



Cinema Iranica
A Research Compendium

Iran's Cinema in Pursuit of Happiness: Part I (1951-1971)

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July 11, 2025

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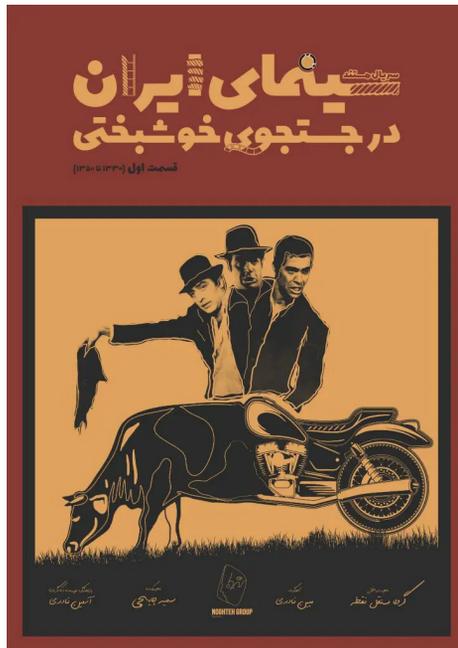


Figure 1: Poster for Iran Cinema in Pursuit of Happiness (Sīnimā-yi Irān dar just-u-jū-yi khush-bakhtī)– Episode 1 (2024). Design by Armyn Naderi.

According to John Reich, “Characters are the essence of a movie.”¹ They are the primary meaning-bearers and bring the story to life through their actions in various situations. In fact, they are often the key drivers behind a film’s success. As audiences, we become deeply involved with the characters’ lives, their conflicts, and their stories.² Moreover, characters are central to

films because they allow the audience to identify with them, and, in this way, they create a measurable impact on viewers' engagement and emotional response.³

For both filmmakers and researchers, characters have always been at the forefront of analysis. A well-developed, memorable character can significantly boost a film's box office success, while researchers can explore characters from various perspectives and disciplines. One such approach examines character actions, as proposed by Joseph Campbell. An American author and comparative mythologist, Campbell is best-known for his work on the hero's journey.⁴ In his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell details the structure of the hero's journey, which he describes as a monomyth. According to him, the monomyth follows this pattern: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."⁵ This monomyth is a metaphorical representation of the cyclical processes of Separation (Departure), Initiation and Return.⁶

Later, Christopher Vogler, a Hollywood development executive and screenwriter, adapted Campbell's model for modern cinematic narratives, expanding the three core stages of Departure, Initiation and Return into twelve distinct steps. In Vogler's model, the hero's journey begins with the Departure stage where the hero starts in their familiar, "Ordinary World" (1). This tranquility is disrupted by an unexpected "Call to Adventure" (2), but the hero initially hesitates, and in the "Refusal of the Call" (3) stage, does not accept the challenge as they are reluctant to leave their comfort zone. However, after "Meeting a Mentor" (4) who offers guidance, the hero crosses the threshold into the unknown, marking their entry into the adventure, which marks the "Crossing the Threshold" (5) stage. As the hero moves into the Initiation stage, they face a series of tests, encountering both allies and enemies along the way, a stage Vogler calls "Test, Allies and Enemies" (6). They "Approach the Inmost Cave"

¹John Reich, *Exploring Movie Construction & Production: What's So Exciting about Movies?* (SUNY Textbooks, 2017), 36.

²Johannes Riis and Aaron Taylor, eds. *Screening characters: Theories of character in film, television, and interactive media* (Routledge, 2019): 1-17.

³Jens Eder, "Understanding characters." *Projections* 4, no. 1 (2010): 16-40.

⁴Robert Segal, "Joseph Campbell: American author," *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Campbell-American-author>

⁵Joseph Campbell, *The hero with a thousand faces*, 2nd ed. (Pantheon Books, 1968), 30.

⁶Derek L. Robertson & Christopher Lawrence, "Heroes and Mentors: A Consideration of Relational-Cultural Theory and "The Hero's Journey,'" *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 10, no. 3 (2015): 264-277.

⁷Christopher Vogler, "Joseph Campbell Goes to the Movies: The Influence of the Hero's Journey in Film Narrative," *Journal of Genius and Eminence* (December 2017): 9-23.

⁸Mas'ūd Mīhrābī, *Kitāb tārikh-i sinimā-yi Īrān: az āghāz tā sāl-i 1357* [The History of Iran's Cinema from the Start till 1978] (Tehran, 1992), 14-20.

(7), where they prepare to confront the most difficult part of their journey. This climaxes in the "Ordeal" (8), a moment of extreme challenge or crisis, followed by a "Reward" (9) that comes because of overcoming the ordeal. In the final Return stage, the hero begins their journey home, often facing new obstacles along the "Road Back" (10). The hero then experiences a "Resurrection" (11), a transformative insight or rebirth, before ultimately "Returning with an Elixir" (12) to the ordinary world. The hero returns with a solution or wisdom that can heal or help others, completing the cycle of transformation.⁷

Since Vogler's model is specifically designed for cinematic narratives, we believed that applying this detailed structure through descriptive analysis would provide us a deeper understanding of the heroes of Iran's cinema. Our research aimed to examine Iranian cinema to discover the types of characterizations found in some of its most pivotal films. In the first phase of our research project, we focused on a selection of key films produced between 1951 and 1971.

