: “I brought you some apples, why don’t you eat them?” He then proceeds to beat off the apples from the tree. This is of course immediately reminiscent of the story of Adam and Eve. As in the Bible, this story is present in the Koran, yet with some variations. The Koran blames both Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit, however, they both repented when they were sent down to Earth, and thus the concept of original sin does not exist in Islam. Hence the story of human creation in Islam does not posit women as inferior to men. In this light, it is important to mention that, as Eric Egan has pointed out: “Makhmalbaf has positioned the relationship between Gabbeh and her lover as an inverted depiction of the Persian literary notion of the beloved.” (Egan 160) because traditionally, the figure of the beloved was often a passive woman and the one expressing his desire was male.

Ironically, though he had long given up this aim by 1996, the director may have inadvertently made a true “Islamic” film, if we consider what Eric Egan has written about *Gabbeh*:

“The utilitarian and spiritual endeavour of the artist and his work, both of which are manifested in the gabbeh, approaches the essence of Islamic art, in which all acts of human creation uplift the soul to God in order to become aware of His omnipotence in the creation of life and individuality.” (Egan 158)

### **Conclusion**

*Gabbeh* is another illustration of how the expression of Divine Love in Persian poetry is used as an inspiration for Makhmalbaf to tell a cinematic story about love, beauty, sensuality and longing which considers different perspectives. It is important to

remember that it is very rare in the Persian literary tradition to find a love story narrated from the female perspective which makes *Gabbeh* a valuable addition to the multiplicity of Persian love stories.

### CHAPTER 3

#### *A Moment of Innocence; the relative nature of reality*

*A Moment of Innocence* (1997) continues exploring the co-existence of multiple realities through a singular auto-biographical style. The film revisits a defining moment in Makhmalbaf's life. In 1974 at the age of seventeen when the director was an anti-shah militant, he was wounded and arrested after attempting to disarm a police officer. He was imprisoned until the Islamic revolution of 1979. Two decades later, Makhmalbaf returns to this event with his new relativistic viewpoint. The film features Makhmalbaf (as himself) recreating this event by shooting it from two perspectives; his own, and that of the policeman. The actor<sup>12</sup> playing the aged police officer acts as though he is directing his own segment, and two young men (one playing the young Makhmalbaf, the other playing the young policeman) are preparing to re-enact the event. A young actress plays Makhmalbaf's cousin and partner in crime. His cousin had distracted the police officer by asking him for the time. In this updated version, the police officer reveals that he had fallen in love with her, and that he still loves her even though he has not seen her in twenty-two years, once more evoking the poetic notion of the elusive Beloved. Through its self-reflexive approach (the credits are announced in voice-over over the images of a clapboard and the cameras are often seen in the frame to name only two of the most obvious strategies) the unique truth of absolutism cannot thrive in this film because we are made acutely aware of its constructed nature. And because it revisits a "real" event, it also makes

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<sup>12</sup> Though there has been much confusion on this subject and several sources claim that this character is played by the "real" policeman who was involved in this incident with Makhmalbaf in 1974, the director has confirmed in an interview that the man is indeed an actor, and not the "real" one (Barbera & Mosca 62). That this confusion arose and has remained so pervasive over the years is interesting however, demonstrating how efficiently Makhmalbaf can orchestrate the fusion of "reality" and "fiction" with his films.



us question the constructed and multiple nature of reality itself because it is always filtered through the subjective prism of individual perception.

In an essay about what he calls *film blanc*, William Johnson identifies *A Moment of Innocence* as a prominent example of this style. This style, he says: “By maintaining a balance between narrative transparency and opacity, it offers us the continual pleasure of finding new clues and rearranging them into new patterns.” (Johnson 71) In other words, it is an open style that leaves room for multiple interpretations, unlike its “mirror image” of *film noir* which though enigmatic at first, usually reveals all the facts at the end. Subtlety and complexity are defining qualities of *film blanc* and it is safe to say that the films that Makhmalbaf made after 1990, this one in particular, are all carriers of those qualities.

### **The Relative Nature of Reality and Time**

Again the influence of Sufi mysticism seems to persist with this film, as comments are made about time and its illusory or at least relative nature. When the retired policeman goes to the Makhmalbaf residence to ask the director to play a role in a film, little Hannah opens the door and an interesting exchange on this occurs. When he is telling her the story of the attack that happened twenty-two years before, as the girl finds out that the man was a police officer, she asks “Why do you want to be in a film if you are a policeman?” and “If you’re a policeman, where is your gun?” Though the man explains to her that he is no longer a policeman, she does not seem to understand this passage of time. This is again a reference to the fact that children know better than adults how to live in the present moment according to Sufis (Rumi in Barks 82). One critic has written that this film evokes the magic of childhood by

how from a single event, infinite fictions can be generated, as time stops and imagination takes over, until someone yells out "I don't want to play anymore!" much like the police officer gets angry when he finds out that he was duped by Makhmalbaf's cousin (Goudet 34). The important mystical figure of the child is again present in this notion of play, being in the present moment, and imagination is the very source of multiple narratives. Later, when the actress who is playing Makhmalbaf's young cousin goes into a clock shop to ask for the time, the shopkeeper cannot answer her because he says that all the clocks are broken. There are dozens of clocks, but not a single one of them can tell the time, pointing to the arbitrary nature of time. This motif returns again when we are informed that the event that caused the policeman to lose his concentration and allowed Makhmalbaf to attack him is that the young girl would ask him for the time to distract him. And because the policeman himself is still obsessed with that time of his life, still in love with a young woman who he has not seen in twenty-two years, it is in fact as if time had not passed for him. The notion of the all-consuming love for the figure of the Beloved is present here again with the policeman and his twenty-two year old obsession with Makhmalbaf's cousin. However we see how his energies are being misplaced because he is directing his passion towards the wrong source, much like the characters in *Time of Love* did. That he had made up a story about their love and held on to it for so long is another comment on the relative nature of reality, as well as again on the inferiority of profane, time bound love.

When the policeman takes the young version of himself to purchase a costume, the tailor tells him passionately about a myriad of American action films he saw before the revolution, as if it had happened yesterday. It is very significant that this character

mentions that he saw these films at the Rex, because the Rex was the site of a murderous pre-revolutionary fire on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1978. Its screening of American films was seen as an invasion on Iranian culture and a consequence of the shah's pro-West politics. More than 300 people lost their life in this attack (Naficy 2002 26). It is significant that Makhmalbaf allows a sympathetic character to be so enthusiastic about these American films when we know that before the revolution and well into the eighties he himself was radically against such cultural exchange. This adds to the film's desire to make amends with the past as well as to its acceptance of difference and multiplicity.

The film is not edited in a linear way as well, and some scenes are repeated twice, sometimes with slight variations, referencing the filmmaking process which calls for the shooting of many takes of one scene, which is mirroring the multiple versions of reality that the different characters hang on to in their minds. This is furthermore, again, a reference to the mystical idea of the multiplicity contained in the unity (in this case the unity being the film in its totality). The multiple layers of this film constitute an eloquent observation about the relative nature of reality and memory. Like concurrent parallel universes, versions from past and present as well as the varying versions of the event depending on the character who is telling it co-exist. It is also filmed in a manner that seems to want to re-capture the authenticity and the immediacy of the spontaneous event, as there are two separate camera crews, one for each of the two main characters (one is led by Makhmalbaf following the young Makhmalbaf and cousin, and the other by his assistant Zinal Zinalzadeh and the former policeman who is directing the young version of himself.) Makhmalbaf's team makes sure that they cross the other team by surprise and arrive at the location of

the confrontation at a very specific time. However this illusion of authenticity is broken of course when the filmmaking process is made transparent and we see that they film several different takes with this technique. One critic has commented on this film's evocative use of the themes of time and memory as follows: "...they [these themes] waft through the picture like faintly perfumed scents – barely yet discernibly present, evocative yet never overbearing." (Groen A13) The same author notes how this film is structured like a poem: "Certainly, this had the glory of poetry, not only in the economy of expression but also in the ability to trace the weightiest of themes with the lightest of touches." (Groen A13) Though Makhmalbaf presents multiple perspectives on this story, he remains the director and writer behind them all and thus he is stepping into an almost God like role where all the multiplicities become unified under his authority. The contradictions of mysticism and of cinema are simultaneously exposed and yet, in some way, also resolved.

Countless times, the actor playing the older policeman wishes that he could play himself as a young man and does not understand why Makhmalbaf won't allow this. This is an indication that he is stuck in the past and refuses the passage of time. This can express how holding on to the past can be detrimental, evoking again the mystical insistence on the importance of living in the present moment. The policeman does this because he has a desire to re-create this event in a way that is authentic for him, but time and time again this film shows us how this is impossible. Because there are so many versions of the truth in the mind of each party, it is impossible to arrive to a consensus on what is THE ultimate truth of this event. Hence the usefulness of re-creating it through the use of fiction, changing the course of the events so that what can be expressed is perhaps an attempt at reaching a higher transcendental mystical

humanistic truth about love, peace, and forgiveness, rather than about the particular event in itself.

