



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 7 Sayı: 35 Volume: 7 Issue: 35

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

THE PRESENCE OF THE QUR'AN AND HADITH IN THE FILMS OF MAJID MAJIDI*

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Abstract

Majid Majidi is a famous Iranian director who has won many awards around the world. However, although he has won many awards, what makes Majidi a particularly interesting and important Iranian filmmaker is his presentation of Islam in his movies. Unlike other Iranian filmmakers, Majidi does not tell his audience about Islamic values; nor does he quote the Qur'an or include the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith). Nevertheless, Islam penetrates all of his films in a subtle way and to such an extent that watching a Majidi movie is like reading the Qur'an. This essay will show the view of Islam Majid Majidi represents in his films and how he represents that view of Islam.

Keywords: Iranian Cinema, Majid Majidi, Islam, The Qur'an, Hadith, Religious Education .

The Presence of the Qur'an and Hadith in the Films of Majid Majidi

Majid Majidi was born to a middle class family in Tehran, Iran, on April 17, 1959 and started acting in amateur theater groups at the age of fourteen. After graduating from high school, Majidi studied at the Institute of Dramatic Art in Tehran. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Majidi began writing and directing short films. His first feature-length film, *Baduk*, which he wrote and directed, debuted in 1992. *Baduk* was presented at the Quinzaine of Cannes and won several awards at Tehran's Fajr Film Festival. Majidi's second feature-length film, *Children of Heaven* (1997), won the Best Picture award at the Montreal International Film Festival and was nominated for Best Foreign Film by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. *Baran* (2001) won the Best Picture award at the 25th Montreal World Film Festival and it received a nomination for the European Film Academy Award. Majidi's 2005 film, *The Willow Tree*, won four awards at the Fajr Film Festival.

Those awards, however, are not his most important legacy. The fact that he addresses Islam in such a subtle way that audiences feel they actually reading the Qur'an is his most important legacy. That is something other Iranian filmmakers have not yet accomplished.

At a recent conference, someone asked Majid Majidi, "Do you use Islamic messages intentionally in your movies?" Majidi answered, "I am trying to be a good Muslim. I try to practice Islam properly. If you are a good Muslim, the color of God dyes your movies."¹ What he means, of course, is that you do not have to try to promote Islam in your films and that you do not have to focus upon the Qur'an in your movies. If you try to be a good Muslim, Islam will find its way into your movies without any effort on your part.

Most of the values in Majidi's movies - truthworthiness, altruism, and fairness - are universal values. However, because Majidi is a devout Muslim, these values are linked with the Qur'an and Hadith. It is Majidi's unique way of revealing Islam in his films that makes him

* Bu çalışma TÜBİTAK 2219 Yurtdışı Doktora Sonrası Araştırma Bursu desteği ile yapılmıştır.

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¹ "The Conversation on Majidi Movies," Meridyen Foundation Siyer Workshop 2013, 20-21 April 2013.

such an interesting filmmaker, both within and outside of Iran. This essay will discuss Majid Majidi's view of Islam and reveal the methods he uses to reveal that viewpoint.

Baduk is the story of Jafar and his sister, Jamal, who are separated from their mother after their father dies in an accident. As the siblings are leaving their village, they are kidnapped and then sold. Jamal is sold to be the playmate of a Saudi prince and Jafar is sold to become a baduki, or smuggler. After a period of time, Jamal escapes his captors and begins his search to save his sister.

Baduk has the fewest religious messages among Majidi's movies. *Baduk* is a political movie rather than a religious one. Majidi ran into censorship problems after making this film because of the grim picture he presented of the child abuse among the refugees.²

Majidi's second feature-length film, *The Father*, begins to utilize scenes that correspond to elements of the Qur'an. It is necessary to look at Majidi's films individually to explore the totality of his religious messages. Therefore, that study begins with *The Father* and will continue with several other of his feature-length films.

1. *The Father* (1996)

Mehrollah is a boy of 14 when his father dies in an accident. Now, in order to support his family, Mehrollah finds a job in the city. Later, Mehrollah visits his family in the village, and suddenly learns that his mother has married a policeman and moved into the policeman's home. Mehrollah refuses to accept his new stepfather.