While Iranian cinema traces its root back to 1900, when Muzaffar al-Dīn Shah Qājār ordered the purchase of a cinematograph for Iran the real emergence of Iranian cinema came nearly three decades later.⁸ In 1930, Ovanes Ohanian made the first feature film, *Ābī and Rābī*, a slapstick comedy that attracted around seventeen thousand viewers and introduced a new form of entertainment to the Iranian public. However, it was not until 1933 that Iranian cinema began to take a more defined character with the release of *The Lor Girl* (*Dukhtar-i Lur*), directed by Ardashīr Īrānī. This film served as a clear manifesto, reflecting the belief that Rizā Shah Pahlavī had liberated Iran and created a better country.



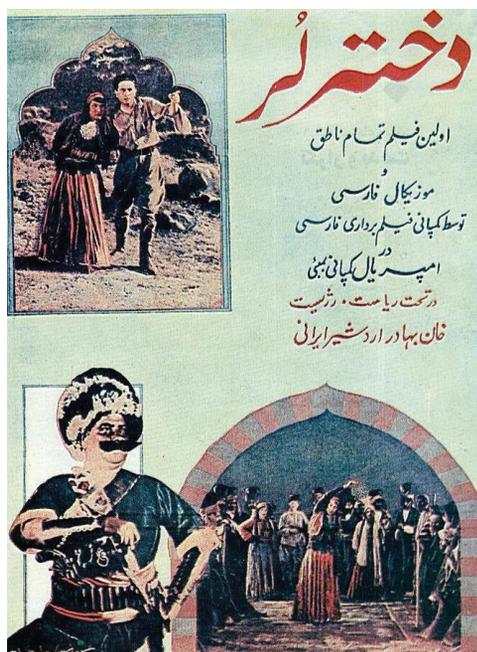


Figure 2: The poster for The Lor Girl (Dukhtar-i Lur). The text reads: “The Lor Girl. The first all-talkie and musical film in Persian, produced by the Farsi Film Company at the Imperial Company, Bombay, and directed by Khan Bahādur Ardashīr Irānī.”

The Lor Girl tells the story of Gulnār, a young woman from an affluent family who is abducted by bandits and forced into a life as a café dancer. Eventually, Gulnār meets a young man, Ja’far, and together they decide to escape. When viewed through the lens of Vogler’s hero’s journey, Gulnār’s life is disrupted as she is taken from her ordinary world, and her abduction sets her on an uncertain path. She faces numerous hardships and, eventually, finds an ally in Ja’far, who serves as her “mentor.” However, Gulnār’s journey lacks the active participation that is crucial to the hero’s transformation. Initially, she is passive in the face of her abduction, with little agency in shaping her destiny. It is only after meeting Ja’far that she begins to act, but even then, her decisions are driven by circumstances rather than active choice. Ja’far and Gulnār ultimately flee to India by taking a ship (considered by some to be the first depiction of refugees in Iranian cinema). However, despite their efforts, it is

not their agency but “chance” and “external factors” that brings them resolution. With a change in Iran’s government and the defeat of the bandits, Ja’far and Gulnār at last find a means for heroic “resurrection” and return to Iran. According to Vogler’s model, however, the true test of a hero lies in their active participation in the supreme ordeal, which is the way to resurrection and finding elixir. While Ja’far and Gulnār try to escape, which might be seen as their way of confronting hardship, it is the intervention of “chance”—the change in government and the bandits’ defeat—that allows them to return victorious. In this case, both characters, particularly Gulnār, remain passive players in their own redemption, and their journey lacks the transformative agency that Vogler’s model suggests is necessary for the true hero.

In the 1950s, cinema began to emerge as a money-making industry in Iran, with the success of *Mother* (Mādar), directed by Ismā’īl Kūshān, marking a significant turning point. *Mother* (1951) tells the story of Rubābah, a woman working as a babysitter who falls in love with a handsome man from her neighborhood. After they begin a relationship, Rubābah becomes pregnant, but the man abandons her. She loses her job and, with the help of another man, starts working in a café. Tragically, her former lover returns only to be murdered, and Rubābah is falsely accused of the crime and sent to prison. Before her sentence ends, she asks a wealthy family to raise her daughter. Upon her release fifteen years later, Rubābah returns to find her daughter about to marry a wealthy man. In the end, Rubābah and her daughter are reconciled, and they live happily ever after.

At first glance, it appears that Rubābah could be an active character, one who will struggle against her circumstances and fight for her dignity. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Rubābah does not change or actively influence the course of her life. In fact, her journey is defined by passivity and resignation. When her lover abandons her, Rubābah chooses to



flee rather than confront him or assert her rights. She accepts her victimhood without resistance, embodying a passive role throughout the film. When accused of murder, Rubābah does not attempt to actively defend herself or challenge the charges. She simply denies the accusation, stating that she did not kill the man, but does little else to confront injustice. Her fate is sealed as she is sent to prison, where she waits out her sentence without taking any action to alter her situation. Upon her release, she seeks out her daughter but, upon meeting her, decides to leave again. In one poignant moment, when her daughter asks who she is, Rubābah remains silent and once again runs away. Ultimately, it is not Rubābah who reveals the truth to her daughter, but rather the daughter's stepmother, who takes the initiative and discloses the information.



Figure 3: Poster for Mother (Mādar). The text reads: “The musical drama Mādar, produced by Pars Film Studio. Written by ‘Alī Kasmā’ī, with cinematography by ‘Ināyatallāh Famīn, and starring Dilkash.”