### **Planes of Reality Co-existing and Multiplicities of Points of View**

Again as was the case with *Time of Love*, it seems that a single event is relived in multiple ways in an attempt to clear the “negative karma” away from it to come closer to the pure light of God, to a transcendent truth. The way time and space are collapsed is also similar to how it was done in *Gabbeh*. As in *Gabbeh*, many planes of reality co-exist, though here it is only past and present that are collapsed into one. The dimension of heaven and earth is not included in the equation, at least not directly so. An example of this co-existence of past and present is when Mohsen (the director) goes to visit his cousin to see if she will let her daughter play the young version of herself, Mohsen (the young actor) and the young girl seem to slip into 1974 momentarily and have a quick spontaneous secretive exchange about “when they will disarm the policeman”. Time is collapsed again in another scene where the young Mohsen is talking about the girl he loves (right after the director has told him “you are now me”), the older Mohsen says after he is done telling his story that he lived the exact same thing at his age, in the exact same way. The actor asks whether he is making fun of him. Here he may be having fun with the audience, because the web of what is reality and what is not is so intertwined that we no longer have any way of knowing what is the “truth” in this story. There is no “unique” truth, as fiction and “reality” and past and present are meshed beyond recognition. Interesting comments about the unusual use of time and space in the film were made by one critic:

“...the Iranian filmmaker moves his players through a metaphysical meditation that fragments narrative and reassembles it in circular rather

than linear form. It's as if ripples appear before the pebble is thrown.”

(Gerstel D6)

The multiple layers start with the premise that Makhmalbaf, the filmmaker, appears as himself, in a film he is making about himself. Miraculously, the film is not an indulgence of the ego, but perhaps precisely an attempt at transcending the ego and its silly insistence on a unique version of reality, on one unique truth. This further corroborates the idea that the film is inspired by mystical ideas, as transcending the ego is an important aim in virtually all mystical traditions.

The multiplicities of points of view are important in this film on many levels. Not only is the contrived nature of cinema and storytelling eloquently displayed, but also the multiple perspectives on reality and life itself are evident. Makhmalbaf and the former policeman remember this event very differently and both have very different approaches to how they wish to represent it twenty-two years later. The policeman is very controlling. He almost quits when the attractive actor he had chosen to play his role is not accepted by Makhmalbaf. He has fits of rage when the young man playing him puts himself in a vulnerable position as if attempting vicariously to avoid the attack that has already happened. And then when he finds out that the young woman was not honest in the interest she showed him, his violent side emerges and he orders the young version of himself to shoot anyone who approaches him in a desire to seek some kind of symbolic revenge. Makhmalbaf on the other hand seems more desirous to revisit this event with a certain distance. The event itself is less important than the *process* of recreating it, as if in doing this the depth of understanding may be pushed further. Of course, as the director, Makhmalbaf might have scripted it in an extremely contrived manner and we cannot know to what extent the actors affected the final

outcome. It is difficult to know how much (if any) freedom the actor playing the former policeman had in filming his own version of the story. Just that Makhmalbaf didn't allow him to use the more attractive actor to play him suggests a substantial amount of manipulation on his part, and Makhmalbaf is no stranger to stepping into the tyrannical (fictional?) role of the despotic director as we saw him perform it in *Salaam Cinema*. On the fact that Makhmalbaf the director is often present in his films, Martin Bilodeau has said that in his search for truth, erasing himself from the picture would be a form of lying (Bilodeau B8). However, this does not take into consideration the performative aspects of his presence on screen and the potential "lies" that exist there. Perhaps parallel destinies are staged beside each other to examine the naivety of both characters until at the end they transcend their individuality and come together in a sublimely graceful gesture that celebrates love above all else. It is again a film about multiple perspectives and relativity, but it is still in service of the unifying concept of love for the divine:

"The film serves as an explicit statement that violent political action is to be rejected: the youth, who changes his mind and is reluctant to stab the policeman, is the youth that the middle-aged Makhmalbaf wishes he could have been. Politics turns to poetics, as Makhmalbaf seeks redemption."

(Ridgeon 19)

Both the lives of Makhmalbaf and the shah's police officer were profoundly changed by this event and this film acts as a peace offering which is almost like a healing act of forgiveness towards a past act of violence.

The intricate web of self-reflexivity of the film serves the cause of relativism and multiplicity on a myriad of levels. Some examples have already been stated, but a

closer analysis reveals actually how complex and multifaceted this film's narrative construction actually is. *A Moment of Innocence* can be considered a quintessential example of self-reflexivity. Examples abound, as when the young policeman asks the old one what the movie is about, and he says he doesn't know. The young one then says: "You've got the lead role and you don't know?" This is self-reflexive, but also perhaps an indication of how much Makhmalbaf's vision is potentially imposed on the film. Because even though he is attempting to give it an illusion of being a collaborative effort, we have clues like this here and there that express how much the action is contrived. So there is a constant tension between the director's total control and the impression of total freedom he gives his players, mirroring the tension between the absolute and the multiplicity, as the director almost steps into a God-like position. And this is present again at the end when we hear Makhmalbaf giving a long series of directions to the actors, for example to the homeless woman and the young cousin he says:

[To young cousin]: "Ask him why he is buying bread. Go!"

[To homeless woman]: "Don't look at the camera madam..."

[To young himself]: "Ready? Why are you crying?"

That he inquires (in his role as director) as to why the young himself is crying implies that this is not actually staged, that he did not script it, and that by extension the young actor's decision to end the film in a peaceful gesture is his own choice and not Makhmalbaf's. This gives us the illusion (or perhaps it really happened this way?) that the young man made this decision on his own. But if we follow Makhmalbaf's logic in this decade of his filmmaking, we can assume that he probably wanted things to happen this way, but that to leave this ambiguity simply adds to the theme of relativity and multiplicity and finally of universal love. Another interesting episode



of self-reflexivity relating to the cinematic process happens at the end with the interesting cut from Mohsen (the director) who we hear off screen behind the camera, to a jump cut of him in front of the camera in the next shot. But here he is still holding a camera, as if he were still directing from behind it, however the fact that we now see him on screen points to the multiple layers of this film, insinuating that there are multiple levels of “truth” to it. This moment is very transparent and self-reflexive, informing us that what we have actually been seeing was...very self-reflexive! It was like a rehearsal, but in the next scene we no longer hear Makhmalbaf’s comments and we are watching what seems like an actual “movie”, pointing to the multiple stages of the filmmaking process.

If the policeman and his “side of the story” was perhaps duped in this film, we should keep in mind that as Stéphane Goudet has mentioned, this film is also about how Makhmalbaf was duped by the revolution (Goudet 35). Both their destinies were profoundly marked and changed by this event and this film provides not only closure, but also a loving and forgiving gaze towards what was perhaps juvenile naïveté. This film being yet another meditation on multiple versions of reality makes it a valuable addition to the director’s work on relativity. The tensions of these contradictions are what hold it together and make it another homage to the unity that can come out of a multiplicity. As in mystical poetry, paradoxes and contradictions are explored and pushed to their limit to consider all the possible angles of one single event. Perhaps this is why, though Makhmalbaf is no longer attempting to be overtly political with his films, they are still often censored by the Iranian regime who wishes to maintain a highly univocal version on the nature of reality. The co-existence of realities in political terms can be threatening to the Islamic Republic because it implies that its

official homogeneous stance on reality can be questioned. Though the supreme existence of God is always restated by Makhmalbaf's mystical approach, ideas about what is good and what is evil can no longer be maintained, or at least they are not as dichotomous, as they were in his earlier films. In this sense, his films may be questioning the legitimacy of the current regime.

The fact that the women in this film are hidden under black chadors or behind doors constantly, are never shown indoors and are unusually modest in covering their faces when speaking to men can be seen as more than respecting Islamic codes of modesty necessary to have a film approved by the regime. It seems like it could be another element in the director's engagement with the meaning of "truth". Showing women fully veiled indoors in the privacy of their own homes is not realistic, and many directors have attempted by various means to circumvent this obligation for full *hijab* on camera. In the case of this film, Makhmalbaf never shows a woman indoors, and when he goes to visit his cousin, he asks her to join him outdoors in the snow, rather than go meet her inside. She is furthermore only shown in an extreme long shot (this may also be a reference to her existing mainly in the past...). The idea of the veil covering God's truth is evoked here again.

### **Unifying Love**

Ideas about unconditional unifying love return as when the actress playing Mohsen's young cousin says that loving children would be a practice for loving humanity. This is evocative of the afore mentioned notions of human love being a practice for divine love.<sup>13</sup> In their idealist wish to save humanity, these young people are ultimately

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 2

trying to approach the notions of the higher and pure all-conquering divine love. The fact that the young actress wishes that she could love all humanity is another indication that Makhmalbaf's humanism has now crossed the borders of Iran, whereas in the past he felt almost only fear and mild contempt for what was not part of the restricted culture sanctioned by the Islamic regime. The young actors agree on the fact that humanity should have a "Mother" and a "Father" so they wouldn't be in such bad shape. It is significant that it is said when they are talking about wanting to love all mankind like their children, because it evokes again the desire for a unity while accepting all differences and multiplicity, as this all inclusive desire to love transcends the borders of Iran. Also relating to unity, the kids say that "two heads are better than one" to figure out how to save humanity.

The refusal of violence and discrediting of the past in this film also serves to emphasize further the need for unity and universal love. For most of the film, what we see going on are rehearsals of the final scene, which is a brief enactment of the act of violence itself that Makhmalbaf carried out against the police officer. The police officer is very adamant about making sure that the young version of himself does not repeat the same mistakes which made him vulnerable to the original attack, so he cautions him not to fall in love with the first girl he sees and to make sure that no one takes his gun. It is literally as if he is talking to himself, wishing that he had not made the mistakes that changed his faith so significantly. Reality expands to include the possibility of multiple universes which would have had different outcomes. In the film's official press release, Makhmalbaf has said about the former police officer:

"Since I had been disappointed by politics, I didn't need his weapon any longer. Now he needed mine-the weapon of the movies! The latter

wasn't meant to do politics or hurt each other but it could help to attempt to understand each other so as not to have to fight anymore.”