The stepfather is a caring man and he is kind and gentle with Mehrollah's little sisters. Yet, in spite of the stepfather's invitation for Mehrollah to live with him, his mother, and sisters, Mehrollah prefers to stay at his old house. Living alone, it soon becomes apparent that Mehrollah cannot properly care for himself because he becomes quite ill. At an earlier time, when Mehrollah first returns home and discovers that his mother had remarried, he went into a fit of rage and deliberately destroyed his stepfather's garden, broke the windows in his home, and insulted him. Now, however, at this time of great illness, the stepfather brings Mehrollah to his home to help him recover. Eventually, Mehrollah's health improves and he heartlessly steals his stepfather's service gun and flees to the city. Once again, the stepfather demonstrates kindness to Mehrollah. He heads to the city, finds Mehrollah, and brings him back home on his motorcycle. On the way home the stepfather's motorcycle breaks down and the two of them are stranded in the middle of a desert. Still, the stepfather is kind to Mehrollah. Slowly, Mehrollah begins to change. His heart softens and he gradually comes to accept his stepfather. At last, Mehrollah comes to genuinely care for his stepfather, and he is given the opportunity to save his life.

In this movie, the policeman is a good stepfather. Being inspired by the Qur'an, the stepfather treats Mehrollah's sisters with kindness. He speaks gently to the children; buys them new clothes, and hand feeds his adopted little daughters. He does all these kind acts that correspond to the instructions from the Qur'an regarding orphans: "Worship Allah and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, Al-Masakin (the poor), the neighbour who is near of kin, the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet), and those (slaves) whom your right hands possess. Verily, Allah does not like such as are proud and boastful"³; "And they give food, in spite of their love for it (or for the love of Him), to Miskin (poor), the orphan, and the captive"⁴, and "Therefore, treat the orphan without oppression."⁵

Majidi also gives his viewers a religious insight when Mehrollah offers his stepfather money for his sisters' expenses, and his stepfather rejects his money based on what the Qur'an

² Gonul Donmez Colin (2006). *Cinemas of the Other*, Oregon, USA: The Cromwell Press, p.60

³ Noble Qur'an, Surah Nisa, verses 36: All verse translations in the article are from: Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *English Translation of the Qur'an*, Kindle Edition.

⁴ Noble Qur'an, Surah Insan, verses 8

⁵ Noble Qur'an, Surah Duha, verses 9

says: "And give unto orphans their property and do not exchange (your) bad things for (their) good ones; and devour not their substance (by adding it) to your substance. Surely, this is a great sin."⁶

2. *Children of Heaven* (1997)

Children of Heaven is a stunning story of two siblings. The film starts with Ali fetching his little sister Zahra's shoes after a cobbler has repaired them. Ali then leaves them outside the grocery store when he goes in to buy some potatoes. While he is choosing potatoes, a garbage collector comes and picks up the shoes thinking they are garbage. When Ali discovers that the shoes are gone, he desperately tries to find them, but he cannot.

Because Ali's family live in a poor neighborhood and have financial problems, Ali is afraid to tell his parents that he lost Zahara's shoes. In secret, the siblings design a solution. They decide to share Ali's sneakers. Zahra will wear the sneakers to school in the morning, and Ali will wear them to his classes in the afternoon. Therefore, every day Ali must run very fast if he wants to be on time for his afternoon classes.

Later in this story, Ali competes in a children's region-wide foot race where the third-place prize is a pair of sneakers. Ali tries to win third place in the race, but he accidentally places first. Because he does not win the sneakers, Ali sadly turns to go home. Suddenly Ali's father appears holding two new pairs of shoes—one pair for Ali and one pair for Zahra..

This movie illustrates a specific verse in the Qur'an: ". . . it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you. Allah knows but you do not know."⁷ In the movie, Ali loses his sister's shoes so the two children need to share one-pair of sneakers between them. Now Ali must run very fast in order to be on time for school each day. At first glance, this seems like a very bad situation, but, in fact, all the running is beneficial for Ali. In fact, because of all his running, Ali is able to win the race. Later in life, Ali becomes a professional athlete.

There are other references to the Qur'an in this story. For instance, at the foot race Ali tries to win third place because he wants to win the sneakers. So when Ali accidentally wins first place, he becomes upset because he thinks this is a bad situation for his sister and him. However, while the crowd is watching the race, everyone sees Ali's father carrying new shoes for Ali and Zahra, and everyone knows it is a good situation for them. Ali becomes a double winner. He wins the first place prize, and he receives a new pair of sneakers from his father. Ali's victory illustrates another reference to the Qur'an: "And that man can have nothing but what he does."⁸ Ali wins first place because of all his running to get to school on time.