When we apply Vogler’s model of the hero’s journey, it becomes clear that Rubābah fails to meet the essential criteria for a heroic transformation. In Vogler’s framework, the hero must actively accept the call to adventure, but Rubābah never rises to this challenge. When faced with a false accusation, she passively accepts the situation rather than resisting or attempting to alter the course of events. Even if we consider her imprison-

⁹Christopher Vogler, "Joseph Campbell Goes to the Movies: The Influence of the Hero's Journey in Film Narrative," *Journal of Genius and Eminence* (December 2017): 9-23.

ment as the start of her adventure, Rubābah does not undergo any meaningful transformation during this period. When she is released, she remains passive and unchanging as she was at the beginning of the story. According to Vogler, the "elixir" represents a change in the hero's character—an internal transformation that allows the hero to return to their ordinary world with newfound wisdom or power. For a journey to be complete, the hero must evolve through their trials, gaining insights or achieving self-realization.⁹ However, Rubābah's journey lacks this essential element of transformation. She never fully engages with the challenges that arise in her life. She does not accept the call to adventure. She does not cross the first threshold. She does not return with an elixir of change.

In this film, Rubābah embodies the stereotype of a self-sacrificing mother in Iranian culture. Her value is determined not by personal growth or rational action, but rather by her emotional devotion and maternal instincts. Her character arc is defined by a kind of emotional immobility, where her role as a mother becomes her defining characteristic, but this is not enough to fulfill the dynamic journey required by Vogler's model. Rubābah's journey ultimately illustrates how some film characters, particularly those cast in the mold of traditional roles, remain passive observers of their own lives, failing to break through the boundaries of the archetypal figure they embody.

Cinema in Iran, like the broader social uprisings of the era, experienced significant growth in both quantity and scope during the late 1950s and 1970s. The number of films produced skyrocketed, with the reel count increasing from 28 in 1959 to 58 by 1974. However, most of these films fell under the category of *Filmfārsī*. These films were typically regarded as low-quality cinema, marked by weak plots and simplistic narratives. Despite their often-derogatory reputation, these films held an essential place in reflecting the societal realities of the time. The dominant theme of *Filmfārsī* was one of fatalism, where events unfold in accordance with the will of fate or divine in-



tervention. This perspective echoed the uncertainty of Iranian society during this period. The government’s financial plans, influenced by American modernist ideologies, were not in harmony with the country’s existing patrimonial system, leading to structural contradictions and widespread instability. Amidst this upheaval, a growing segment of society, experienced rapid financial growth, which, in turn, drastically reshaped the public’s understanding of hard work and effort. This shift in societal values would influence cinema, where the struggles of the common man, often resolved through supernatural or fated interventions, became a staple in Fīlmfārsī narratives.

¹⁰Mas’ūd Mihrābī, Kitāb tārikh-i sinimā-yi Irān: az āghāz tā sāl-i 1357 (Tehran, 1992), 86-87.

¹¹Muhammad Mu’īn, Farhang-i Mu’īn [Mu’īn Encyclopedic Dictionary], Vol.1 (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1972): 523.



Figure 4: The poster for The Strong Man (Avval-Haykal) bears the inscription: “The Strong Man, directed by Siyāmak Yāsami,” followed by the names of the principal actors.

In 1958, a new archetype, the jāhil, entered the world of Fīlmfārsī,¹⁰ a character whose name translates as “ignorant” but also refers to hyper-masculine character, combat-savvy hero.¹¹ This figure would eventually come to define what became known as the “Velvet Hat” genre, which focused on a rugged, tough

¹²Parvīz Ijlālī, *Digargūnī-i ijtimā'ī va film-hā-yi sīnimā-yi dar Irān: Jāmi'ah-shināsī-i film-hā-yi 'āmah-pasand-i Irānī (1357–1309)* [Social Transformation and Cinema in Iran] (Tehran: Āgah, 2021): 228-230; 323-330.

male protagonist often coming to the rescue of women in distress. One key film in this subgenre was *The Strong Man* (Avval Haykal, 1960), directed by Siyāmak Yāsīmī, which became a major box office success. In *The Strong Man*, one of Fīlmfārsī's recurring themes—social status change—was depicted. The film tells the story of Parvīn, a woman who works as a singer at a cabaret to support her brother and elderly mother. Parvīn regularly faces harassment from the male patrons of the cabaret. Desperate to escape this situation, she meets Kāmṛān, a wealthy man's driver, who offers her a ride. When the cabaret's owner and Parvīn's coworkers see her being dropped off by a luxurious car, she fabricates a story, claiming that she is Kāmṛān's fiancée. As the story progresses, Kāmṛān falls in love with Parvīn, and the two eventually marry.

The Strong Man emphasizes the theme of upward social mobility, but it is critical to note that this change in Parvīn's life does not occur through her own actions or agency. Instead, it is brought about by fate and divine intervention. Despite her own struggles and efforts, it is Kāmṛān's external help and the intervention of chance that transform Parvīn's circumstances. This reflects a broader pattern in Fīlmfārsī cinema, where protagonists often find themselves at the mercy of fate, with little active participation in changing their own destinies.¹²

Although the main character of *The Strong Man* is Parvīn, she is unable solve her problems on her own and depends on the assistance of male figures, particularly a male patron. Her character is primarily defined by her sexual appearance and her voice, which serve as key features in her interactions with others. Applying Vogler's model of the hero's journey, Parvīn's initial encounter with Kāmṛān's driver can be seen as her "call to adventure," and her lie about being Kāmṛān's fiancée represents her acceptance of that call. Throughout the film, Kāmṛān's driver plays a critical role, helping Parvīn navigate the various challenges she faces. Parvīn's central ordeal is maintaining the lie of her fake engagement, but with the driver's continuous



assistance, she ultimately transforms the lie into a genuine relationship. Despite her involvement in the story, Parvīn does not actively shape her own fate. She does not even try to seduce Kāmṛān, and much of what happens to her is driven by chance or external forces, such as the intervention of Kāmṛān’s driver. While her life does change by the end of the film, this transformation is not the result of Parvīn’s own actions or personal growth, but rather of “intervention of external factors.” She does not engage with or overcome the challenges she faces; instead, she passively moves from one event to another. Thus, according to Vogler’s model, while the external circumstances may change—symbolized by her eventual marriage to Kāmṛān—the hero does not experience the necessary self-transformation that would constitute a true “return with the elixir.” The shift in her life occurs, but not through her own agency or active participation in her journey.

