Farīdūn Rahnamā's Postmodernist Approach in *Siavash in Persepolis*

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Introduction

In this article, my focal point is Farīdūn Rahnamā's (1930-1975) first feature film, Siavash in Persepolis (Siyāvash dar Takht-i Jamshīd, 1964). This film, defined by its minimalist, postmodern approach and self-reflexive metafictional perspective, explores the mythological figure central to Iranian culture: Siyāvash, a legendary hero immortalized in Firdawsī's Shāhnāmah. In this article, I examine Rahnamā's historical and mythological insights to highlight his primary preoccupation with themes such as the erosion of Iranian identity, the perplexing historical incongruities, and the intricate interplay between the modern individual and their historical and mythological heritage, all as portrayed in the film. The article argues that Rahnamā's cinematic innovations extend beyond formal experimentation; they serve as a deliberate means of engaging with the existential and political dilemmas of his time. Through its reworking of myth, Siavash in Persepolis offers a commentary on the role of the sacrificial hero in modern Iran, exploring how personal choices intersect with broader societal forces. By analysing Rahnamā's stylistic choices and thematic concerns, this study situates Siavash in Persepolis within the intellectual currents of its time, demonstrating how it both reflects and critiques the struggle for meaning in a fragmented modern world. At the heart of Siavash in Persepolis lies a profound engagement with myth and modernity, particularly through the reinterpretation of the legendary figure of Siyāvash. In many ways, the

film reflects the era's larger struggles with identity, autonomy, and political resistance, mirroring the tensions between tradition and modernity that defined Iran's sociopolitical landscape. Rahnamā's choice to reimagine Siyāvash—a mythological figure known for his unwavering integrity and ultimate self-sacrifice—raises compelling questions about individual agency in a rapidly changing world. The article also casts a critical eye on the film's modernist non-linear narrative structure, as well as the intriguing historical anachronism woven into the narrative. Furthermore, I analyse Rahnamā's formalistic approach to adapting literary works and defamiliarising prominent mythological characters like Siyāvash, Sūdābah and Rustam.

Rahnamā made only three films: a short documentary known as Takht-i-Jamshīd (Persepolis, 1960) and two feature-length films, Siavash in Persepolis and Iran's Son is Unaware of His Mother (Pisar-i Īrān az mādarash bi ittilā' ast, 1976) in his short life. His films explore certain core ideas, namely the loss of identity amongst Iranians and the incompatibility between modern Iran and its historical and mythological past. He made Siavash in Persepolis with the financial backing of National Television of Iran.[1]

Shot on location in the ruins of Persepolis, the film tells the story of Crown Prince Siyāvash who leaves his homeland in order to avoid dishonoring his father, Shah Kay Kāvūs. He marries the daughter of the local king Afrāsiyāb, but is betrayed and murdered. The film is notable for its then-uncommon temporal experimentation with footage of tourists trekking through the ruins of Persepolis interspersed with the older setting. By framing Siyāvash's journey within the ruins of Persepolis, the film not only explores the weight of historical legacy but also invites a meditation on the fragmentation of meaning in a modernizing society.

[2]See, "Shâhnâmeh (the epic of kings): The Story of Siyâwash," CAIS, accessed April 24, 2025, https://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Literature/Shahnameh/siyawash.htm

Siyāvash in Shāhnāmah

Siyāvash is mythological figure in Iranian culture and a central character in Firdawsī's Shāhnāmah. The son of Kay Kāvūs, Siyāvash embodies innocence and purity but falls victim to betrayal. His stepmother, Sūdābah, falsely accuses him of assault after he rejects her advances. To prove his innocence, Siyāvash undergoes a fire trial and emerges unscathed, yet he becomes disillusioned and seeks refuge in Tūrān, ruled by Afrāsiyāb, Iran's enemy.[2] There, he marries Firangīs, Afrāsiyāb's daughter, but faces further treachery, leading to his tragic execution. Siyāvash's tragic demise symbolizes martyrdom and the triumph of purity over deception.

Unlike epic heroes like Rustam, Siyāvash is a pacifist who avoids violence, even toward his enemies, by rejecting the archetypal warrior ethos and seeking resolution through moral integrity and diplomacy. His alienation from Iran and Tūrān reflects his unique stance and independence from conventional allegiance. This duality mirrors Rahnamā, who navigated between Western cultural influences and Iranian traditions, demonstrating that engagement with modernity did not necessitate a rejection of national identity but rather fostered a dynamic interplay between the two.

The Shāhnāmah can be viewed as a series of myths that fill the gaps in the history of the Persian Empire; it has become a foundational work of Persian culture by preserving its myths and legends in an archival form. The tragic story of Siyāvash has been adapted into various artistic mediums, including literature, theatre, and cinema, in Iran and Central Asia. In a notable cinematic rendition in 1976, Soviet filmmaker Boris Kimyagarov made an epic film faithfully portraying the Siyāvash narrative derived from the Shāhnāmah. Additionally, Bahrām Bayzā'ī contributed to this cultural legacy with a screenplay titled Siyāvashkhānī (Siyāvash Recitation) in 1992. But Rahnamā's adaptation of this story bore no resemblance to the previously

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made films about Siavash or other heroes of the Shāhnāmah, such as Mahdī Ra'īs Fīrūz's Rustam u Suhrāb (Rustam and Sohrab, 1957) or Manūchihr Zamānī's Bījan u Manīzhah (Bijan and Manijeh, 1958) which were more straightforward epics centred on heroism and romance.