Being a good neighbor is also very important in Islam. In multiple hadith Prophet Mohammad says, "He will not enter Paradise whose neighbor is not secure from his wrongful conduct."⁹, and "Those who are full while their neighbors are hungry do not belong to us."¹⁰ "When you prepare the broth, add water to it and give that (as a present) to your neighbor."¹¹ In the movie, even though Ali's family is poor, they sent a bowl of soup to their old neighbors and thus the family practices Islamic values in their home.

Another important value in Islam is altruism. The Qur'an says: "And those who, before them, had homes (in Al-Madinah) and had adopted the Faith, love those who emigrate to them, and have no jealousy in their breasts for that which they have been given, and give them (emigrants) preference over themselves, even though they were in need of that and whosoever is saved from his own covetousness, such are they who will be the successful."¹² Ali and Zahra

⁶ Noble Qur'an, Surah Nisa, verses 2

⁷ Holy Qur'an, Surah Baqarah, verse 216

⁸ Holy Qur'an, Surah Najm, verse 39

⁹ Sahih Muslim, 15.

¹⁰ Hâkim, II, 15.

¹¹ Sahih Muslim, 1208.

¹² Holy Qur'an, Surah Hashr, verse 9

are altruistic because their parents' are altruistic in their actions toward others. For example, when Zahra sees her shoes on another girl's feet, she and her father and brother follow the girl to her home. They intend to take back Zahra's shoes. However, when they realize that the girl's father is blind and poor, they decide that they no longer want the shoes back.

A final value evident in this movie is trustworthiness. Prophet Mohammad's nickname was "Al-Ameen" (reliable, safe, truthful) which was known among not only the Muslims, but also among the Jews and polytheists living in Makka and Madina. Prophet Mohammad commands all Muslims to be truthful people. He says, "Whoever cheats us is not one of us."¹³ There is an instance in the movie when the father splits a large block of the mosque's sugar into small proportions to use for mosque's cafe. Zahra brings him a cup of tea and he asks Zahra to bring him the family's sugar bowl. Startled, Zahra says, "But you can have all this sugar." Tenderly, the father looks at Zahra and says, "This sugar belongs to the mosque; it has been given to us in trust." From this experience Zahra and Ali learn that you cannot take someone else's goods even if you need them. Finally, when Ali is at the wailing ceremony, he sees hundreds of shoes spread out at the entrance to the mosque. Gazing at all the shoes, Ali knows that no matter how much he might need shoes, he will never steal another person's pair of shoes. Ali knows how to be a truthful person.

3. *The Color of Paradise* (1999)

This story is about a blind boy named Mohammed who studies at a special blind school in Tehran. As the story begins, Mohammed's father is being forced reluctantly to bring Mohammed home for summer vacation. Mohammed's father is a widower who has recently found a woman whom he wants to marry and he worries that if the girl's family know that he has a blind son, they will not give their permission for the marriage. The reason the father wants Mohammed to stay at the school is because he does not want to be seen with Mohammed. Fortunately, however, Mohammed's grandmother and his sisters love him very much.

To ensure that Mohammed is not seen with him, the father sends Mohammed away to work as an apprentice to a blind carpenter. Later, when Mohammed's grandmother realizes why the father sent Mohammed away, she is filled with grief. With a broken heart she leaves home, becomes ill, and dies. The bride's family sees this as a bad omen and the wedding is canceled. Now the father feels regret for what he did, and so he decides to bring Mohammed back home.

Audiences can discover many references to the Islamic belief in *The Color of Paradise*. One of these references is, "Whoever does an atom's weight of good, will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil, will see it."¹⁴ These verses are primarily references to the afterlife. All people will receive either a reward or a punishment in the hereafter based on how they lived their lives on earth. Sometimes, however, Allah gives rewards or punishments in this life as well as the next. This movie shows Mohammad's reward and the father's punishment in this world.