The Strong Man also serves as one of the earliest anti-capitalist films in Iranian cinema. Kāmṛān, the wealthy male character, is portrayed as somewhat inept and dependent on his driver, who is the true “strong man” of the story. The resolution of the film, in which Parvīn and Kāmṛān marry, acts as a metaphor for blending the wealthy and the poor, yet this union occurs without conflict or any real ideological challenge.¹³ The lack of agency or transformative struggle in the characters reflects a broader societal and cinematic trend where personal and social upheavals are resolved through “fate” or external intervention rather than through individual effort or agency.

¹³Naderi, Armin, Dir. *Sīmā-yi Īrān dar justujū-yi khushbakhtī* [Iran’s Cinema in Pursuit of Happiness] (Noghteh Group & Cinema Iranica, 2024), 15’:29”-18’:09”.



Figure 5: Poster for The Midnight Terror (Faryād-i Nīmah'shab). The inscription reads: "Fardīn in The Midnight Terror. Director: Samuel Khāchīkiyān," followed by the names of the principal actors.

As Fīlmfārsī films began to lose popularity with audiences, many turned to foreign films, which were becoming more accessible through cinema magazines and international distribution. By 1961, a shift in Iranian cinema had begun, sparked by films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Iranian works that emulated its style. One such film, *The Midnight Terror* (Faryād-i Nīmah'shab, 1961), directed by Samuel Khāchīkiyān, shares several cinematographic similarities with Hitchcock's work but retains the thematic underpinnings of Fīlmfārsī.

In *The Midnight Terror*, the protagonist is Amīr, a young, tough man who is unemployed and unable to marry his fiancée due to his circumstances. While he loves her, Amīr makes no effort to change his situation and instead spends his days drinking and singing in cafes, believing that intoxication offers an escape from his frustrations. By chance, Amīr becomes entangled with



a mafia gang involved in counterfeiting money. The wife of the mafia boss, drawn to Amīr, attempts to seduce him. In the end, Amīr rejects her advances, but the mafia boss, discovering his wife's infidelity, kills her. This sets off a confrontation that ultimately leads to the death of the mafia boss.

¹⁴Christopher Vogler, "Joseph Campbell Goes to the Movies: The Influence of the Hero's Journey in Film Narrative," *Journal of Genius and Eminence* (December 2017): 9-23.

Amīr's encounter with the mafia gang can be seen as his "call to adventure," yet it is driven purely by chance rather than any active decision on his part. His greatest ordeal—avoiding the unwanted attention of his boss's wife—also unfolds passively, without Amīr taking meaningful steps to confront the challenge. In the end, the situation is resolved not through Amīr's actions, but through an external event: the violent confrontation between the mafia boss and his wife. Amīr remains a passive participant, and even when the police arrive at the scene, they do not arrest him. He simply walks away, untouched by the events that have transpired.

This lack of personal transformation highlights a central theme of the film: Amīr does not change throughout his tumultuous journey. Despite the various ups and downs he faces, he does not grow or evolve. By the end of the film, Amīr's life returns to the status quo, and he reverts to his former, aimless existence. According to Vogler, a hero should experience some form of change—whether in their environment, personality, or worldview—by the time they return from their journey.¹⁴ In *The Midnight Terror*, however, Amīr's journey is not one of growth or transformation. He embarks on an adventure, only to return to his old life, unchanged and unaffected by the challenges he faced.

In 1962, another thriller film captured the audience's attention: *Anxiety* (*Dilhurāh*) by Samuel Khāchīkiyān. The film follows the story of Bīhrūz, a writer married to Rushanak. One day, a man named Bābak arrives at their house, claiming to possess five romantic letters written by Rushanak. He threatens to expose her if she does not comply with his demands. Bābak re-

¹⁵Christopher Vogler, "Joseph Campbell Goes to the Movies: The Influence of the Hero's Journey in Film Narrative," *Journal of Genius and Eminence* (December 2017): 9-23.

quests a large sum of money in exchange for four of the letters but insists that Rushanak sleep with him to obtain the final one. She agrees, but when they go to bed, she kills him. Following this incident, Rushanak begins to lose touch with reality. The police become involved, and the case is assigned to Jamshīd, an officer who also happens to be Rushanak's former lover. As Jamshīd investigates, he uncovers that Bihrūz was the mastermind behind the plot. In the end, Jamshīd kills Bihrūz.

Rushanak, the protagonist, initially enters the hero's journey by accepting Bābak's proposition. Her act of killing Bābak can be seen as her "first ordeal," in which she takes action to protect herself. However, as the film progresses, her journey stagnates. Instead of evolving through her challenges, she descends into madness, hallucinating and seeing Bābak everywhere. Her emotional and psychological unraveling halts her journey, preventing any meaningful transformation or redemption. In this respect, Rushanak's journey does not follow the classic trajectory of the hero's journey, as outlined by Vogler.