At the beginning, the director asks the young version of himself how he will save humanity, and the actor says, “In whichever way I can” which does not exclude violence, but as the movie progresses, he will see that violence is not an option for him. Makhmalbaf's focus on non-violence with this film hints again at the influence his immersion in Indian culture had on him.<sup>14</sup> As we have seen in the first chapter about *Time of Love*, and as will be expanded upon in the chapter about *Kandahar*, the idea of non-violence, as proposed by Ghandi, has now become an enormous influence on Makhmalbaf. This is yet another significant shift that he has gone through, as in the past violence was something he accepted as a necessary means to achieve political change. But as we have seen with this film, he has let go of this belief so profoundly that he feels the need to recreate this violent event in his life to transform it into one which is advocating peace and acceptance. About *A Moment of Innocence*, he has said that he wanted to express how “Democracy cannot be arrived at with weapons.” (Barbera & Mosca 52)<sup>15</sup> This can be seen as the reason why his young characters all eventually reject violence. Makhmalbaf acting as “the director” tells them to enact violent acts, or to yell out political slogans. But the young characters always end up choosing to disobey him (or act like they do) by enacting loving acts. In a possible act of humility, when Makhmalbaf is talking to the young version of himself in his car, he starts a sentence with “When I was young...” however there is a cut and we do not hear the end of it. This is done possibly to discredit the narrow ideas that he harboured in his youth. Later this happens again at a more significant moment, when

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 1

<sup>15</sup> My translation of: “*Non si puo arrivare alla democrazia con le armi.*”

the young Makhmalbaf tells the director that violence is not necessary to save humanity and that instead they should be working on changing how people think. Makhmalbaf (the director) seems to disapprove and ironically answers; "Is that how the youth of today think? When I was your age..." But this is again interrupted by the arrival of the young cousin. As an actor he is stepping into the performative role of still holding the beliefs he had when he was seventeen, which is the use of violence as a tool to effect political change. But as we know that today his ideas on the matter have radically changed, he is expressing this indirectly by interrupting himself (probably on purpose as this was most likely scripted) to discredit such ideas. The humour in some scenes is also indicative of this desire to somewhat ridicule his youthful ambitions. Makhmalbaf chooses an actor who he says like himself at the age of seventeen wanted to naively "save humanity". When asked how many people there are in the world, the boy answers that there are only 1 and a half million. This failure to see the "larger picture" might be alluding to the narrow vision of the world that the director had at this age. Then in scenes where the former policeman is showing the young man playing him how to march, the silly music and the over the top acting is quite humorous. The editing is also significant in expressing the fusion of past and present, of merging this multiplicity in the unity of the film as a whole. When they are marching, there is a close-up on the legs of the old policeman, followed by a medium shot from the torso up of the young policeman, also marching, as if they really were the same person. The futility of wanting the past to conform to one version is constantly played out, as we see how ridiculous the retired policeman looks when he is attempting to make the young version of himself enact the events in a more controlled manner, so as to avoid the attack that affected him so much, after he realises that he was duped and wasted twenty-two years of his life being in love with a

girl who was actually complicit with his aggressor. And though the events in the film seem to be configured as if to enact the scene as it had actually happened (i.e. with the attack of the policeman by young Makhmalbaf) the ingenious surprise twist at the last moment of the film is a powerful plea in the name of peace and forgiveness, when instead of enacting the attack, the two young men make a peaceful exchange of bread and flower (hence the original Farsi title; *Nun-o Goldun*, meaning “Bread and Vase”). This occurs after the young girl anxiously asks three times “What time is it?” The young Makhmalbaf breaks down crying because he refuses to enact violence, even if it is fictional, saying: “I don’t want to stab anyone, we don’t need that to save mankind.” Instead of carrying out the attack, the young men make peaceful offerings to one another in an exchange of bread and flower ending in a final freeze frame. The illusory concerns about terrestrial realities are here transcended by this loving act which became a highly praised and critically acclaimed ending shot. Here, love wins, despite all the imperfections of the characters involved. An idealized version of the event has been created with this “therapeutic” form of filmmaking. As was the case with *Time of Love*, a single event is relived in multiple ways in an attempt to clear negative karma to come closer to the light of God. Perhaps parallel destinies are staged beside each other to examine the naivety of both characters until at the end they transcend their individuality and come together in a sublimely graceful gesture that celebrates love above all else.

### **Poetic Imagery**

The ever present image of mirrors is a part of this film as well, even if there is no actual physical presence of a mirror. This is reflected upon by one critic as follows:

“What is it that drew him to the cop? Did victim and aggressor provide a distorted

reflection of one another which each recognised?" (Macnab 52) To recognise oneself in one's enemy is the supreme peaceful gesture that transcends conflict to attain some form of unity. Also, by featuring different versions of the "truth", there is yet another allusion to Rumi's fable about the broken mirror which continues to inspire Makhmalbaf in film after film.

When the young police officer asks a man in the bazaar if he has seen a sunlight ray when he has lost his flower, the man tells him symbolically that the sun does not stay only in one place. This poetic utterance is a micro commentary on what the film as a whole is saying about the unstable nature of reality and memory and about the evolution of life in general. It is also an auto-biographical comment on Makhmalbaf's spiritual and artistic evolution. Furthermore the sun is equated to life force in Zoroastrianism, and thus to God. As we will see in the following chapter, this symbol of the sun as being equated to the light and love of God is present in Sufism as well.

Relating to the theme of the Quest or the mystical path, the recurrent image of roads alludes to the paths one takes during a mystical quest. They are, not surprisingly, engaged upon in a non-linear way. When the policeman threatens to leave the project at the beginning, we (and Makhmalbaf) watch him walk on a snowy road for a significant amount of time, but as he disappears, Zinalzadeh, the director's DOP, runs after him at Makhmalbaf's request to ask him to return, and we then watch them walk back together. The police officer and the young version of himself discuss the film's action together while taking a walk. And finally we often follow the characters walking through the labyrinth-like sinuous streets of a bazaar, as they separate and come back together, change directions and re-enact events in different takes.

Symbols from nature are also present in this film. The almost mystical political slogan chosen by the young actors, “As long as there are trees, life must go on”, in its poetic simplicity expresses awe for all forms of life and is a peaceful contrast with the revolutionary era anti-shah slogans that Makhmalbaf (the director/actor) would want them to shout, showing the possible wisdom present in such mystical utterances. The symbol of snow can also be examined, as this film is set in winter. Snow symbolizes the stagnant human being, who has not yet reached a higher consciousness of the luminous sun-like warmth and light of the love of God:

“The ice and snow in the solidified world of winter – be it the winter of corporeal life, or that of the congealed minerals and inanimate beings – would immediately melt if it only knew the strength and beauty of the sun, and would turn once more into water, running in brooklets towards the trees to do useful work in quickening them – for being frozen is the state of the selfish and egotistic person.” (Schimmel 1993 81)

It is significant then that we mostly see snowy landscapes in the first part of the film, and that later when the characters are close to reaching a more peaceful comprehension of events there is no more snow shown on screen. Then when the young policeman puts the flower pot under the ray of sunlight in the bazaar, and when some girls bring it near a baker’s oven so that it can thaw, we can think of usual images of annihilation in the love of God, and interestingly this image of the ray of sunlight crossing the roof of a bazaar is repeated at the end of *The Silence*<sup>16</sup> with similar meanings.

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 4.



As we have seen, the image of birds is an important one both in mystical poetry and in Makhmalbaf's cinema. So birds are again present in this film, as when the two crows fly together off from a snowy tree right before we see the policeman and the young version of himself take a walk together. We see and hear crows at several moments during the film, and this symbol, similar to the image of snow, means the stubborn human attachment to worldly desires (Schimmel 1993 113). It is not surprising then that it is said that "...the crow talks only in the heart of winter." (Schimmel 1993 116) The crow becomes associated with the old policeman, who is stuck in his desire for a girl in the past who he cannot have, which masks (as it did in the previous films we have examined) the longing for the love for the infinite love of God. In fact, for Rumi crows were mercilessly related to humans' base instincts:

"Do not give your eyes into the crow's claw, as if they were carrion.

And he complains that the beloved has taken away his heart to give it to the crows. This bird feeds on unclean food, like the base instincts, and should be educated by being kept hungry:

Prescribe the crows "Nature" a fast from their carrion

So that they may become parrots and hunt sugar."