In the beginning of the movie, Mohammad is waiting for his father who is in a meeting with the principal of Mohammed's school. Mohammed's father tells the principal that he does not want to take Mohammed out of school. Outside, Mohammed waits. Suddenly Mohammed hears the cries of a baby bird as it falls from its nest. A nearby cat also hears the cries of the bird and it quietly sneaks up to catch the bird and eat it. However, Mohammad saves the baby bird and gently carries it back to its nest in the tree. During this time, the principal has refused for a final time the father's demand that the school keep Mohammed during vacation time. The principal gives Mohammed to his father. Now, because Mohammed is kind and returns the baby bird to its nest, Allah eventually reunites Mohammad with his family, thus receiving a reward in this world.

¹³ Sahih Muslim, Faith, 164

¹⁴ Holy Qur'an, Surah Zilzal, verse 7 and 8.

In another scene, Mohammad's grandmother is furious at the father for sending Mohammed away. Angerly, she leaves the home as it is pouring down rain. While she is walking near a river, she finds a little fish washed up from the flood and stranded on the ground. She gently picks up the fish and carries it to the river. At this point, the father appears and begs his mother to come back home. So the grandmother returns home with her son. Allah has rewarded the grandmother for her kindness in saving the little fish.

Mohammed's father, on the other hand, is not kind and good. He does not want Mohammad around him for fear that the family of the woman he wants to marry will see Mohammad's blindness as a bad omen. Therefore, fearing their rejection, the father sends Mohammad away to be an apprentice to a blind carpenter. When the grandmother realizes what her son has done, she leaves home. Even when her son takes her back home, she becomes deathly ill, and dies a few days later. The bride's family then sees the death of the grandmother as a bad omen and call off the wedding. Thus, Mohammed's father is punished for his bad deeds.

As the grandmother lies dying on her bed, suddenly her face begins to glow and then she smiles. This symbolizes that the grandmother will go to paradise after she dies. The Qur'an says: "Indeed, those who have said, 'Our Lord is Allah' and then remained on a right course, on them the angels will descend (at the time of their death) (saying): 'Fear not, nor grieve! But receive the glad tidings of Paradise which you have been promised!'"

In this movie, Majidi tries to show that there are two ways to be handicapped-- Mohammad is physically handicapped, but his father is emotionally handicapped. The father may look normal, but he is not. Mohammad is blind, but he communicates in a different way.¹⁵ Although Mohammad is blind, he enjoys his life and has good relationships with people and with the universe. However, the father loses his faith and can only focus on the loss of his happiness.¹⁶ When the grandmother is leaving home, he yells at her, "What am I to do now? What have I done wrong to be stuck with taking care of a blind child for the rest of my life? Who will look after me when I am old and weak? Why doesn't that great God of yours help me out of this misery? Why should I be grateful to Him for the things I don't have? For my miseries? For a blind child? For the wife I have lost? I've put up with it for five solid years. What do you think you've done for me? That's why I am a poor and miserable man. I lost my father so early that I can hardly remember him! Who helps me? Who cares for me? Go wherever you like!"

As demonstrated in his tirade, the father is emotionally handicapped. This is what the Qur'an says about this type of situation, "And surely, We have created many of the jinns and mankind for Hell. They have hearts wherewith they understand not, they have eyes wherewith they see not, and they have ears wherewith they hear not (the truth). They are like cattle, nay even more astray; those! They are the heedless ones."¹⁷ and "Have they not travelled through the land, and have they hearts wherewith to understand and ears wherewith to hear? Verily, it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts which are in the breasts that grow blind."¹⁸

Unlike his father, Mohammad tries to communicate with and understand the universe. He wants to see Allah with his heart. In the best scene of the movie, Mohammad says to the carpenter, "You know nobody loves me. Not even Granny. They all run away from me because I'm blind. If I could see, I would go to the local school with the other children, but now I have to go to the school for the blind on the other side of the world. Our teacher says that God loves the blind more because they can't see, but I told him if it were so, He would not make us blind so that we can't see Him. My teacher answered, "God is not visible. He is everywhere. You can feel Him. You see Him through your fingertips. Now I reach out everywhere for God

¹⁵ Gonul Donmez Colin, *ibid*, p.61

¹⁶ Nacim Pak-Shiraz (2011). *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, London: I.B. Tauris, p.104-105.

¹⁷ Holy Qur'an, Surah Araf, verse 179.

¹⁸ Holy Qur'an, Surah Hajj, verse 46.

till the day my hands shall touch Him, and I will tell Him everything, even all the secrets in my heart.”

After this conversation, the audience understands why Mohammad touches pebbles in the water, rubs grains in his hands, and tries to decipher the voice of the woodpecker. Mohammad wants to read the universe in Braille, and he wants to find God.