Siavash in Persepolis remains a strikingly fresh and innovative film even sixty years after its creation. With his cinematic innovations and modernist approach, Rahnamā played a crucial role in shaping Iranian New Wave cinema and significantly contributed to the development of the language and arthouse film culture in Iran. However, his innovations were not merely aesthetic; they were deeply intertwined with the broader cultural and political transformations of Iran in the 1960s. His films explore certain core ideas, namely the loss of identity amongst Iranians and the incompatibility between modern Iran and its historical and mythological past. Rahnamā reframes Persian cultural heritage for modern viewers by juxtaposing the ancient myth of Siyāvash, who is recast as a sacrificial hero, with the experimental techniques of the Iranian New Wave.

Rahnamā's approach to editing, narrative structure, and visual composition defied conventional filmmaking norms of his time, positioning the film as a pioneering work in Iranian New Wave cinema. One of the film's most striking innovations is its fragmented and experimental editing style. Rahnamā employs discontinuous cuts, abrupt shifts in perspective, and a deliberately non-linear structure that disrupts traditional narrative flow. This unconventional editing technique mirrors the film's thematic preoccupation with the rupture between past and present, reinforcing its meditation on identity and historical memory.

Siavash in Persepolis was shown at La Cinémathèque Française in 1965 and was well-received by the French film critics including Henry Langlois, the French film archivist and the co-founder of La Cinémathèque. Rahnamā's film was later submitted to the Locarno Film Festival in 1966 and awarded the

[3]Peter Chelkowski, "Popular Entertainment, Media and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Iran," in The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 7, ed. Peter Avery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 798.

[4]Jamāl Omīd, Tārīkh-i Sīnimā-yi Īrān, 1279–1357 [The History of Iranian Cinema, 1900–1978] (Tehran: Rawzānah, 1995).

[5]Shamīm Bahār, "Tawzīhī darbārah-yi Siyāvash dar Takht-i Jamshīd (Kārī az Farīdūn Rahnamā)," Andīshah va Hunar 1 (December 1967), 90-93.

[6]Shamīm Bahār, "Tawzīhī darbārah-yi Siyāvash dar Takht-i Jamshīd (Kārī az Farīdūn Rahnamā)," Andīshah va Hunar 1 (December 1967), 90-93.

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Jean Epstein prize for promoting cinematic language.[3] The film was screened at The Boulevard Cinema in Tehran for only four days, but it failed to achieve commercial success and garnered limited attention from critics upon release. Iranian film critics such as Shamīm Bahār and Bīzhan Khursand have characterized the film as "intellectual and pedantic," dismissing it as the "delusions and nightmares of an intellectual filmmaker lacking familiarity with Firdawsī's Shāhnāmah and its protagonists." Criticisms extended to the film's perceived deficiency in cinematic vision.[4]

Shamīm Bahār, a prominent Iranian film critic of the time, characterized Siavash in Persepolis as a manifestation of the director's "desperation" and labelled it a "futile" and "pathetic effort" in his review. He said that "enduring more than 10 minutes of the film, for a film critic who takes cinema seriously, was nearly unbearable."[5] Bahār's reaction to the film was particularly harsh and dismissive. He described the experience as so unbearable that he left the cinema hall abruptly, advising against any discussion, commentary, or contemplation of the film. His scathing critique—hoping that even the memory of those few minutes would quickly fade—suggests an unwillingness to engage with the film's experimental nature. Rather than attempting to understand its unconventional approach, Bahār outright rejected it: "It is impossible to sit in front of this terrible effort of this dumb speaker and not feel pity… Rahnamā's film does not have the ability to express anything (in the strict sense of the word: nothing)."[6] The primary thrust of criticism centred on Rahnamā's perceived deficiency in cinematic language, particularly its inability to articulate philosophical and intellectual concepts accurately. According to Ahmadrizā Ahmadī, the renowned Iranian poet and writer, while Siavash in Persepolis demonstrates the same weaknesses and deficiencies that are evident in Rahnamā's documentary film, these shortcomings were exacerbated by the amateur performances of non-professional actors, who lack the necessary training and creativity to effectively portray Firdawsī's legend. Ahmadi states: "In

the absence of sufficient familiarity with Siyāvash's narrative in Shāhnāmah, the viewer would struggle to discern Siyāvash, Sūdābah, Kāvūs, Garsīvaz, and Rustam amid the confounding delusions and nightmares. If Firdawsī were alive to watch this film, he would likely find his iconic heroes unrecognizable."[7]

Henry Corbin (1903–1978), the French philosopher, theologian, and Iranian studies scholar, was among the early enthusiasts of Farīdūn Rahnamā's film. After viewing of the film, Corbin wrote, "Upon watching this film, I found myself both amazed and captivated. What I had been seeking and attempting to comprehend in Iranian thought for years, this young Iranian filmmaker embodied within himself."[8] Henri Corbin posited that Farīdūn Rahnamā's film transcends the historical narrative presented in the Shāhnāmah. He asserted that limiting the film to Siyāvash's historical account would diminish its significance, stating:

If the film merely wove the informational thread of Siyāvash's story, the director's task would be relatively straightforward, and the film's scope would not extend beyond the boundaries of conventional or, rather, superficial understanding. In such a scenario, it would suffice to substitute ruined palaces with makeshift sets and unleash a multitude of Iranian and Tūrānian horsemen, engaging in cavalry charges and skirmishes across plains and mountains. The resultant work would fall into the category of 'historical reconstructions'… but Rahnamā's aspiration did not align with any form of 'historical reconstruction' whatsoever.[9]

Corbin's statement underscores the distinctive artistic ambition of Rahnamā, who sought to move beyond a literal historical retelling in favor of a more symbolic and philosophical exploration. Rather than adhering to a conventional historical narrative, Rahnamā's film employs an abstract and highly stylized approach, using fragmented storytelling, poetic dialogue, and unconventional cinematography to evoke deeper existential and

[7]Ahmadi, Ahmadreza. Film and Cinema Magazine, no. 6 (1998).

[8]"Chihil sāl pas az khāmūshī-i Farīdūn Rahnamā [Forty Years After Fereydun Rahnema's Disappearance]," Iranian Studies, March 19, 2016, accessed April 24, 2025, https://iranian-studies.org/fa/1394/12/29/.

[9]"Chihil sāl pas az khāmūshī-i Farīdūn Rahnamā [Forty Years After Fereydun Rahnema's Disappearance]," Iranian Studies, March 19, 2016, accessed April 24, 2025, https://iranian-studies.org/fa/1394/12/29/.

[10]Farīdūn Rahnamā, "Guftugū bā Nasīb Nasībī [In Conversation with Nasīb Nasībī]," Nigīn 82 (February 1971): 22.

spiritual themes. The film engages with questions of fate, sacrifice, and the cyclical nature of history, presenting Siyāvash not simply as a tragic hero, but as an archetype representing moral purity and resistance against corruption. By rejecting historical realism, Rahnamā transforms the tale into an allegory, where Siyāvash's martyrdom resonates beyond its specific temporal setting, offering commentary on broader philosophical and socio-political concerns.

Rahnamā is primarily preoccupied with realism, although his interpretation leans toward a more subjective reality. In Siavash in Persepolis, he depicts a mythological reality through a modernist lens. According to Rahnamā, "this mythological realm represents an integral aspect of our consciousness and thoughts, transcending a mere mythological world and assuming the stature of a mythological historical analysis."[10] Departing from the established conventions of preceding Iranian films centred on mythological figures and narratives from the Shāhnāmah, the film exhibits a notable deviation in both narrative structure and visual aesthetics. In contrast to the traditional narrative style used to recount the story of Siyāvash, Rahnamā adopts a more innovative narrative technique and offers a modernist reinterpretation. Set in a contemporary setting, the film follows a group of actors attempting to create a cinematic or theatrical recreation of Siyāvash's narrative amidst the ancient ruins of Persepolis. However, the film withholds details about the identities and objectives of the characters, whose costumes suggest that they are the mythological characters of Shāhnāmah. Rahnamā focuses on key characters from the Shāhnāmah, including Kay Kāvūs, Sūdābah, Garsīvaz, and Siyāvash, extracting them from their mythological contexts and transplanting them into the contemporary era. This juxtaposition allows the characters to grapple with their destinies in interaction with modern individuals to provide a fresh perspective on the legend of Siyāvash. The characters look through history and navigate dark physical and psychological passages in search of some grounding in reality. Subsequently, Firangīs and, later, Rustam joins this contempo-

rary assembly in the film, transforming the setting of Persepolis into a quasi-judicial for the trial of Siyāvash and other major characters of the Shāhnāmah.

These ghostly figures, like spectral echoes from a bygone era, awaken from millennia of slumber to roam the ruins and challenge the historical narratives of Persian mythology. Moving like zombies, they traverse ancient remnants, accusing one another of their roles in historical performances and the errors and betrayals they have perpetuated. This blurred boundary between the living and the dead reflects the film's meditation on the persistence of history and the inescapability of myth.

Both Sūdābah and Kay Kāvūs acknowledge their supernatural essence in a scene discussing a plant that has flourished amid the ruins of Persepolis. When Kay Kāvūs points out, "Look at the plant that turned green," Sūdābah indirectly alludes to their own resurrection, stating, "Just like us after all these years." This moment suggests that they, much like the plant, have endured despite time's passage—implying that the figures of mythology never truly die but continue to haunt the cultural and historical consciousness.

Then, in a striking juxtaposition, the camera shifts leftward to reveal a Jeep entering the scene. A German film crew arrives, their presence symbolizing an external, perhaps colonial, gaze upon Iran's history. As they observe Siyāvash and his companions, one of the passengers queries the driver about their identity. The driver speculates that they might be art groups frequenting the area for photography and filming, adding that he experiences hallucinations amidst the ruins at night, seeing these figures. Sūdābah, privy to their discourse, tells Kay Kāvūs, "We are pleased that nothing has changed. It's as if the same stories and conflicts persist." Kay Kāvūs responds, "You heard it yourself. One of them thought we were ghosts. Everyone knows we're not, but we are indeed."

[11] Farīdūn Rahnamā, "Javānān tanhā umīd-i sīnimā-yi mā hastand [Youngsters Are the Only Hope for Our Cinema]," Rastākhīz Newspaper 87 (1975): 11.