(Schimmel 1993 118)

The symbol of violets is also alluded to, and its meaning is similar to the symbols of snow and of the crow. When re-enacting the event, the police officer pretends to be the young girl he was in love with and asks directions to Banafsheh street. *Banafsheh* means violet in Persian, and the recurring imagery of the bent violet in mystical poetry is very similar to that of the crow:

“...this flower may represent the lowly person sitting in the dust; it is bent under the burden of the beloved, full of grief. In general, the violet is the symbol of the ascetic in his dark blue frock, who sits meditating, or in the position of genuflexion in ritual prayer. In the mature believer: When the base soul has become old, and heart and soul are fresh and green, (you are) like a violet with fresh face and hum-backed...” (Schimmel, 1993, 90)

### **Conclusion**

In this film, self-reflexivity about the cinematic medium is masterfully explored, as was the case with the trilogy of *One Upon a Time Cinema*, *The Actor* and *Salaam Cinema*, but this is done with the added mystical dimension. With its presentation of multiple narratives, parallel universes and a meshing of past and present through the prism of unity there is the creation of an alternate universe where all the temporal, terrestrial and illusory concepts of time and space are transcended to once more express a mystical idea about the unity of the divine.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Silence, or; The Quest for immortality*

Though sources do not agree on this topic, *The Silence* (1998) is probably the first film of Makhmalbaf's fourth phase, a phase in which he moves away from self-reflexivity (Egan 121). Self-reflexivity was central in his third phase, namely with the films in which he directly engages with the mechanisms of the cinematic medium. However his exploration of mystical relativity is not over in his fourth phase. *The Silence* was shot in Tajikistan and is about a little blind boy, Khorshid<sup>17</sup>, who works as a tuner in an instrument shop to support himself and his mother. He arrives to work systematically late because he is constantly distracted by beautiful sounds he encounters on his way to work. His mother is threatened of eviction by the landlord if they don't pay the rent. There is thus much pressure on Khorshid to bring home more money. However he is not very talented in tuning the instruments, which combined with the fact that he is always late, will eventually result in him being fired and in their eviction. Mystical themes about the Quest are still present in this film as this little boy is constantly wandering in search of beautiful sounds to the point that this will distract him from the realities and constraints of the material world in a radical way. Makhmalbaf has said that *The Silence* should be viewed together with *Gabbeh* because of their thematic resemblances as both films are pretexts to examine the relationship between the artist and his art (Karimi & Scognamillo 100). In *Gabbeh* the artwork is the rugs, and in *The Silence* it is the music that the little boy is constantly trying to create with his surroundings (Karimi & Scognamillo 100). Both films chronicle how the everyday simplicity of life can become beautiful, magical and

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that Khorshid is actually played by a homeless Tajik girl who received a house as payment for her work on the film (Karimi & Scognamillo 97).

grandiose. As a testimony to its universal spiritual content, *The Silence* was included in the twenty films screened at the Millennium Spiritual Film Festival of 1999 in Vatican City (Ridgeon 12).

As with *Gabbeh*, in which Makhmalbaf worked to reach an aesthetic harmony with colors, he attempts the same through the use of sound in *The Silence*. Critics were not unanimous on whether he has succeeded in doing this; however this is irrelevant in light of the present discussion. The point is that he was trying to build a certain rhythm with this film, as for a song, but also much like a poet would do with the words of a poem. Mystics often use music as a sacred means to celebrate the love they feel for the divine: "Music is seen as the resonance of eternal harmony; the flute speaks only when touched by the Friend's lips, the rebeck when caressed by his hand." (Schimmel 1982 77) There is a recurrent motif that plays out almost like an obsession for Khorshid: the fact that he hears the first four notes of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony everywhere: in the way his landlord and his boss knock on doors, or in the way the coppersmiths use their tools to work. In fact there is a popular story about Rumi falling into a mystical dance for the first time when he heard the hammering of coppersmiths in a bazaar. Copper then became a recurring image in his poetry, signifying the element of alchemy which symbolizes the lowly human who has the potential to be transformed into gold through the power of the Divine (Schimmel 1993 73). The end sequence of *The Silence* (to which we will return) has Khorshid coordinating a whole orchestra of coppersmiths to the sound of this piece. His intoxication with this melody, as well as his enrapturing with other beautiful sounds, is a metaphor for his Quest for something greater than his current existence. He is always drawn to beautiful sounds, as the human soul is constantly longing for divine

love as the Sufis say. In fact: “Love is for Rumi the essence of life, the source as well as the goal of it.” (Abdul Kalifa 42) The formal decisions that the director has made for this film reinforce this focus on sound. Makhmalbaf has said that he has attempted as much as possible to recreate visually what the world of a blind person might feel like (Karimi & Scognamillo 100). Indeed he has avoided using long shots as much as possible and he has used a telephoto lens to separate the characters from the backgrounds, resulting in soft focuses in the background so that we feel the attention being solely on the universe of the character who is being framed, most of the time in close-ups. This emphasizes sensorial elements other than visual ones.

### **Poetic Imagery**

Symbols from mystical poetry are once more abundant in this film. First, the boy’s name, Khorshid, means “sun” in Persian. The sun is a prominent symbol in Persian poetry. It can mean a variety of things: “...the Divine Light, the Prophet who guides his people, the Perfect Man, the Spiritual Beloved...” (Schimmel 1993 67). Rumi’s muse was the wandering dervish Shams, meaning “sun” in Arabic. Also, linking it to more ancient Persian history, the sun is intimately related to the Zoroastrian religion, as the energy of the one creator God is represented in Zoroastrianism with the Sun and fire. Water is also an important elemental symbol in this film, as it was in *Time of Love* and *Gabbeh*. Khorshid and his mother live near a stream and their home is accessible only with a rowboat. The mother is a fisherwoman, but she is not very successful, expressing their struggles in accessing the abundant protection of God, and perhaps once more referencing Rumi’s poem about the three fish which had been a central inspiration for the imagery of *Time of Love*. Several poems enrich the

narrative of this film. This is in large part because as Makhmalbaf himself has said about Tajikistan:

“In the last forty-fifty years Russian was imposed on the population as the official language and it was forbidden to speak Persian. But the Tajiks, to maintain their idiom, have memorized poetry books. This is why today they speak a Persian that is much closer to the language of poetry than that of spoken language.” (Karimi & Scognamillo 97)<sup>18</sup>

This reverence he feels for the Persian language and how the Tajiks have preserved it is paradoxically accompanied by the same transcendence of nationalism that was begun with *Time of Love* and that continues to be present in all the films that I am examining. After having been a highly religious person that could not see beyond the borders of the Islamic Republic, Makhmalbaf now can rise above differences in an effort to apply his mystical ideals to come to some kind of universality by seeing multiplicities as all part of the unity of God.

The film was inspired by the poet ‘Omar Khayyam as Makhmalbaf has said:

“It’s a film about music and the inner-voice that each of us should follow. Khorshid lives for the moment without thinking about the past or the future. I was inspired by Khayyam, a famous Persian poet who said: ‘On Earth life is the most important thing that exists, and life means the present time.’” (Ridgeon 16)

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<sup>18</sup> My translation of : “*Negli ultimi quaranta-cinquanta’anni agli abitanti è stato imposto il russo come lingua ufficiale ed è stato proibito di parlare persiano. Ma i tadjiki, per mantenere il proprio idioma, hanno imparato a memoria i libri di poesia. Ecco perché oggi parlano un persiano molto più simile alla lingua della poesia che non alla lingua parlata.*”

Though Khayyam did not consider himself a Sufi, the importance of the present moment is a recurrent theme in his poetry as well as in mystical lyric in general. When speaking of ‘Omar Khayyam (whom he calls the most minimalist of Persian poets), Makhmalbaf said that all his poems were about the same thing:

“...one must not have regrets about the past or build castles on a future that does not yet exist, living in the present moment, in the fleeting instant is absolutely necessary. Finding the strength to change the world can be done only in the moment in which we are effecting the change. This idea of the fleeting moment also has a therapeutic use: we must enjoy as much as possible the moment in which we are living.”(Karimi & Scognamillo 100-1)<sup>19</sup>

*The Silence* is also a variation on this theme as the main character lives only for the present moment.

As in *Gabbeh*, the characters of this film recite poems. One day when Khorshid is on the bus on his way to work, despite his efforts not to be distracted by blocking his ears, he overhears two little girls attempting to learn a poem by heart. It goes as follows:

“Speak no more of what happened yesterday

Don’t worry about what happens tomorrow

Do not rely on the future or the past

Seize the moment, do not waste time.”

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<sup>19</sup> My translation of: “...non bisogna avere rimpianti per il passato o costruire castelli su un futuro che ancora non c’è, bisogna vivere assolutamente il momento presente, l’attimo fuggente. Si può trovare la forza di cambiare il mondo solo nel momento in cui lo stiamo effettivamente cambiando. Questa idea dell’attimo fuggente ha anche un risvolto terapeutico: bisogna godere al massimo dell’istante in cui si sta vivendo.”

The theme of this poem is about living in the present moment, and again it is significant that it is recited by children, because as we have seen, children are an important symbol in Sufism to express the importance of living in the present moment, because of their ability to do it more willingly than adults. Children are an important symbol in Sufism. They can express contradictory meanings, not surprisingly. Though they are often praised for living in a perpetual present and thus transcending the artificial barriers of time and space, they can also be a symbol of spiritual immaturity. The child actor in *The Silence* embodies these qualities, as he arrives late to work all the time because he gets distracted by beautiful sounds. He is also blind, probably a reference to Makhmalbaf's former conviction that watching movies was also a sin, when he used to proudly boast that he did not watch a single film till the age of 24 (Ridgeon 9). In this scene, Khorshid is able to learn the poem much faster than the girls, who in disbelief ask "But you're blind, how did you learn it?" Here Khorshid answers that their eyes are distracting them, and he tells them to close their eyes so they will learn it better. He says: "Close your eyes and repeat after me." This game however results in the little girls missing the stop for their school and they then get mad at Khorshid and blame him. This scene is significant in expressing several tenets of Sufism, primarily the fact that the connection to spiritual knowledge is achieved primarily through an internal search. The theme of blindness is useful to understand this, because even though it has sometimes been used negatively in mystical imagery, it can also be a gift to tune into the "inner vision" which is superior to outward creation (Schimmel 1993 200). Not surprisingly, one thing can be interpreted in two opposing ways, depending on context, as is so often the case with mystical imagery, evoking yet again the multiplicity and its unity. Hafiz, another



Persian poet from the golden age of Sufi poetry, also spoke of blindness in these terms:

“Hafiz perceived with deep insight that union is hidden behind separation as light is hidden in the darkness: only in absolute darkness, in the dark night of the soul, can the Sun at Midnight rise or, as the poets often say, only in the Valley of Tenebrae is the Water of Life to be found. And the heart needs to be polished, the stains of worldly existence need to be removed by the constant remembrance of the Beloved, so that the heart can become a radiant mirror that reflects the beauty of the Friend without fault.” (Schimmel 1982 69-70)

As it is in mystical poetry, the story of this film is constructed in a way that everything is also about everything else. To express both the unity and multiplicity of expression, the senses are both celebrated and denied. While the pleasures of vision were exalted with the luscious saturated colors of *Gabbeh*, here they are denied but only with the goal of accessing another layer of truth which is to be found in the internal world. The same is the case with the sense of hearing. As a blind person, Khorshid has an exceptionally developed hearing and his love of music and all sounds permeates the film. However it is called *The Silence*, and this emphasis on silence, the opposite of sound, falls again into the celebration of the Divine Unity. Schimmel explains this through the writing of the poet ‘Iraqi:

“In later times, the feeling that there is no real separation possible because *everything* is the Beloved seems to prevail in many poems, and ‘Iraqi’s lines:

Lover, beloved and love-all the three are one.