At the end of the movie when Mohammad is lying unconscious by the sea, the audience can see his fingers trying to decipher sounds. He doesn't give up seeking God even as he faces his own death. Mohammed sees more with his heart than most people see with their eyes.

4. *Baran* (2001)

Baran is a unique love story between Baran and Lateef. Lateef is a 17 year old Turkish construction worker. When the story begins, an illegal Turkish construction worker named Najaf falls from a building and breaks his leg. The next day, another Afghan worker brings Rahmat, Najaf's son, to replace his father on the job. Memar, the forman of the construction site, realizes that Rahmat is too weak for hard work, so he decides that Rahmat and Lateef, who is a tea maker, should switch jobs. Being a tea maker is an easy job, and Lateef wants to keep that job rather than be a construction worker. Lateef becomes very angry and he tries to get back his old job by spying on Rahmat. Then one day Lateef is looking through a window spying on Rahmat when he is shocked to discover that Rahmat is a girl.

After this discovery, Lateef becomes protective and caring for Rahmat, and he eventually falls in love with her. One day at work there is a surprise visit by the Labor Inspectors, and they see Rahmat and realize there are illegal Afghan workers on the construction site. Subsequently, the company lays off all the Afghan workers, and now Lateef can no longer see Rahmat.

Unable to bear the grief of losing Rahmat, Lateef decides to find her, and he goes to her home village. Lateef finds Rahmat there and learns that her real name is Baran. Lateef quickly realizes that Rahmat is in very bad health caused by the work she must do in order to earn money for her family. Her job is to carry heavy stones from a river. Lateef combines all his salaries from Memar and sends it to Baran's father, Najaf. Soon Lateef learns that Najaf gave the money away to another needy Afghan named Sultan. Because Najaf no longer has any money, Lateef sells his identity card and gives all the proceeds to Najaf.

At the end of the movie, Lateef realizes that Najaf and his whole family need money in order to return to Afghanistan. In great sorrow and grief, Lateef goes to Najaf's home and helps him load the truck he is driving to Afghanistan.

Baran evidences very strong connections with Islam. First, there is Memar, the forman at the construction site. Memar is a fair-minded man, and he is not intimidated when the Iranians come to him demanding that they receive higher salaries than what the Afghan refugees receive because they are superior to the Afghans.

Memar rejects the Iranians' demand that they be paid more than the Afghans, and he gives everyone the same salary. Memar treats the Afghans, according to the Qur'an which says "Verily! Allah commands that you should render back the trusts to those, to whom they are due; and that when you judge between men, you judge with justice. Verily, how excellent is the teaching which He (Allah) gives you! Truly, Allah is Ever All-Hearer, All-Seer."¹⁹ And it also says, "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah and be just witnesses and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just: that is nearer to piety, and fear Allah. Verily, Allah is Well-Acquainted with what you do."²⁰

Islam also teaches that not wasting things like food, money, time, etc., is an important virtue. Baran (Rahmat) demonstrates that she has this virtue during her time working at the construction job. During that time Baran, she collects all the scraps of bread she can find and

¹⁹ Holy Qur'an, Surah Nisa, verse 58.

²⁰ Holy Qur'an, Surah Maidah, verse 8.

uses it to feed the pigeons. The Qur'an speaks to Baran's prudence and says, "O Children of Adam! Take your adornment (by wearing your clean clothes), while praying and going round (the Tawaf of) the Ka'bah, and eat and drink but waste not by extravagance, certainly He (Allah) likes not Al-Musrifun (those who waste by extravagance)." ²¹ and "And those, who, when they spend, are neither extravagant nor niggardly, but hold a medium (way) between those (extremes)." ²²

Altruism is another value demonstrated in *Baran*. Because Baran's father needs money, Lateef sends him all the money he has. Later, after Najaf receives Lateef's money, he gives it away to Sultan, another Afghan refugee who needs the money more than Najaf does. This is what the Qur'an says regarding these circumstances, "And those who, before them, had homes (in Al-Madinah) and had adopted the Faith, love those who emigrate to them, and have no jealousy in their breasts for that which they have been given (from the booty of Bani An-Nadir), and give them (emigrants) preference over themselves, even though they were in need of that. And whosoever is saved from his own covetousness, such are they who will be the successful." ²³