The film portrays Rushanak not as a heroine who takes active steps toward her own redemption but as a character whose fate is largely dictated by external forces. Her inability to make rational decisions and her lack of agency in resolving her situation reflect a recurring theme in early Iranian cinema: protagonists who are passive in their struggles. Ultimately, it is an external helper, in the form of the police officer Jamshīd, who resolves the situation, killing Bihrūz and removing the immediate threat. This external intervention leaves Rushanak's fate unresolved and her journey incomplete. According to Vogler, heroes are expected to actively participate in their own redemption and transformation.¹⁵ However, in *Anxiety*, Rushanak's journey is interrupted by her own mental breakdown, and she never truly experiences the kind of cathartic change that Vogler's model suggests is essential for a complete hero's journey.

During the 1960s, Indian musical films made their way into



Iranian cinema and quickly became box office hits, outperforming nearly every Iranian production. Their success sparked concern among Iranian filmmakers, with many fearing the financial collapse of the industry.¹⁶ In response to this, Iranian filmmakers found themselves navigating a shifting landscape: While a new wave of more serious, art-house cinema emerged, focusing on deeper and more meaningful subjects, it failed to captivate the broader public. This era, now known as the “New Wave” of Iranian cinema, was defined by original screenplays, continuous filming techniques, and a more realistic approach to character development.¹⁷ However, despite the critical acclaim these films received, they struggled to find a mass audience. As a result, filmmakers were compelled to return to the more commercially viable Indian musical formula.

¹⁶Parvīz Ijlālī, *Digargūnī-i ijtimā'ī va film-hā-yi sīnīmā-yi dar Irān: Jāmi'ah-shināsī-i film-hā-yi 'āmah-pasand-i Irānī (1357–1309)* [Social Transformation and Cinema in Iran] (Tehran: Āgah, 2021): 101.

¹⁷Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 327.



Figure 6: The poster for Qārūn’s Treasure (Ganj-i Qārūn). The inscription reads: “Qārūn’s Treasure, directed by Siyāmak Yāsamī, produced by Pūriyā Film,” followed by the names of the principal actors.

One film that helped revitalize Iranian cinema and marked a turning point in the industry's recovery was Qārūn's Treasure (Ganj-i Qārūn), directed by Siyāmak Yāsīmī. The film centers on a wealthy, estranged father and the love story between a poor young man and a rich young woman. It presents the story of a lonely, affluent man who, after abandoning his wife and son many years ago, is overcome by despair and contemplates ending his life. The protagonist, a strong, young man named 'Alī Bīgham, saves the wealthy man and brings him into his humble home. 'Alī lives simply with his friend, a street vendor, and together they try to teach the wealthy man about the meaning of life.

In one memorable scene, during a modest dinner, 'Alī sings a song that encapsulates the central message of the film:

'Alī: *"All the sober in the world have some sort of sorrow; indifference is the best way to pass this world."*

This lyric reflects 'Alī's philosophy of life, which is further emphasized during a conversation between him and the wealthy man:

Wealthy Man: *"I think that, until today, I never truly understood what life is."*

'Alī: *"If you understood, you wouldn't want to kill yourself. Life has just one motto: eat, sleep, wander, and enjoy. A good life requires only joy and health. That's all."*

At the heart of Qārūn's Treasure is the tension between material wealth and spiritual fulfillment. The film explores the idea that, in a world dominated by consumerism, the pursuit of material success often leads to a lack of true contentment. Made at a time when Iran was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom due to rising oil prices, Qārūn's Treasure is also a reflection of the social realities of the period. The sudden influx of wealth



brought about by the oil boom led to an increased reliance on imports, which, in turn, stifled local production. This phenomenon, known as the “Dutch Disease”¹⁸ led to a sharp increase in unemployment, particularly in rural areas, as domestic industries became less competitive.¹⁹ This economic shift caused a massive migration from the countryside to the cities, further exacerbating the growing divide between wealth and poverty and leading to even more unemployment and stagnation.

The strain on urban infrastructure and resources made it increasingly difficult for the newcomers to find stable employment, and this economic turbulence fueled a sense of helplessness among the population. In such an environment, it is no surprise that Iranian cinema would give rise to protagonists who embody a sense of passivity and resignation, characters who do not actively seek change or expect much from life.²⁰ These characters, like ‘Alī in *Qārūn’s Treasure*, reflect the pervasive disillusionment of the time, as individuals struggle to navigate a world where external circumstances, rather than personal agency, dictate their fate.

Life, fate, and divine will dictate the protagonists’ journeys, with little to no active effort required on their part. At the conclusion of *Qārūn’s Treasure*, the tension between social classes is resolved in a way that feels almost too convenient: the wealthy man is revealed to be ‘Alī’s long-lost father. This revelation neatly resolves the film’s central conflict, but not through any meaningful struggle or action. Once again, the dichotomy between the poor and the wealthy is bridged without substantial effort or confrontation.

In this way, *Qārūn’s Treasure*, like many of its contemporaries, promotes a kind of social slacktivism, reinforcing the notion that material wealth and prosperity are ultimately hollow if they do not lead to happiness and health.²¹ The characters’ transformations occur not through personal initiative or struggle, but through an external, almost divine intervention. In a

¹⁸Dutch Disease: An economic term that describes the negative effects of a sudden increase in a country’s income, often resulting from the discovery of abundant natural resources such as oil and gas. See M. W. Corden & P. J. Neary, “Booming Sector and De-Industrialization in a Small Open Economy,” *Economic Journal* (1982): 825-48.

¹⁹Rizā Manūchihī Rād and Nāsir Shams Mughāranah, *Bīmārī-i Hulandī dar iqtisād-i Īrān* [The Dutch Disease in Iran’s Economy] (Tehran: Dunyā-yi Iqtisād, 2013).

²⁰Naderi, Armin, Dir. *Sīmā-yi Īrān dar justujū-yi khushbakhtī* [Iran’s Cinema in Pursuit of Happiness] (Noghteh Group & Cinema Iranica, 2024), 42’:54”-43’:19”.