When union comes in, what has separation to do?" (Schimmel 1982 69-70)

Alternation between sound and silence is frequently used in this film, as the boy utters very few words and music takes on an almost more important role than dialogue. Rumi spoke often of the insufficiency of language in expressing the most divine feelings, a paradoxical position for a poet that dedicated his whole *oeuvre* to exalting the qualities of God in writing. However, whenever he felt he had reached a point where words could no longer express the love he felt, he would praise the virtues of silence: "The word *khamush*, "silent", "quiet" is used so frequently that some scholars have been inclined to regard it as Rumi's original nom de plume." (Schimmel 1982 97) This emphasis on silence, as well as the emphasis on blindness, expresses the value of the spiritual experience that can come from a connection with the light that is within every human being. Eric Egan points out how *The Silence* expresses the spiritual maturity achieved by the director by contrasting its use of the theme of blindness with how it was used in an earlier film:

"In his earlier film *Two Sightless Eyes*, part of the miraculous tradition of Islamic cinema, blindness was seen as an ailment requiring the intervention of God, the supernatural result of which allowed access to the light. *The Silence* makes clear that there is no longer any need for divine intervention or the performance of a miracle because the notion of light and seeing has taken on a less literal and more complex set of meanings, far removed from religious dogma." (Egan 178)

The simple beauty and sensuality of all things is a returning theme in this film. Brilliant colors are an important element again. The women wear multi-coloured

dresses and headscarves. There are close up shots of sweet colourful fruits; pomegranates, red and black cherries. Pomegranates, an important symbol in Persian poetry, refer to the abundance of the multiplicity of their numerous individual shiny seeds all contained within the unity of the fruit itself. Rumi has said that he "...feels like a pomegranate whose 'teeth' i.e. the small round kernels of the fruits, constantly smile." (Schimmel 1993 141) Nadereh, Khorshid's co-worker, picks the petals off of warm coloured flowers to decorate her nails. There are several close-ups on the pink lips and soft skin of the little girls whom Khorshid recognises by touch thanks to their "peachy" skin. Simple gestures like eating a cherry or the sinuous dancing of Nadereh decorated with flower petals on her nails and cherries on her ears in the guise of earrings are profoundly charged on the sensorial level. This led the Iranian government to attempt to censor this scene, by wanting to force Makhmalbaf to cut out the sequence of the little girl dancing (Karimi & Scognamillo 99). However, knowing Makhmalbaf, this ode to sensuality is not an end in itself but is very rooted in spiritual concerns, as it is and was for Sufis.

Makhmalbaf's ever-recurring theme of the mystical belief of the unity containing the multiplicity is developed in this film as well. When we see Khorshid being distracted on his way to work for the first time as he loses himself to follow the plaintive and longing voice of a singer in the bazaar, the lyrics are as follows:

"Don't go astray, don't go astray

The pilgrim and the dwelling are both me

The trap and the bait are also me

The wise man and the fool are both me

The master is me

The enchained man is also me

The master of destiny is me

Don't go astray, don't go astray."

Here we see how this song is explaining how everyone has the potential to connect to the unity of the Divine acknowledging and feeling that we are all connected and all of the same essence. By telling Khorshid to "not go astray" he might also be telling him that he shouldn't be searching for the divine light outside of himself constantly (resulting in the unfortunate consequences that are chronicled in the film) because he is, himself, a part of that essence and thus has access to it within himself. It is also a critical reference to a particular kind of wandering dervishes that in their search for God forgot about the world and became "do-nothing dreamers" that share many traits with Khorshid:

"But the ascetics and Sufis of Islam considered the world and God as two irreconcilable contradictories and turned their backs to the world in its entirety. Joining to this their belief in the omniscient Providence of God for which, like everything else, they would find a basis in the Qur'an, some of them became do-nothing dreamers." (Abdul Kalifa 86)

The unity of all things is further alluded to in the scene where Nadereh and Khorshid are near the stream and they are playing with a mirror. The scene opens with the children walking along the water with their reflection in the frame. Not only is there an actual mirror in this scene, but the reflection in the water also serves as another mirror and evokes the presence of multiple realities. When Nadereh is looking at herself in the mirror, Khorshid asks her what it is because he does not understand what a mirror is for. She says that it is to see yourself in and that she is looking at

herself. Khorshid asks “Am I in it too?” Nadereh says yes and puts the mirror in front of him. He asks “Where am I?” She then takes his finger and draws the outline of his face on the dusty mirror. He then drops the mirror and it breaks into two pieces. Here we have, yet again, another reference to Rumi’s fable of the mirror of God’s truth breaking into several pieces to become appropriated as the manifold truths of individuals. In the following shot we see the children’s images separated each on one piece of the mirror. However, it is significant that they then pick up the piece on their opposite side, as if appropriating the image of the other as their own. This is a comment about the unity of all things and an image that is very similar to the yin/yang symbol that expresses this. In the following scene, we see Khorshid, shirtless, lying on the ground and covered in yellow leaves, enjoying the rays of the sun, yet another image that points to the cosmic unity of all things. Another mirror symbolism is present when the landlord kicks out Khorshid’s mother and removes all their belongings from their home. She is left with a boat full of their things and leaves her home rowing towards the opposite shore with an enormous mirror in front of her. This mirror reflects the brilliant sunlight. On the mystical meaning of mirrors, Schimmel has written:

“Time and again they return to the image of the mirror, which reflects the beauty of the Beloved and, having lost its own identity, has become more He than He Himself, and thus constitutes the only gift which the lover can offer to the Beloved. The whole world is, for the discerning eye of the true lover, nothing but the mirror of God’s eternal beauty...” (Schimmel 1982 80)

The recurrent use of mirrors in Makhmalbaf’s cinema has largely been interpreted as a reflexive tool to reference the cinematic apparatus. Though this is certainly one

dimension of their use, the mystical meaning of mirrors, such an important symbol in Persian Sufi poetry, has been more often than not ignored.

The film ends with Khorshid conducting a whole orchestra of coppersmiths to the tune of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony. He does this while walking towards a ray of light that is crossing through the roof of the bazaar and stands right in it. His sweater falls off, and he continues conducting in the light for a long moment. We hear the sound of a bird while this is occurring, again the symbol of the bird as the soul trapped in the physical body. Khorshid, having become homeless, is under this light as if wanting to escape the sufferings of the material world with this desire to return to God. He is like the moth attracted to the flame of annihilation, except his passion burns for the flame of music and sound. This large use of the imagery of the sun in mystical poetry is in some way a continuation of the Zoroastrian worship of sun and fire. Khorshid's positioning under this ray of sunlight can be related to what is called the dance of the *zarrat* in mystical terms:

“Rumi's main topic is – as it is the case in other Persian-writing poets as well- the dance of the *zarrat*, the tiny dust particles which are seen moving in the sunlight; the word *zarra* can also be translated as ‘atom’ which gives this imagery a very modern, but appropriate flavour. These particles are thought to dance around the sun; the Sun of Tabriz is the center around which everything turns so that the Sufis can almost be called sun-worshippers. It is out of love for this sun that the atoms of this world came dancing forth from Non-Existence.” (Schimmel 1993 220)

This end sequence expresses a climactic liberation in the purest mystical sense: “The paradox of Love is that man becomes freer the more he is captured by it, for only

thanks to Love will he be able to fly heavenward.” (Schimmel 1982 112) Which explains this character’s desire for a symbolic death: “This longing for death is combined with longing for pain, for the pain of love is in itself the greatest happiness- and idea common to mystics in all religions.” (Schimmel 1982 70) This symbolic death, however, is in fact a desire to achieve immortality of the soul:

“Love as a cosmic force and its universal operation in Nature; Love as the movement towards Beauty which being identical with Goodness and Truth represents Perfection and the Highest Idea, and Love as the inherent desire of the individual for immortality...” (Abdul Kalifa 44-5)

This insatiable and all consuming longing Khorshid has for beautiful sounds culminates in his symbolic death because as Sufis say, the only way to truly know God, is to die (and this can mean both a literal or symbolic death):

“...the secret of longing as the source of true poetry.