This exchange is crucial in reinforcing one of the film's central themes: the cyclical nature of history and the way mythological and historical narratives continue to shape present realities. The characters exist in a liminal space, neither fully alive nor entirely spectral, embodying the persistence of the past within contemporary Iran. Their recognition as "ghosts," by outsiders, underscores how the legacy of Persian mythology is perceived—both as an enduring cultural force and as something distant, almost unreal. The intrusion of the film crew further emphasizes how Iran's historical identity is constantly being interpreted, observed, and sometimes misrepresented through an external lens.

Henry Corbin reflects on how these characters navigate the ruins, emphasizing their complex existence beyond mere historical reenactment. Unlike Firdawsī's heroes, they speak in modern language—not as a break from the past, but in full continuity with it. Corbin argues that they are neither simply past heroes nor mere actors; rather, their return allows them to reclaim and revive history, driven by an unfinished purpose. Unlike the German film crew, who perceive them as performers, Corbin sees them as true mythic figures whose work remains unfinished, necessitating their return—not for spectacle, but for deeper historical reckoning.

Corbin's insight adds layers to the interpretation of these characters, inviting contemplation on the intricacies of time, identity, and the enduring significance of ancient narratives.

Discussing his fascination with Siyāvash's character, Rahnamā expressed, "Undoubtedly, Siavash holds my interest. One could argue that he is the hero residing in my heart."[11] In Rahnamā's view, Siyāvash is a symbol of human oppression in a society full of lies and deception. In the Shāhnāmah, Siyāvash experiences a profound sense of isolation, feeling misunderstood by others. His lifelong commitment to advocating peace and friendship between Iranians and Tūrānians clashes with his current pre-

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dicament, as he finds himself surrounded by warmongers like Afrāsiyāb, Sūdābah, and Kay Kāvūs. Despite his naïveté, Siyāvash possesses bravery, courage, and purity. He falls victim to deception by Garsīvaz, leading to his tragic death. Amidst this turmoil, Firangīs, Siyāvash's devoted wife, remains the sole source of genuine sympathy and support. She steadfastly stands by him, even engaging in arguments with his father, Afrāsiyāb, on his behalf.

History, Mythology and Persian Identity

Rahnamā does not focus on the epic aspects of Shāhnāmah or the story of Siyāvash, instead he follows the ethical and philosophical elements of Iranian myths, providing a new cinematic form in his narrative and literary adaptation. Rahnamā does this by bringing the past to life and placing these historically significant characters of Persian mythology in the present. The film begins ostensibly as a portrayal of the hero and his trials during the wars between Iran and Tūrān. Set in the ruins of Persepolis, it intercuts between the present and the past with a metatextual approach. Rahnamā transforms the ancient site into an allegorical space where history, myth, and modernity collide. The stark contrast between the grandeur of the past and the alienation of the present is heightened by the film's black-and-white cinematography, which enhances its poetic and dreamlike quality. The interplay of light and shadow, combined with meticulously composed frames, evokes a sense of both timelessness and dislocation. Confronted with this novel cinematic experience, the spectator is invited to engage with something distinct from previous visual and narrative forms. In the auteur's own words, "the problem with the spectators who do not communicate with my films, is that they do not know their culture well enough, and they are not to blame for they have not been given the opportunity."[12]

Rahnamā suggests that his cinematic approach offers a distinct viewing experience that deviates from conventional visual

[12]Hamīd Shuʿāʿī, Nām Āvarān-i Sīnimā dar Irān, Volume 2: Farīdūn Rahnamā [Outstanding Figures of Iranian Cinema: Farīdūn Rahnamā] (Tehran, 1976): 94.

and narrative norms. He acknowledges that some viewers may struggle to connect with his film based on their lack of familiarity with its historical and cultural context, emphasizing the importance of cultural knowledge in engaging with his work.

Rahnamā's narrative strategy transcends the characters' viewpoints, weaving scenes from the past—derived from Firdawsī's Shāhnāmah—to create a reciprocal dynamic between historical epochs. The film's mythological characters offer modern individual insight into their past, helping them grasp their historical significance. However, the contemporary characters cannot assist, as they lack a clear understanding of history and are unfamiliar with the Shāhnāmah and Iranian myths. The director blurs the lines between the present and the past, with some scenes appearing as direct extensions of historical events. The film oscillates between the past and the present, featuring identical characters in the same attire and makeup, reenacting segments of Siyāvash's life within both the framing narrative and its embedded story.

The crux of Rahnamā's work is centred on exploring the Iranian sense of self, reflecting on the history and mythology of the nation and its relation to current society. Rahnamā adapts Persian classical literature, such as Firdawsī's Shāhnāmah, with a new approach. He explains: "Some people criticised my conception of the Shāhnāmah and the story of Sūdābah and Siyāvash. I do not say my take is exactly like the Shāhnāmah, no one can have such a claim, but what you see in my film is not that far from Firdawsī's concept."[13] Rahnamā was more of an archaeological thinker than a nationalist. His fondness for Iran's cultural past and historic identity did not lead him to chauvinism or absolutism; instead he adopted a more critical approach to history. Unlike many intellectuals of his time, he held no hatred or grudge against the West or Western culture. He lived in Europe for years, spending much of that time learning French and writing poetry in the language. The alienation of Westernized Iranians from their identity and Iran's history was a central theme

in many stories, plays, and films of the 1960s and 1970s, including Rahnamā's work. The nativism in Rahnamā's films and writings reflects the philosophical discourse common among the Iranian elites and intellectuals during the 1960s. In an era when anti-Westernism and nativism (in the form of radical nationalism or politicized Islam) dominated Iranian intellectual discourse, Rahnamā's nativism, focused on ancient historical identity, was neither anti-Western nor reactionary. Instead, it served as a warning against historical ignorance and an invitation to reassess history from a modern, unorthodox perspective. Rahnamā aimed to bridge between Iranian thought with Western modernity, and the anachronistic nature of his film, with its fluid passage between past and present, reflects the postmodernist aspect of his cinema.