²¹Naderi, Armin, Dir. *Sīmā-yi Īrān dar justujū-yi khushbakhtī* [Iran’s Cinema in Pursuit of Happiness] (Noghteh Group & Cinema Iranica, 2024), 40’:25”-42’:04”.

²²Parviz Jahed, *The New Wave Cinema in Iran: A Critical Study* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022): 7-14.

society struggling with economic turmoil and class disparity, this cinematic resolution reflects a broader cultural tendency to rely on fate, rather than individual agency, to resolve complex social issues.

The conditions of the society were worse than before, with widespread dissatisfaction toward the modernism promoted by the government. At the same time, the government, which considered itself as the ultimate authority on all matters, began to restrict freedom of speech. During 1960s, people began to take notice of films from Iran's New Wave cinema. This new wave primarily focused on themes such as locality, national identity, and authenticity which were becoming increasingly popular among Iran's educated class, especially filmmakers.²² These filmmakers sought a more serious form of cinema that deeply engaged with social issues, often using their films as critiques of the status quo. In addition to their thematic focus, these films were also more artistic in terms of cinematography, costume design, settings and character development. *Qaysar* (1969), directed by Mas'ūd Kīmīyā'ī, was one such film that metaphorically depicted the people's anger toward the government. It is the first film in which the protagonist rises against injustice and seeks revenge.





Figure 7: The poster for Qaysar. The text reads: “Qaysar, written and directed by Mas’ūd Kīmīyā’ī, produced by Āriyānā Film,” followed by the names of the principal cast and crew.

Qaysar tells the story of a sexual assault. A female protagonist named Fātī is sexually assaulted by the Āb-Mangul brothers. Overcome by despair, she commits suicide. She has two brothers: Farmūn and Qaysar. When Farmūn tries to confront the Āb-Mangul brothers, they kill him. Qaysar then vows to take revenge. He kills the Āb-Mangul brothers one by one, and in the end, he is arrested by the police while severely injured.

Qaysar, the protagonist, embarks on his journey after receiving the devastating news of his sister Fātī and older brother Farmūn’s deaths. This tragic revelation serves as his “call to adventure,” urging him to step away from his ordinary life as a laborer in southern Iran. Despite the pleas from his mother and uncle, who urge him to stay silent and do nothing, Qaysar is resolute in his decision to seek revenge against the cruel forces that have shattered his family. By choosing to act, he rejects

²³Naderi, Armin, Dir. *Sīnimā-yi Īrān dar justujū-yi khushbakhī* [Iran's Cinema in Pursuit of Happiness] (Noghteh Group & Cinema Iranica, 2024), 52':14"-54':00"

passivity and crosses the first “threshold,” committing himself to a path of justice.

As Qaysar hunts down the Āb-Mangul brothers, the perpetrators of his family's suffering, he receives unexpected help from a cabaret dancer, who provides him with the brothers' location. Throughout his journey and as he kills the perpetrators one by one, Qaysar begins to realize that values such as justice and honor are more important than personal desires or revenge. His transformation becomes evident when he breaks off his engagement, choosing instead to sacrifice his life for the greater cause of eradicating cruelty. This shift from a man driven solely by vengeance to one who seeks a broader societal justice aligns with the kind of character arc that Vogler's model suggests—a hero who grows and evolves through challenges.

Qaysar functions as a powerful protest against the inequalities in Iranian society. Unlike typical heroes driven by personal gain, Qaysar's quest is rooted in a desire for something far more meaningful: the eradication of cruelty and injustice. His journey is not about wealth, power, or revenge for its own sake, but about addressing the deep-seated wrongs he sees in the world around him. His actions reflect a willingness to sacrifice his own life for the benefit of his community, thus embodying the ideal of the selfless hero.²³

Qaysar's transformation throughout the film underscores his growth from a man obsessed with vengeance to one motivated by a broader social mission. By the end of the film, he sits alone in a train station, waiting for others to join him in his fight. This scene symbolizes his evolving role from an individual seeking revenge to a leader who hopes to inspire others to take a stand. In this way, Qaysar emerges as one of the first truly active protagonists in Iranian cinema—someone who does not rely on fate or divine intervention but instead takes control of his own destiny. He is one of the first protagonists of Iranian cinema to pass through all the stages of Vogler's hero's journey.



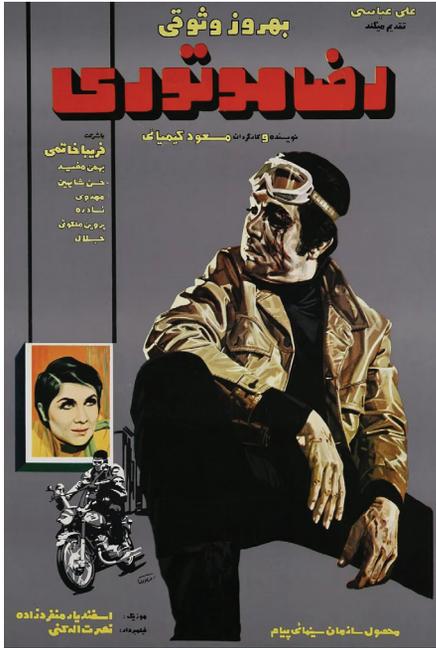


Figure 8: The poster for Reza, the Motorcyclist (Rizā Muturī). The text reads: “Reza, the Motorcyclist, written and directed by Mas’ūd Kīmiyā’ī, produced by Payām Cinematic Organization,” followed by the names of the principal cast and crew.