But how to reach union with the Beloved? That is possible only by death:

It is not easy to reach the incomparable friend-

If you hope for union, then die!” (Schimmel 1982 70)

## **Conclusion**

*The Silence* is a film in which again the absolute existence of God is maintained, but where relativity is still present as we have seen with Makhmalbaf’s continued exploration of multiple meanings. The exploration of uniting with the divine through art, and in particular through music, is also an acceptance of mysticism and a more

open outlook on religion, especially since Makhmalbaf had previously considered music as sinful.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Introduction



## CHAPTER 5

### Kandahar; the Quest continues during/despite/because of hardship

*Kandahar* (2001) was selected by Time Magazine as one of the 100 best films of all time (Time Magazine website). Once more, Makhmalbaf was inspired by a true story to make *Kandahar*. Nelofer Pazira plays Nafas<sup>21</sup>, an exiled Afghan journalist living in Canada returning to her homeland to rescue her sister from committing suicide due to her desperation under the Taliban regime. The film ends before we can find out if Nafas reaches her destination. In “real life”, Pazira had undertaken this journey unsuccessfully to save a suicidal childhood friend and had asked Makhmalbaf to go along with her to film her journey, but he refused (Pazira 12). The film was eventually shot without permission and at great risk on the Iran-Afghanistan border, with non professional actors (Ng). *Kandahar* was made in an effort to raise consciousness and denounce the miserable living conditions of Afghan people in general and of Afghan women more specifically living under the rule of the Taliban. In a sad prophetic twist of fate, the film was released just months before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, when the country’s sufferings were still invisible to most of the world. Little did Makhmalbaf know that after this date, Afghanistan was finally going to be on the map for the rest of the world, but not in the way that he had hoped it would be. The film received little attention at first, but after 9/11 this changed drastically, for obvious reasons. Makhmalbaf released a book along with the film, *The Buddha Was Not Demolished In Afghanistan, it Collapsed Out Of Shame*, and in it he quotes a line from a poem by Saadi, which is engraved in front of the United Nations and reiterates his desire for unity as a basis for humanism and peace: “All humans are members of a

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<sup>21</sup> *Nafas* means “breath” or “respiration” in Persian. In an interview with Mohammad Haghighat, Makhmalbaf mentions that he chose this name to refer to the fact that under the oppressive *burkas*, Afghan women cannot breathe. (Makhmalbaf Film House website: <http://makhmalbaf.com/articles.php?a=296>)

same body” (Makhmalbaf 15).<sup>22</sup> He points to the irony of this, since the world had, until then, completely ignored the devastating crisis in Afghanistan (with the exception of the destruction of the Buddha statues, but ignoring the human drama).

### **The Mystical Theme of the Quest**

Though this film is more overtly political than all the others Makhmalbaf has made since 1990, mystical themes are still present. Most evident is the recurring theme of the Quest. When the film starts, Nafas, the main character, has been attempting for several weeks to get into Afghanistan to try to stop her sister, the amputated victim of a landmine living under the Taliban regime, from committing suicide on the day of the last eclipse of the twentieth century. Nafas crosses into the country from the Iranian border only three days before the date her sister has chosen to take her own life. No matter how dangerous the journey, Nafas is determined to reach Kandahar on time and stop her sister from killing herself. To do so, she has collected several hopeful stories on her tape recorder that she hopes will give her sister back the will to live. The film’s subtitle is *The Sun Behind the Moon*, appropriate, as Nafas is attempting desperately to give back hope to her sister, to make her see the light behind the dark. Nafas wants to show her all the beautiful things that she can be hopeful about despite all the hardship. She says “I gave my soul to this journey to give you 1000 reasons to live.” Despite the hardship, this character still believes in the multiple reasons there are to feel love and hope. Sufis say that God’s light is even more visible in times of hardship (Schimmel 1993 10). The argument for this is that one needs to know pain in order to understand pleasure. During the difficult time of the Mongol invasion on the Muslim world, mystical leaders would say that: “...God’s

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<sup>22</sup> My translation of: « *Tous les hommes sont les membres d’un même corps* »

inscrutable will and His Love may reveal itself in affliction even better than in happiness.” (Schimmel 1993 10) To suffer, for some, seems to be an integral part of the very destiny of humanity:

“Struggling and striving does not mean striking one’s head against fate, because it is the very fate of man to struggle. Struggling against Destiny is the very destiny of man. In this very struggle his hidden, unrealised potentialities are actualised.” (Abdul Kalifa 78)

The gruelling journey that Nafas undertakes in this harsh desert setting can be well summed up by Schimmel’s comments on the mystical vision of such a quest:

“The mystical poets were well aware that the caravan of life is constantly moving, and with the images taken from the Arabic tradition they taught their listeners to follow the call *ar-rahil*, “Let’s travel!” and not to close their eyes in the sleep of the heed-lessness lest the caravan leave them in the desert. (...) But these poets, headed by Sana’i and ‘Attar, knew also that

Every time this road is more endless,

Every moment people are more confused in it.

For once the journey *to* God is finished the journey *in* God begins, as is stated at the end of the *Mantiq ut-tair*—and that is a mystery never to be told.” (Schimmel 1982 65)

“Doctor” Sahib<sup>23</sup>, the African-American who is searching for God in Afghanistan is also on a Quest. When Nafas asks him if he has found him, he answers no, and that

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<sup>23</sup> Played by the infamous Hassan Tantai aka Dawud Salahuddin aka David Belfield, known by the American authorities for the assassination of an Iranian critic of Khomeini, Ali Akbar Tabatabai, in 1980. Belfield, a convert to Islam, fled the United

he is still looking for him. Rumi's teachings from the story about the broken mirror and the desire for reaching unity are evoked here again when Sahib recounts his involvement in the war fighting with Afghans against the Russians. After that was over, fighting continued between ethnic groups. He says that the Pachtounes say "God is with us". The Tadjiks also say "God is with us." He fought on both sides, until meeting two sick children from different tribes made him understand that his search for God was in helping the Afghan people heal their pains, no matter what their ethnic origin, suggesting once more the desire for unity which includes the multiplicity. He may have learned the following important mystical lesson about love and unity (as Makhmalbaf did):

*"The infinite way, however, can be traversed only by Love, for every stage on it requires a loving sacrifice from the way-farer.*

*Heaven has no prayer direction but Love (...)*

*The world has no glamour without the matter of Love,*

Says Nizami, who, in commonly used phrases, praises the power of Love, which is visible in the magnet attracting the iron, in the amber attracting the straw. Love is, as Hallaj had determined for the first time, the inner principle of Divine life, and hence without beginning and without end.

*Love is what has no end;*

*It has had neither a beginning nor has it an end."* (Schimmel, 1982, 66)

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States after committing the murder and has been in exile in Iran ever since. See the documentary *American Fugitive: The Truth About Hassan* (2006) by Jean-Daniel Lafond for more information. Note that Belfield is also known under the identity of Hassan Abdulrahman. Makhmalbaf apparently was not aware of his past when he cast him to play in the film and claims to have hired his actors "in the street" or "in the desert" (Author unknown, A10).

## Poetic Imagery

Dr. Sahib also evokes the recurring notion of the Beloved when recording a message for Nafas' sister: "This is the voice of a man that has searched for eternal love but has always fallen in love with another human being." restating once more the mystical idea that love for humans is practice for the upcoming love for the divine. However Makhmalbaf also allows himself to subtly express anger towards God in this film, a gesture that would have been unthinkable in the first decade of his filmmaking. Nafas, though strong and fearless, does mention that the only real obstacle on her journey is the sun that competes so unfairly with her. She mentions that she has always thought that if each human shone the light of a candle, there would be no need for the sun. The desire for the multiplicity is here, though an absence (or refusal) of the unity is clear, once more bringing us back to Rumi's fable about the mirror. Makhmalbaf has said about Afghanistan "...the name of God is often pronounced, but he seems to have abandoned this country"<sup>24</sup> (Lorieux & Wachthausen), hence because He is absent the unity cannot emerge. This approaches an exploration of the notion of atheism, a theme which will be picked up again more elaborately by the filmmaker in *The Scream of the Ants*. This can be seen as a radical position for a director who is a former supporter of the Islamic revolution. But it is interesting to note that if Islam has been used as an instrument politically by the Taliban to create a fundamentally austere vision of the world and of God, in Sufism there is also the potential to view atheism in a more organic way, as simply part of God's plan for the world. For some Sufis, atheism (or perhaps "scepticism" is a more appropriate word) is just another part of the multiplicities of beliefs available to humans, and cannot be seen as separate from the unity in them because this would deny God's supremacy:

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<sup>24</sup> My translation of: « ...on prononce souvent le nom de Dieu mais il semble avoir abandonné ce pays. »

“From early days Sufi poets voiced the feeling that in true *tauhid*, *kufr* and *iman* (infidelity and faith) are basically unimportant because both of them are created, hence transient.” (Schimmel 1982 62)

This inclusion of atheism falls under the desire for multiplicity, which seems to have been embraced in the very structure of this film. *Kandahar* was not scripted, much of the actions and dialogue were improvised and often hastily recorded in a single take, because of the high risk the shoot was in by being in proximity to the Taliban. In allowing his actors to participate in the creative process, the film becomes an inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices all working towards a common goal, surely in a much more open and non contrived way than it was done in *A Moment of Innocence*.

Mystical poets themselves were rarely very fond of observing dogmatic prescriptions and rituals. Religion, or God, for Rumi was not to be found in ritual:

“Maulana in his personal life continued to follow the injunctions of religious law, very carefully observing fasting and prayer. Yet all these lively images point to the fact that Love is outside the religious rites and the seventy-two sects of Islam:

Love entered the mosque and said: “O master and guide,  
Tear the shackles of existence-why are you still in the fetters  
of the prayer rug?” (Schimmel 1982 129)

Because God for them is an essence that always was and always will be, it becomes irrelevant to see God as their creator, because since they are a part of God, they too are eternal and thus cannot be created:

“After this identification of the divine and the human spirits, it became self-evident for the Sufis to deny the fact of creation altogether so far as the soul is concerned, and with the denial of creation, the denial of God as a Creator went hand in hand. In one of the lyrics of Rumi we find this utterance in a sharp and unambiguous manner: “An outspoken fellow was saying in the desert: A Sufi has no God, he is not created.” (Abdul Khalifa 15)

More about the theme of infidelity and atheism has been reflected upon by Omar Khayyam, another poet who has inspired the director:

“I saw a free Sufi squatting on the ground, who was neither for infidelity nor for Islam, neither for the world nor for religion: truth and reality and law and belief were nothing to him: in the two worlds who is brave like him?” (Abdul Kalifa 57)

This quote restates again the impossibility of achieving absolute truth and thus the necessity for dogma becomes irrelevant.