Rahnamā's use of Zarb-i Zūrkhānah music in the opening credits serves to evoke traditional Iranian mythology and its continuity in modern-day Iran, contrasting with Ibrahīm Gulistān's use of the same music in Brick and Mirror (Khisht va āyīnah, 1964) to allude to themes of Iranian masculinity and its subversion. In the title sequence, the camera moves from images of Achaemenid soldiers on the walls of the Persepolis ruins, accompanied by the powerful beat and voice of Murshid ʿAbbās Shīrkhudā (b. 1933), the renowned Shāhnāmah reciter and percussionist in Zūrkhānah (the house of strength). By drawing upon this auditory tradition, Rahnamā situates his film within a broader historical and mythological continuum, reinforcing its engagement with Iran's cultural heritage.

Following the credits, the film opens with a panoramic view of Persepolis, where Siyāvash and his companions walk among its towering columns, engaging in dialogue. Kay Kāvūs gestures toward the columns, symbolizing their separation, and says: "You see how these columns are separated from each other." The camera then tilts down from a tall pillar to the ground, where Kay Kāvūs picks a plant, and hints at their undisclosed mission: "Look at the plant that turned green. It's a bit like the plant that

is the subject of our work." Although he does not explicitly state their purpose, the plant references the mythological belief that it grows from Siyāvash's blood after his martyrdom.

Rahnamā assigns Sūdābah the most vocal role among the film's characters, as she engages in disputes and questions the actions of everyone, including Kay Kāvūs, Afrāsiyāb, Siyāvash, and Rustam. From the outset, Sūdābah critiques Siyāvash and Kay Kāvūs for their illusions, asserting, "You both have an illusion, one fixated on duty and the other on righteousness and purity." In response, Kay Kāvūs accuses her of succumbing to the illusion of selfishness, but Sūdābah counters that selfishness is simply doing whatever one desires. This exchange underscores the clash of values and worldviews among the characters, enriching the film's exploration of myth, morality, and contemporary perspectives.

Sūdābah emerges as a formidable critic, targeting Kay Kāvūs and her companions for their unwavering beliefs: "You stay in the moulds you made for yourself until you rot." She also criticises Siyāvash and Rustam for making peace with Tūrān, accusing Siyāvash of compromising his homeland by seeking refuge in Tūrān and marrying the daughter of Iran's enemy. However, the validity of Sūdābah's critique is questioned as scenes depict her manipulating Kay Kāvūs, caressing his feet and tearing her shirt while accusing Siyāvash. Sūdābah embodies a conspiratorial and politically motivated figure, willing to sacrifice others to fulfil her goals. Yet, she is also a victim of unrequited love, and her anger stems from the failure to win Siyāvash's affection. Her character unfolds as a complex mix of manipulation, political intrigue, and personal torment.

Rahnamā portrays Sūdābah as a melancholic woman, her spirit broken by unrequited love, which fuels her rebellious inclinations and covert actions. Her poignant admission reveals her vulnerability: "I am not afraid of anything except loneliness and aging." The main narrative explores the dynamics between

Siyāvash and Sūdābah, captured through evocative shots that show Sūdābah sitting beside Siyāvash, holding his hand and frequently whispering his name. A pivotal scene, framed in a fixed two-shot, captures their conversation where Sūdābah bares her soul, expressing the depth of her sorrow and love. Their dialogue demonstrates the intensity of Sūdābah's passion and the futility of her desires. Sūdābah implores, "You're trembling every time. Stay with me." Burdened by his own melancholy, Siyāvash responds, "I am depressed." Sūdābah mirrors his sorrow and confesses, "I am also depressed. I'm mourning. You are depressed for the death of your mother, and I am for the death of my heart. I want you, my baby. Do not leave me." Despite her pleas, Siyāvash departs, leaving Sūdābah to face solitude.

Frustrated by rejection, she plots revenge by falsely accusing Siyāvash of rape. The film explores the tragic consequences of unfulfilled love, blending emotion, deception, and the complexities of human relationships. Sūdābah's yearning for love and fear of abandonment drive her defiance, positioning her as both a tragic figure and an agent of disruption. Her vulnerability contrasts with Siyāvash's restraint, highlighting the film's exploration of unfulfilled desires and emotional isolation. Through Sūdābah, Rahnamā critiques rigid moral structures that condemn female longing, framing her not merely as a villain but as a deeply human, wounded soul.