The impact of Qaysar on Iranian society can be seen in the real-world events that followed. The film’s depiction of a rebellious hero encouraged a shift in social consciousness. In 1970, in the wake of Qaysar’s success, university students staged a protest against the rise in bus ticket prices. They set fire to several buses, prompting a strong police response. The protest led to injuries and arrests but also caused the government to reverse the price hikes. This event marked a significant moment in the Iranian struggle for social justice, highlighting how Qaysar not only reflected but also influenced a growing sense of dissatisfaction and activism among the public. Through both the film and the protests, Qaysar’s legacy as a hero and rebel became intertwined with the increasing social unrest of the time.

One year after the release of Qaysar, Mas’ūd Kīmiyā’ī directed another significant film in Iranian New Wave cinema, Rizā, the

Motorcyclist (Rizā Muturī, 1970). Much like Qaysar, Rizā also gained significant attention for its portrayal of a protagonist who grapples with the harsh realities of life and the limitations imposed by social class. The film tells the story of Rizā and his accomplice ‘Abbās, two thieves who seek refuge in a mental hospital after a robbery. Once inside, they feign insanity and, in a daring turn, steal an ambulance and break into a factory safe. As their betrayal of accomplices unfolds, the arrival of Farrukh, a writer who resembles Rizā, further complicates matters. Rizā adopts Farrukh’s identity, becoming enamored with the writer’s lifestyle and even falling in love with Farrukh’s fiancée, Farangīs. However, Rizā’s charade unravels, and he eventually confesses the truth to Farangīs, realizing that no matter how far he has come, his life remains trapped in a cycle he cannot escape.

Rizā’s journey can be seen as a “call to adventure,” an opportunity for him to step outside his mundane existence as a petty thief and adopt the identity of someone far more privileged. However, Rizā’s adventure, unlike the transformative journeys of traditional heroes, is driven not by a desire for justice or heroism, but by a wish to escape his social class and gain access to a life of luxury. His encounter with Farangīs deepens his personal transformation, shifting his motivation from personal gain to love. However, Rizā’s ultimate ordeal—the confession to Farangīs—marks a turning point in which he comes face to face with the impossibility of escaping his fate. He realizes that no matter how much he pretends or desires a different life, his true self remains tethered to his humble beginnings. He realizes that he is condemned to live a stagnant life with no hope of progress.

Rizā’s transformation during the journey contrasts sharply with the passive, effortless elevation of characters like ‘Alī in Qārūn’s Treasure. ‘Alī, in the latter film, moves through life with ease, benefiting from fate or destiny’s hand to shift his social class effortlessly. In Rizā, the Motorcyclist, however, Rizā is forced to confront a much bleaker reality: social mobility is an illusion,



and changing one's fate is not only difficult but, in his case, impossible. His realization—expressed in a conversation with his mother about the futility of expecting anything more from life—reflects the crushing limitations of Iranian society at the time. Rizā, much like the protagonist of *Qaysar*, seeks change but ultimately finds only disillusionment and despair.

The tragic end of Rizā underscores this disillusionment. After being betrayed and killed by his accomplices, Rizā's body is discarded into a garbage truck, and his motorcycle, a symbol of his dreams and desires, is crushed under the truck's weight. This final, symbolic act captures the essence of Rizā's journey: the crushing reality that dreams of social ascension or transformation are often met with a brutal, inescapable fate. Rizā's death serves as a metaphor for the fate of young heroes in Iranian cinema, heroes who aspire to change but are ultimately discarded by society. It is a stark contrast to the easy victories of characters like 'Alī, whose success in *Qārūn's* Treasure comes with little personal effort or sacrifice. The journeys of characters like Rizā and *Qaysar* offer a critique of a society where personal change and mobility seem nearly impossible, and social class is an unbreakable chain.

An overview of the key films from two-decade period (1960s and 1970s) reveals that truly active protagonists who undergo significant transformation are rare. Aside from *Qaysar*, whose journey is marked by agency and personal growth, most characters either never fully embark on the hero's journey or fail to undergo meaningful change. This is often due to their belief that fate or divine intervention will resolve their struggles. During this period, three major approaches emerged in the way the hero's journey was depicted in blockbuster films: The first category is the Active Protagonist (e.g., *Qaysar* in *Qaysar*) – *Qaysar* is a hero who fully follows Vogler's hero's journey model. However, his redemption ultimately comes with a form of self-destruction. He kills the aggressors and, while severely wounded, is arrested by the police. Nevertheless, in terms

²⁴Naderi, Armin, Dir. *Sīmā-yi Īrān dar justujū-yi khushbakhī* [Iran's Cinema in Pursuit of Happiness] (Noghteh Group & Cinema Iranica, 2024), 52':13"-52':22"

of both personal growth and the hero's journey, he undergoes all stages of transformation and achieves all his main and secondary goals—goals that include revenge and a moral commitment to the elderly woman and his fiancée.²⁴ He tangibly reaches both his material and spiritual objectives. The second category belongs to the Fake Active Protagonist (e.g., Rizā in *Rizā, the Motorcyclist*) – At first glance, Rizā appears to be an active hero who spares no effort to achieve his goals. However, when analyzed within the framework of the hero's journey, it becomes clear that he is unable to progress through its stages and remains deeply passive. His efforts do not lead him toward either material or spiritual goals, and in the end, he perishes without any achievements. Characters like Rizā follow a one-way path to self-destruction, without experiencing character transformation or upward social mobility. And the last category consists of the Fatalistic Passive Protagonist (e.g., 'Alī in *Qārūn's Treasure*) – This type represents the complete opposite of Rizā. 'Alī does not pursue a specific goal. He has accepted a minimal and routine life, seizing every opportunity to glorify poverty. His central philosophy is to be content with what he has and not sacrifice his life for greater ambitions. He unwittingly gets involved in an event, drifts along with it, and in the end, an external factor leads to his material success. In 'Alī's case, he witnesses a person attempting suicide, only to later discover that the man is his wealthy father, making him the sole heir to a vast fortune. 'Alī becomes rich without undergoing any personal transformation; he does not strive for social mobility, yet his faith in God, contentment, and acceptance of his circumstances reward him with overnight wealth.