This may seem contradictory, but we should remember that Sufism thrives on contradictions and their resolution, because this expresses the unity of the multiplicity, that all is One in the Love of God. This Love, which transcends logical thought, is the final goal for everything, even, and especially during suffering:

“Logical knowledge of God is impossible, because all knowledge depends upon comparison and limitations and moves in contraries; light is known by contrasting it with darkness and pleasure is known through pain. But God is the sum total of all existence and nothing stands outside of Him by contrasting with which He could be known.” (Abdul Kalifa 132-3)

Because he feels that God has abandoned Afghanistan, Makhmalbaf has made God absent even from the life giving force of water, a symbol that was recurrent in many other films is now only mentioned because of its absence amid the dry desert causing drought and because of the illness caused by the contaminated wells. The source of all life, the mother of life on Earth is absent and invisible, just like the women of Afghanistan.

When on the border of Iran near Afghanistan a United Nations volunteer is warning young refugee girls returning to Afghanistan that they will no longer be allowed to leave their home and go to school, he suggests to them that they should use their imagination to pretend that they are ants. By doing so, he says, the house will seem bigger to them adding that “the ceiling is high, but the sky is even higher”. The image of ants, “models of earthbound humans” (Schimmel 1993 177), is a recurring one in mystical poetry, and Makhmalbaf will return to it with his 2006 film *The Scream of the Ants*. Rumi in particular was fond of referring to these insects as a testimony of his reverence to all of creation, even towards its smallest creatures (Schimmel 1993 108). The Muslim Holy Book (The Koran) also mentions ants as “models of God’s creative power and inspiration” (Schimmel 1993 108)

The enrapturing music and singing that permeates the whole film is, aside from an obvious defiance towards the austere regime of the Taliban, another beautiful mystical celebration of the divine creative spirit. The blind girl who sings at the beginning reminds us of Khorshid in *The Silence*. Khak, the boy who guides Nafas for some time, is thrown out of the Koranic school because of his inability to recite the Holy



Book, yet we later discover that he is a talented singer. This seems to establish a parallel between worship of God through sacred texts and worship of God through music, however in a true Sufi spirit, it is done without establishing a hierarchy. The transgressive power of art, that “great demon” which is despised by the Taliban and to a certain extent by the ruling religious class in Iran, is paradoxically a form of worship for Sufis as we have seen with *The Silence* and demonstrates how a more open outlook towards spirituality includes it in the celebration of God:

“While the *ulama*<sup>25</sup> see God in terms of omnipotence and order, Sufis perceive God in terms of love and they use a multitude of forms such as music, song and dance to help in the search for God.”(Egan 183)

As in *The Silence* and in *Gabbeh*, the beauty of life is expressed through a myriad of brilliant colours in this film. Even though they are hidden under burqas, the women and girls are fascinated with colourful nail polishes and shiny tingly bracelets. Embracing these colors as manifestations of beauty, creativity and femininity is no longer a terrible sin but through the prism of mysticism becomes a subversion of extremism to become a way to celebrate God. One woman takes a mirror and lipstick under her burqa, celebrating beauty, even though she is the only one who will see it. Nafas comments on this on her tape recorder as another attempt to give hope to her sister. Beauty is the only ray of light/hope and potential life source left in this realm of darkness, and also the only way of fighting against the darkness. The burqas themselves, despite their oppressiveness, become visually stunning for a fleeting moment when we see a large group of women accompanying a bride to Kandahar. They are all wearing different colors and their beautiful singing and drumming

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<sup>25</sup> Muslim clergymen

combine to create this attractive mirage on the sandy dunes. Of course, the spell is broken when they are intercepted by Taliban who confiscate musical instruments and a book. We can presume that they are also arrested for singing, which was forbidden under the Taliban (and is still forbidden to women in current day Iran). The burqa can be seen in this film again as a stand in for the Sufi notion of the veil that covers God's truth. This is restated with the concluding images of Nafas pulling the burqa over her eyes which is followed by a reverse subjective shot with its grid covering the camera and cutting the sunlight. As we have seen in both Sufism and Zoroastrianism the sun is a symbol of God, and here this veil of hate, fear, oppression and ignorance that is embodied by the Taliban is covering this light, or rather this true essence of God. Hiding the sun becomes an eloquent parallel with the fact that water is also absent, because these two essential and complementary elemental sources of life cannot thrive under so much darkness. Yet, again, the opposite may be true, as God's light may be hiding just under the surface of this darkness just as when the fear of death is transcended (when one "dies before they die" as Sufis say) God's light becomes more clearly visible:

The resurrection which the common believers fear so much is, according to 'Urfi, only the first station in Love, a love which obliterates everything and is, in itself, death and resurrection. For being the innermost essence of God, Love is, like God, an endless ocean, but:

The water of this ocean is fire;

Waves come so that one would think they were mountains of darkness;

In the midst of its waves it has three hundred crocodiles,

On the shore a hundred dragons full of majesty..." (Schimmel 1982 66)

As was the case with several other films that we have examined, Makhmalbaf approaches transnational filmmaking by setting his film in Afghanistan and featuring a Canadian and an African-American actor as well as including several different idioms. The transcendence of nationality again is present, as a humanistic ethos, but also as a spiritual commentary about the unity of all peoples under the eyes of God.

### **Relative Nature of Time and Space**

We are made acutely aware of the relativity of time and space with this film as was the case with all the other films of Makhmalbaf's third and fourth periods, because as one critic has pointed out Afghanistan is:

“...the type of place about which Heiner Muller said that the distance between it and us was not measured across space but across time (...) but at the same time, the wondering beings we meet there have never been so close to us, Afghan brothers and sisters.” (Levieux 12 May 2001)<sup>26</sup>

The director has said about his film that: “The reality of Afghanistan is surreal in itself” (Whitaker 47). Nafas not reaching her destination before the end of the film is also a commentary about the relative nature of time and space in Afghanistan. Despite the urgency of her mission, the lack of security and appropriate transportation slows her down consistently. As it resists modernity, Afghanistan seems to resist the progression of time. This idea is called to mind with the group of amputees that have lost limbs due to landmines. In a surreal image, Makhmalbaf shows them in slow motion running towards prosthetic legs that are falling from the sky using the one leg they have left, resulting in a powerful symbol about how hate and violence hinders the

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<sup>26</sup> My translation of: « ...ce genre de lieu dont Heiner Muller disait que la distance entre lui et nous ne se mesurait pas à travers l'espace mais à travers le temps (...) mais en même temps les êtres errants que nous y croisons n'ont jamais été aussi proche de nous, frères et sœurs afghans. » (Levieux, 12 May 2001)

fate of individuals. Makhmalbaf moves further and further away with each film from his revolutionary support of violence in the name of political ideals, as his commitment to relativity deepens:

“Bush uses the same philosophy as Ben Laden when he says: “You’re either with us, or you’re against us!” These are simplistic words (...) I am probably against only one thing: violence, because it kills humanity and life, and it is useless. If we have power, why wield it with violence? It’s good to put an end to violence, like Gandhi.” (Levieux 24 October 2001)<sup>27</sup>

In this examination of suffering, Makhmalbaf seems to use the paradoxical ways so characteristic of Sufis to arrive at a greater knowledge of the Light. Though suffering is inevitable, it must be used as a tool to come to a greater understanding of the higher Love and Life of the Beloved, and thus the overwhelming darkness must be seen as a tool to discover the powerful Light that it is attempting to hide behind it. This, in more rational terms can be expressed as a defiance of the political repression imposed by the Talibans on the Afghan people, and perhaps by extension also of the repression by the Iranian state on the Iranian population.

### **Conclusion**

*Kandahar* uses the tools offered by mystical ideas to demonstrate how a more open outlook towards spirituality can hope to contribute to one day defeat the hate created by extremists groups such as the Taliban. God then would become the abundant

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<sup>27</sup> My translation of : « Bush utilise la même philosophie que Ben Laden lorsqu’il dit : « Si vous n’êtes pas avec nous, vous êtes contre nous! » Ce sont des paroles simplistes (...) Je suis sûrement contre une unique chose : la violence, parce qu’elle tue l’humanité, la vie et qu’elle ne sert à rien. Si l’on détient un pouvoir pourquoi l’exercer dans la violence ? C’est bien de mettre fin à la violence, comme Gandhi. » (Levieux 24 October 2001)

source of love and life that he is for the Sufis, rather than the vengeful angry God of the Taliban.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the second half of Makhmalbaf's filmmaking career has drawn deep inspiration from the codes and aesthetics of Persian mystical poetry. This is done through his recurrent use of important Sufi themes such as those of the Quest and the longing one feels for the Beloved as well as settings and storylines that quote from the images and symbols inspired by Persian poetry. The transcendence of nationality, as advocated by Rumi, is another recurring theme in these films. Of the five films that were discussed, only two are set in Iran (*Gabbeh* and *A Moment of Innocence*) but *Gabbeh* is about an ethnic minority within the country. His most recent films, *Sex and Philosophy* as well as *The Scream of the Ants* were also shot outside of Iran. Of course some of these films required this for reasons of censorship in the director's native country, but they are also a testimony to his broadening view about the world even if for some they are merely a betrayal to his origins. However his broadened view about the world may simply be in synch with his belief in the necessity of expressing the relativity and multiplicity of spiritual experiences to create acceptance and peace. What Lloyd Rigeon has said about Rumi is also applicable to Makhmalbaf and perfectly sums up what he has been doing with his films of the last two decades: "Rumi frequently oscillates between the absolute truth of God, and the relative truth of human endeavours to perceive God." (Rigeon 15) Makhmalbaf also admits:

"I no longer believe in absolutes and have accepted that I don't have all the right answers... What we and our society need is an open mind which can free us from the darkness of the predominant ignorance." (Ridgeon 17)

The liberating spiritual and political implications of this mystical relativism are great of course. Though they leave room for all people to experience their faith, they by

definition make oppressive extremes obsolete. After all, the director himself has said that: "I accept God in my heart. But I would never try to persuade someone else to accept him. This is a personal matter." (Egan 182)

Makhmalbaf's poetry of images has been commented upon by German director Werner Herzog:

"Three hundred years [from now]...the Iranian journalists will realise that the present generation of Iranian filmmakers was in fact like Kayyam and Ferdowsi. You are the poets of the present age." (Rigeon 3)

This seems to indicate that the important contributions Iranian directors such as Makhmalbaf are making to the Persian poetic tradition are indeed being ignored both in their homeland and abroad. But as we have seen, the influence of mystical poetry is central in Makhmalbaf's later work as it is an effective tool in expressing spiritual concerns in a non-dogmatic fashion. Art and poetic mysticism have been precious companions in Makhmalbaf's spiritual evolution and have assisted him in creating a humanistic cinema that is celebrated internationally. We can only hope that his films, as poetry did for him, will contribute in inspiring others to bring about a more peaceful world.

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## APPENDIX 1

### *The Three Fish: Gamble Everything for Love*

#### ON GAMBLING

To a frog that's never left his pond the ocean seems like a gamble. Look what he's giving up: security, mastery of his world, recognition! The ocean frog just shakes his head. "I can't really explain what it's like where I live, but someday I'll take you there."

\*\*\*

If you want what visible reality  
can give, you're an employee.

If you want the unseen world,  
you're not living your truth.

Both wishes are foolish,  
but you'll be forgiven for forgetting  
that what you really want is  
love's confusing joy.

\*\*\*

Gamble everything for love,  
if you're a true human being.

If not, leave  
this gathering.

Half-heartedness doesn't reach  
into majesty. You set out  
to find God, but then you keep  
stopping for long periods  
at mean-spirited roadhouses.

\*\*\*

In a boat down a fast-running creek,  
it feels like trees on the bank  
are rushing by. What seems

to be changing around us  
is rather the speed of our craft  
leaving this world.

\*\*\*

#### THE THREE FISH

This is the story of the lake and the three big fish  
that were in it, one of them intelligent,  
another half-intelligent,  
and the third, stupid.

Some fishermen came to the edge of the lake  
with their nets. The three fish saw them.

The intelligent fish decided at once to leave,  
to make the long, difficult trip to the ocean.

He thought,

“I won’t consult with these two on this.  
They will only weaken my resolve, because they love  
this place so. They call it *home*. Their ignorance  
will keep them here.”

When you’re traveling, ask a traveler for advice,  
Not someone whose lameness keeps him in one place.

Muhammad says,

“Love of one’s country  
is part of the faith”

But don’t take that literally!  
Your real “country” is where you’re heading,  
not where you *are*.  
Don’t misread that *hadith*.

In the ritual ablutions, according to tradition,  
there’s a separate prayer for each body part.  
When you snuff water up your nose to cleanse it,  
beg for the scent of the spirit. The proper prayer is,  
“Lord, wash me. My hand has washed this part of me,  
but my hand can’t wash my spirit.

I can wash this skin,  
but you must wash *me*.”

A certain man used to say the wrong prayer  
for the wrong hole. He’d say the nose-prayer  
when he splashed his behind. Can the odor of heaven  
come from our rumps? Don’t be humble with fools.  
Don’t take pride into the presence of a master.

It’s right to love your home place, but first ask,  
“Where is that, really?”

The wise fish saw the men and their nets and said,  
“I’m leaving.”

Ali was told a secret doctrine by Muhammad  
and told not to tell it, so he whispered it down  
the mouth of a well. Sometimes there’s no one to talk to.  
You must just set out on your own.

So the intelligent fish made its whole length

a moving footprint and, like a deer the dogs chase,  
suffered greatly on its way, but finally made it  
to the edgeless safety of the sea.

The half-intelligent fish thought,  
  “My guide  
has gone. I ought to have gone with him,  
but I didn’t, and now I’ve lost my chance,  
to escape.

          I wish I’d gone with him.”  
Don’t regret what’s happened. If it’s in the past,  
let it go. Don’t even *remember* it!

A certain man caught a bird in a trap.  
The bird says, “Sir, you have eaten many cows and sheep  
in your life, and you’re still hungry. The little bit  
of meat on my bones won’t satisfy you either.  
If you let me go, I’ll give you three pieces of wisdom.  
One day I’ll say standing on your hand. One on your roof.  
And one I’ll speak from the limb of that tree.”

The man was interested. He freed the bird and let it  
stand on his hand.

  “Number One: Do not believe an absurdity,  
no matter who says it.”

The bird flew and lit on the man’s roof. “Number Two:  
Do not grieve over what is past. It’s over.  
Never regret what has happened.”

“By the way,” the bird continued, “in my body there’s a huge  
pearl weighing as much as ten copper coins. It was meant  
to be the inheritance of you and your children,  
but now you’ve lost it. You could have owned  
the largest pearl in existence, but evidently  
it was not meant to be.”

The man started wailing like a woman in childbirth.  
The bird: “Didn’t I just say, *Don’t grieve  
for what’s in the past?* And also, *Don’t believe  
an absurdity?* My entire body doesn’t weigh  
as much as ten copper coins. How could I have  
a pearl that heavy inside me?”

The man came to his senses. “All right.  
Tell me Number Three.”

“Yes. You’ve made such good use of the first two!”  
Don’t give advice to someone who’s groggy  
and falling asleep. Don’t throw seeds on the sand.

Some torn places cannot be patched.

Back to the second fish,  
the half-intelligent one.  
He mourns the absence of his guide for a while,  
and then thinks, "What can I do to save myself  
from these men and their nets? Perhaps if I pretend  
to be already dead!

I'll belly up on the surface  
and float like weeds float, just giving myself totally  
to the water. To die before I die, as Muhammad  
said to."

So he did that.

He bobbed up and down, helpless,  
within arm's reach of the fishermen.

"Look at this! The best and biggest fish  
is dead."

One of the men lifted him by the tail,  
spat on him, and threw him up on the ground.

He rolled over and over and slid secretly near  
the water, and then, back in.

Meanwhile,  
the third fish, the dumb one, was agitatedly  
jumping about, trying to escape with his agility  
and cleverness.

The net, of course, finally closed  
around him, and as he lay in the terrible  
frying-pan bed, he thought,

"If I get out of this,  
I'll never live again in the limits of a lake.  
Next time, the ocean! I'll make  
the infinite my home."

#### SEND THE CHAPERONES AWAY

Inside me a hundred beings  
Are putting their fingers to their lips and saying,  
"That's enough for now. Shhhhh." Silence  
is an ocean. Speech is a river.

When the ocean is searching for you, don't walk  
to the language-river. Listen to the ocean,  
and bring your talky business  
to an end.

Traditional words are just babbling  
in that presence, and babbling is a substitute

for sight. When you sit down beside your beloved,  
send the chaperones away, the old women  
who brought you together.

When you are mature and with your love,  
the love letters and matchmakers  
seem irritating.

You might read those letters,  
but only to teach beginners about love. One who sees  
grows silent. When you're with one of those,  
be still and quiet, unless he asks you  
to talk. Then draw the words out  
as I do this poem with Husam,  
the radiance of God.

I try to stop talking,  
but he makes me continue. Husam, if you are in  
the vision, why do you want me to say *words*?

Maybe it's like the poet Abu Nuwas,  
who said in Arabic,

*Pour me some wine,  
and talk to me about the wine.*

The cup is at my mouth  
but my ear interrupts,

"I want some."

O ear, what you get is the heat.  
You turn red with this wine.

But the ear says,  
"I want more than that!"

\*\*\*

When I remember your love,  
I weep, and when I hear people  
talking of you,  
something in my chest,  
where nothing much happens now,  
moves as in sleep.

\*\*\*

All our lives we've looked  
into each other's faces.  
That was the case today too.

How do we keep our love-secret?  
We speak from brow to brow  
and hear with our eyes.

\*\*\*

THE GIFT OF WATER  
Someone who doesn't know the Tigris River exists

brings the caliph who lives near the river  
a jar of fresh water. The caliph accepts, thanks him,  
and gives in return a jar filled with gold coins.

“Since this man has come through the desert,  
he should return by water.” Taken out by another door,  
the man steps into a waiting boat  
and sees the wide freshwater of the Tigris.  
He bows his head, “What wonderful kindness  
that he took my gift.”

Every object and being in the universe is  
a jar overfilled with wisdom and beauty,  
a drop of the Tigris that cannot be contained  
by any skin. Every jarful spills and makes the earth  
more shining, as though covered in satin.  
If the man had seen even a tributary  
of the great river, he wouldn't have brought  
the innocence of his gift.

Those that stay and live by the Tigris  
grow so ecstatic that they throw rocks at the jugs,  
and the jugs become perfect!

They shatter.

The pieces dance, and water...

Do you see?

Neither jar, nor water, nor stone,  
nothing.

You knock at the door of reality,  
shake your thought-wings, loosen  
your shoulders,  
and open.

**From:**

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