Disheartened by his harsh destiny and the inherent cruelty of his existence, Siyāvash confides in Pīrān Vīsah. As a member of Afrāsiyāb's ranks and an individual known for his genuine honesty, Pīrān becomes the recipient of Siyāvash's lamentations. Siyāvash expresses his weariness with Tūrān and Afrāsiyāb's palace, feeling like a stranger in a foreign land. Despite his discontent with his father and stepmother in Iran, he contemplates leaving Tūrān. In this moment of vulnerability, Siyāvash identifies Pīrān as a figure of moral equivalence among the Tūrāni fighters, standing shoulder to shoulder with admired Iranian

personalities. Recognizing Pīrān's consistent efforts in fostering understanding and empathy between Iranians and Tūrānis, Siyāvash entrusts him with his thoughts, posing the profound question, "Why is existence like this?" In response, Pīrān solemnly states, "It has always been this way, my son," and encapsulates the enigmatic nature of the universe with a poignant verse: "This is the secret of this universe—sometimes it brings joy, and sometimes it brings sorrow."

Defamiliarization of the characters

Rahnamā employs the postmodernist technique of defamiliarization to present mythological characters such as Siyāvash, Sūdābah and Rustam in a unique light within this film. They are no longer the inaccessible and mythic heroes of Shāhnāmah, but ordinary people who are walking around the ruins of Persepolis and expressing their feelings and thoughts about their past and present situation. The film rejects conventional characterization and instead embraces an abstract, symbolic mode of storytelling. The figure of Siyāvash is not presented as a traditional protagonist but as an emblem of existential and philosophical inquiry. His movement through the film is often stylized, resembling theatrical or ritualistic performance rather than naturalistic acting. This choice underscores the film's engagement with myth as a living, evolving entity rather than a fixed historical account.

Unlike the conventional heroic portrayal of Rustam found in Firdawsī's Shāhnāmah or prevalent in Iranian and ex-Soviet Union films, Rahnamā's rendition of Rustam deviates markedly. In his film, Rustam is depicted engaging in unconventional activities, such as playing the game of Nūn Biyār Kabāb Bibar (an old and traditional Iranian children's game literally means bring bread, take kebab) with a boy or joking around with others. Essentially, Rustam becomes a parody of himself, challenging and subverting the traditional heroic archetype. Defamiliarization of Rustam transforms him from the mighty hero of epic

tales into a character with a satirical edge.

Rahnamā's approach disrupts the audience's preconceived notions of these prominent figures of Persian mythology to prompt a re-evaluation of their roles and characteristics. By injecting humour and everyday activities into the depiction of Rustam, the filmmaker not only defies established conventions, but also introduces an element of relatability by portraying these mythological beings more approachable and human.

The technique of defamiliarisation extends to Sūdābah's character to offer a reinterpretation that challenges conventional expectations. She diverges significantly from the familiar portrayal found in Shāhnāmah or depicted in old Iranian films. Sūdābah's character intricately weaves together layers of manipulation, political intrigue, and profound personal turmoil, all stemming from the poignant absence of reciprocated love. Rahnamā's narration refrains from vilifying Sūdābah; rather, he offers a nuanced portrayal that invites sympathy by positioning her as a victim of unrequited love. Within the narrative, Sūdābah's false accusation against Siyāvash is not merely a personal act of revenge but a political intrigue, aimed at manipulating power dynamics within the court. Rahnamā presents this act as deeply entwined with her unfulfilled romantic desires, highlighting the complexity of her character beyond a simple villainous portrayal. Rahnamā portrays Sūdābah's character with nuance, moving beyond a simplistic depiction of good-versus-evil narrative. He delves into the vulnerability beneath her manipulative facade, revealing the emotional toll of unreciprocated love. In opting for this compassionate approach, Rahnamā encourages the audience to empathize with Sūdābah's struggles and inner conflicts. By doing so, he challenges conventional notions of morality and invites a more profound exploration of the human condition, wherein characters are not merely painted in broad strokes of virtue or vice, but rather as multifaceted individuals shaped by the complexities of their own emotions and circumstances.

Rahnamā's postmodernist technique goes beyond reinterpretation, challenging the sanctity of mythological characters and shifting in the audience's perception and understanding of these timeless figures. Through his defamiliarization, the film comments on the malleability of cultural narratives and the transformative power of reinterpretation by a postmodernist filmmaker. For example, Sūdābah expresses skepticism about Siyāvash's tale of passing through fire, dismissing it as implausible. In her perspective, the idea that someone could traverse fire unscathed contradicts reason: "Zāl, Rustam's father, was a magician, and Rustam, Siyāvash's supporter, shares a similar magical lineage. It is not logically sound that one can pass through fire without consequence."

In a pivotal scene, Sūdābah, joined by Kay Kāvūs, symbolically challenges Siyāvash's narrative by setting fire to a piece of paper—an evocative representation of his fire test. Provoking Siyāvash, Sūdābah dares him to place his hand on the fire: "Put your hand and see if it doesn't burn." This act serves as both a direct challenge to Siyāvash and an interrogation of the Shāhnāmah narrative. Sūdābah seeks further validation for her doubts by asking a passerby if he knows the tale of Siyāvash, and more specifically, his fire ordeal, which the passerby dismisses as a legend. Undeterred, Sūdābah presses him further for his opinion on the legitimacy of the narrative. When asked by Kay Kāvūs if he believes Siyāvash passed through fire, the passerby responds hesitantly, "Maybe." This scene underscores Sūdābah's skepticism and reflects a broader questioning of the boundary between legend and reality in the Shāhnāmah. The film refrains from offering a definitive stance on the myth's authenticity, embracing the postmodernist essence of ambiguity and subjective storytelling. By involving passers-by and seeking their opinions, the film invites the audience to question the reliability of mythologies, challenging the notion of absolute truth and acknowledging the interpretative nature of ancient tales like those found in the Shāhnāmah.