Figure 9: Portrait of Muhammad 'Alī Fardīn, the actor who portrayed 'Alī in Qārūn's Treasure (Ganj-i Qārūn). He represents the category of the fatalist, passive protagonist.



Figure 10: Portrait of Bihrūz Vusūqī, the actor who portrayed Rīzā in Rīzā, the Motorcyclist (Rīzā Muturī). He represents the category of the fake-active protagonist.

Iranian cinema has always been under the grip of censorship. From the moment cinema entered Iran, it has operated under

²⁵Abbās Bahārū, *Rūz Shimār-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān* [Chronology of Iranian Cinema] (Tehran: Matn, 2011): 37.

²⁶Muhammad Tahāmī Nizhād, *Sīnimā-yi Ru'yā-pardāz-i Īrān* [The Cinema of Dreams and Phantasm] (Tehran: Aks-i Mu'āsir, 1986): 119-123.

the shadow of a supervisory institution. This is evident from the fact that the first public cinema in Iran was shut down by the order of Muzaffar al-Dīn Shah at the request of Fazlallāh Nūrī.²⁵ Over time, the supervisory body and the censorship office took on a more formal and structured role. In 1958, following the controversy surrounding the movie *South of the City* (*Junūb-i Shahr*) by Farrukh Ghaffārī, the Censorship Commission of the Ministry of Interior's Film Screening Office issued a warning letter to all Iranian film studios, outlining forbidden subjects. One of these prohibitions was the depiction of poverty in people's lives. In 1967, the Bureau of Writing was established within the Ministry of Culture, essentially a modernized version of the Publications Office from the pre-Constitutional era.²⁶ The establishment of this bureau formalized and institutionalized state oversight of cultural and artistic productions, making it an official and mandatory practice. By examining the history of censorship in Iranian cinema, we can reflect more deeply on the relationship between these three types of protagonists and the supervisory institution wielding the grip of censorship. The Fatalistic Passive Protagonist was the most common and frequently repeated type of hero in Iranian cinema during the 1960s and 1970s. These protagonists were most prominent in the genre of films known as *Filmfārsī*. They appeared in comedies, dramas, and musicals—the main genres of *Filmfārsī*—and shared a common template: they were witty and entertaining characters, who were good-looking and physically fit. They had a warrior spirit and were quick to engage in fights. They placed great emphasis on masculinity, making every decision based on a code of chivalry. They maintained a sharp distinction between men and women, often highlighting social differences between the genders. They had strong religious inclinations and engaged in dialogues with God or Shiite Imams throughout their narratives. And most importantly, they always had happy endings—life ultimately turned out in their favor. On the other hand, the Fake Active Protagonist and the Active Protagonist were closely related. These heroes typically had rough, bony facial features. They often had lean and wiry physiques, constantly ready for



violence and bloodshed. They held deep moral convictions and refused to compromise their principles. Their defining characteristic was a strong sense of vengeance, which often served as the primary driver of their narratives. They sought revenge—sometimes against a murderer or an aggressor, and sometimes as a form of class revenge against those responsible for their poverty. These characters evolved through a path of self-destruction, where their salvation was intertwined with their demise—meaning they had no path to redemption except through their own annihilation. The key difference between the two was that the Active Protagonist underwent a personal transformation and achieved his goals, unlike the Fake Active Protagonist, who remained stagnant and ultimately perished without resolution.



Figure 11: Poster for the film Qaysar, directed by Mas'ud Kimiyā'i, 1969.

A fascinating intertextual connection can be observed between these three types and the political events of the period under study. These parallels may have emerged through cinematic techniques, intentionally or otherwise. For instance, historical events such as the exile of Reza Shah or the 1953 coup—both orchestrated by foreign powers—effectively stripped the people of their agency as primary actors in their own history. Similarly, the mass arrests and executions of the *Fadā'iyān-i Khalq* following the *Siyāhkal* guerrilla operation suggest that independent and self-determined revolutionary action was ultimately doomed to failure. One could also point to the phenomenon known as Dutch disease, where the rich grew richer, and the poor became poorer. This reflects a broader deterministic worldview: in a system centered around individual power, the further one strays from the dominant discourse, the weaker they become. This highlights the significant role of external forces in shaping people's livelihoods within such a system—where an ordinary person sees no path to advancement other than turning to divine faith and waiting for fate to intervene.

The intersection of censorship and Iran's sociopolitical and economic conditions suggests that there was a deliberate or implicit tendency to repeatedly feature Fatalist Passive Protagonists in Iranian cinema of that era. These films distorted cinema's potential, reducing it to the idea that life's beauty lies in enjoying what one has—promoting the sanctification of poverty, the culture of contentment, and simplistic thinking.

However, in a cinematic act of defiance, the Iranian New Wave emerged—films that symbolically referenced historical events and challenged the hegemonic narratives of mainstream Iranian cinema. Films like *Qaysar* served as allegorical reflections of real-world events. These films often employed cinematic techniques to weave intertextual layers and subvert censorship.





Figure 12: A still from the film Qaysar, directed by Mas'ūd Kīmiyā'i, 1969.