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Anachronism in narrative

Another postmodernist trait of Rahnamā's film is its deliberate use of anachronism. In a scene discussing the war between Iran and Tūrān, a boy brings a copy of the Kayhān newspaper, which forecasts the possibility of a Third World War. This historical anachronism illustrates Rahnamā's view of the fluid continuity between past, present, and future. Rahnamā asserts, "The border between yesterday and today is only hypothetical. A sword that penetrated the body of an Achaemenid or Parthian soldier is not much different from a bullet that penetrated the body of a Frenchman or a German. Both of them are killed."[14]

Rahnamā's use of anachronism extends beyond individual props or references; it is embedded in the film's very structure. In Siavash in Persepolis and Iran's Son is Unaware of His Mother, Rahnamā employs a metafictional "film within a film" framework to challenge linear perceptions of time. By refusing to separate mythology, history, and the present, Rahnamā collapses temporal distinctions, allowing legendary figures to co-exist with contemporary individuals. In Siavash in Persepolis, mythological characters wander the ruins of Persepolis alongside modern tourists and a German film crew, an anachronistic layering that disrupts conventional historical reconstructions. This temporal collapse reaches its height in the film's final scene, where Siyāvash stands atop a hill, visually aligned with the towering pillars of Persepolis. This powerful image serves as a metaphor for Siyāvash's destiny merging with the enduring legacy of Iranian cultural memory. Through such anachronisms, Rahnamā crafts a vision of history not as a fixed past but as an ever-present force that continues to shape Iranian identity.

Rahnamā's use of anachronism is not merely a stylistic choice but a means of interrogating historical and cultural narratives. The presence of contemporary elements, such as the Kayhān newspaper referencing a possible Third World War, underscores the film's assertion that past and present conflicts are intrinsi-

cally linked. This visual interplay also reveals a deeper tension between Western and Eastern perspectives, mirroring the nativist and anti-Western discourse prevalent in Iranian intellectual circles. By collapsing time and placing mythological Persian figures within the modern ruins of Persepolis—alongside tourists and a German film crew—Rahnamā critiques the Western gaze that historicizes and exoticizes Iran while simultaneously reinforcing the continuity of Iranian identity. Through this technique, he challenges dominant narratives and invites the audience to reflect on the portrayal of self and other within Iran's historical and contemporary cultural dynamics.

Other, self and Nativism

The film explores nativism and the theory of otherness through historical anachronism, where elements from different temporal and cultural contexts are juxtaposed. These moments include a German film crew documenting Persepolis, tourists conversing with mythological characters, children in modern clothing engaging in disputes, and mythological figures visiting a historical museum. One striking example of this technique is that of the Germans filming Persepolis. Through a Lacanian lens, the German filmmakers directing their gaze at Persepolis, and the subsequent shift of perspective, dramatizes the dynamics of subjectivity and the "Other." Siyāvash and his companions, immersed in their discussions and indifferent to the foreign crew, represent the subjective experience within the Lacanian framework, creating an autonomy and self-contained reality. The focus then shifts to a portable radio playing a melodic song, prompting the Germans to request a dance from Sūdābah and Siyāvash. Their request becomes a symbolic turning point, shifting the gaze and transforming the Iranians from subjects to objects in the foreigners' perspective. Rahnamā visually highlights this shift through the contrast between black-and-white, representing Iranians' internal subjectivity in contrast to the vivid colours of the Germans' camera, signifying an external, foreign perspective.

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In Lacan's terms, the transition discussed above reflects the symbolic order in which Iranians become objects in the gaze of the Western filmmakers. The shift from black-and-white to colour can be seen as a move from an internal, subjective reality to an external, objective positioning. This transformation visually portrays the contradiction between the Western perception of Iran as the "Other" and the Eastern, nativist view of the country as the "self." Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, wherein the individual constructs their identity in relation to an external image, can be applied here. The Iranians, once the subjective subjects, become objects in the gaze of the Western filmmakers, highlighting the complex interplay between self-perception and external representation in the context of cultural identity.

Siavash in Persepolis is a self-reflexive metafictional film that deliberately cultivates narrative unreliability, which not only challenges conventional expectations of linear storytelling, but also engages in a self-conscious reflection on its own language, narrative structure, and cinematic form. This self-awareness, which becomes a defining characteristic of the film, blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality to encourage the audience to question the nature of the narrative and narration. Rahnamā's film goes beyond mere self-awareness, becoming a compelling investigation of the intricate interplay of art, literature, mythology, and lived experiences. The film serves as a canvas where these elements converge, each influencing and shaping the other. By transcending the traditional confines of filmmaking, the film prompts deeper contemplation of the relationship between creative expression and the human experience. Through this dynamic intersection of imagination, literature, and reality, Siavash in Persepolis invites viewers to embark on a thought-provoking journey that challenges the conventions of storytelling.

Rahnamā's minimalistic approach to Siyāvash's killing suggests a stark and direct portrayal of the brutality of the act. The depiction of Siyāvash's execution before Afrāsiyāb and

Garsīvaz is remarkably minimalistic. The executioner retrieves a dagger from its sheath, accompanied by the resonant clang of a cymbal. Abruptly, the scene transitions to a shot of a creek, where the haunting imagery of flowing blood unfolds. The film concludes with the shot of the plant nourished by Siyāvash's blood, sprouting resiliently in the arid desert. Stripping away elaborate details may serve to emphasize the raw and unfiltered nature of the violence, making it more impactful and evoking a visceral response from the audience. The film's conclusion with a plant growing in the desert, nourished by Siyāvash's blood, is laden with metaphorical significance. The plant, fuelled by Siyāvash's sacrifice, can be interpreted as a symbol of resilience, regeneration, and the potential for hope even in the face of tragedy.

Siavash in Persepolis contributed to the promotion of arthouse film language and culture in Iran by introducing experimental narrative structures, symbolic storytelling, and a poetic cinematic approach that challenged conventional filmmaking. The film reinforced the idea of cinema as a philosophical and artistic medium rather than just a tool for storytelling. It influenced a wave of filmmakers, such as Muhammad Rizā Aslānī (1943-) and Parvīz Kīmiyāvī (1939-), who embraced avant-garde techniques and non-linear narratives. Culturally, the film helped legitimize arthouse cinema in Iran, fostering a growing appreciation for experimental and intellectual filmmaking that became a defining feature of the Iranian New Wave.

Rahnamā's primary concern was to refine the language of cinema, crafting a form capable of articulating his philosophical, poetic, and artistic musings. As he remarked in an interview:

As evident in Siavash in Persepolis, I deliberately steer clear of conventional forms of cinematic language—a cinema that may be facile to produce but falls short of conveying the expressive depth I seek. The cinema that I like is one that looks for a higher goal. Some have every right to laugh at this cinema here or at

any other place of the world or even ridicule it. It is because they have other expectations from cinema. But, today, this type of cinema goes its own way very easily. Those who ridiculed it yesterday are now so curious about it.[15]

[15]Farīdūn Rahnamā, "Guftugū bā Nasīb Nasībī [In Conversation with Nasīb Nasībī]," Nigīn 82 (February 1971): 22.

Rahnamā's rejection of conventional cinematic forms is particularly evident in Siavash in Persepolis, where he subverts the linear storytelling of the Shāhnāmah by repeatedly cutting between past and present. This stylistic choice not only reflects Brechtian distancing techniques but also aligns with the cinematic approach of Jean-Marie Straub. Like Straub, Rahnamā employs a minimalist aesthetic, prolonged scenes, and a deliberate emphasis on the spoken word over visual spectacle. These choices disrupt passive spectatorship, encouraging intellectual engagement rather than emotional immersion. By doing so, Siavash in Persepolis fosters a critical reflection on history and mythology, challenging audiences to consider the interplay between cultural memory and contemporary identity.

Conclusion

Farīdūn Rahnamā's Siavash in Persepolis stands as a landmark in Iranian cinema, not only for its aesthetic and narrative innovations but also for its profound engagement with history, myth, and modernity. By reinterpreting the Siyāvash legend through a modernist cinematic lens, Rahnamā bridges the past and present, using film as a philosophical and political medium. His experimental approach—marked by non-linear storytelling, symbolic mise-en-scene, and a poetic engagement with sound and image—helped redefine the language of arthouse cinema in Iran and left a lasting imprint on the Iranian New Wave.

The film's enduring relevance nearly six decades after its release underscores its significance beyond its immediate historical and cultural context. Its themes of personal sacrifice, existential struggle, and the search for meaning in a fragmented world continue to resonate, making it a critical reference point for contem-

porary filmmakers and scholars alike. Moreover, Rahnamā's influence on directors such as Muhammad Rizā Aslānī, Parvīz Kīmiyāvī, and Nasīb Nasībī (1940-2004) demonstrates how his innovations shaped the trajectory of Iranian cinema, inspiring generations of filmmakers to push the boundaries of cinematic form and storytelling. The film's self-reflexive and metafictional style continues to resonate, not only as an artifact of Iran's cinematic past but as an enduring exploration of historical consciousness and national identity.

In a broader sense, Rahnamā's film exemplifies how cinema can function as both an aesthetic experiment and a philosophical inquiry. By reimagining Siyāvash as a sacrificial hero caught between ancient legend and modern existential crisis, the film offers a meditation on the fluidity of cultural narratives and their continued relevance in contemporary discourse.

Looking forward, further research could explore Rahnamā's impact in a global context, situating Siavash in Persepolis within the broader currents of modernist and avant-garde cinema or examine its relevance in the context of Iran's ever-evolving cultural and political landscape. Comparative studies with filmmakers such as Jean-Marie Straub (1933-2022) and Chris Marker (1921-2012), or Sergei Parajanov (1924-1990) could illuminate the film's place within an international cinematic dialogue on myth, history, and experimental narrative. Additionally, given the film's political and philosophical undertones, its relevance in contemporary Iran—where issues of cultural identity and artistic expression remain highly charged—merits deeper analysis.

Ultimately, Siavash in Persepolis is more than just an artifact of the past; it remains a living, evolving work that continues to challenge and inspire. Its ability to merge history with innovation, personal struggle with collective memory, myth with modernity, and form with philosophical depth ensures its place as a cornerstone of Iranian arthouse cinema and a timeless meditation on the human condition.