There are many verses in the Qur'an that teach about being generous; including, "Who is he that will lend to Allah a goodly loan?" This means that anyone who lends to the needy may expect a reward from Allah. Two other similar verses are: "Who is he that will lend to Allah a goodly loan so that He may multiply it to him many times? And it is Allah who decreases or increases (your provisions), and unto Him you shall return." ²⁴ "And if the debtor is in a hard time (has no money), then grant him time till it is easy for him to repay, but if you remit it by way of charity, that is better for you if you did but know." ²⁵ According to these verses, the money Lateef gave to Sultan is considered charity. So, when Sultan sends Lateef a note giving his address and stating that he intends to pay Lateef back for the money he received from Najaf, Lateef tosses the note away because he does not want to be repaid.

Baran is a strong reminder to the audience about a very famous story in Muslim literature called, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*. In this story, Layla and Kays meet at school and fall in love. When Layla's mother realizes that her daughter is in love, she forbids Layla to go to school anymore. Then Kays goes into the desert alone and composes poems about his love for Layla. Kays' bold efforts to woo Layla results in some locals giving him the new name of *Majnun* (possessed). When Layla asks her father for permission to marry Majnun, he refuses to grant it because he thinks that Majnun is mentally unstable. In the end, Layla finds Majnun in the desert and she hears Majnun say, "Who are you? I do not know you. You are not my Layla. My Layla lives inside me." Majnun attains divine love through human love.

In the beginning of the movie, *Baran*, Lateef is a superficial and shallow person. He has a mean heart and bad manners—He is aggressive toward others; often gets in fights with other workers; throws stones at birds, and is greedy. However, Lateef's bad character changes completely after he falls in love with Baran. Now he becomes a merciful and caring person. He no longer fights with others and he feeds Baran's pigeons after she leaves. Lateef becomes a generous person and sends all his earnings to Baran's father.

Lateef attains divine love in the same manner as Majnun. Near the end of the movie, Lateef looks at the tomb's curtain swaying in the breeze. This scene is almost the same as the scene when Lateef suddenly realized that Baran is a girl, and he falls completely in love with her. Now he hears sounds, voices of prayer, and he surrenders. In a way, he is renouncing Baran. When he goes, he leaves his cap behind. Resting on the cap are Baran's hairclip and one piece of her hair. The scene indicates that Lateef has gone beyond material things and become a

²¹ Holy Qur'an, Surah Araf, verse 31.

²² Holy Qur'an, Surah Furqan, verse 67.

²³ Holy Qur'an, Surah Hashr, verse 9.

²⁴ Holy Qur'an, Surah Baqarah, verse 245.

²⁵ Holy Qur'an, Surah Baqarah, verse 280.

spirit.²⁶

In the final scene of the movie, Baran is loading a truck that will soon leave for Afghanistan. As Baran walks to the truck, her shoe is caught in the mud. Lateef removes the shoe from the mud and tenderly returns it to Baran. As the truck takes Baran away, Lateef gazes lovingly at her footprint in the mud and smiles while the rain covers her footstep. This is such a poetic scene because Baran and Rahmat means "Rain". Rahmat also means "Mercy of God". This scene indicates that divine love (symbolically the rain) takes place material/mundane love (symbolically Baran's footstep).

5. *The Willow Tree* (2005)

Although blinded since childhood, Youssef is a well-known professor on famous Sufi Rumi's book *Masnavi*. Youssef enjoys a happy life with a devoted wife, a lovely daughter, and a successful career. Suddenly, one day his doctors tell him that he has a brain tumor. His life is in danger and he needs an operation. Because Youssef has a rich uncle who pays the expenses of a trip to France, Youssef is able to have the operation that may save his life. Youssef turns to Allah and prays, "If You save my life, I will be a devout believer of You." After the French doctors examine Youssef, they tell him that by having the operation, he has a very good chance of being able to see again.

The operation is a success and Youssef's eyesight is restored. Happily, Youssef returns home to Iran. Because Youssef can now see, he is dissatisfied with his wife's appearance and her beauty when he looks at her. Additionally, Youssef falls in love with a young girl—a distant relative. Youssef now decides that he is no longer satisfied with his old life; instead, he wants a new life, a new job, and a new wife. He quits his job at the university and tries to get closer with the young girl. Confronted with these circumstances, Youssef's wife leaves him.

After his wife is gone, Youssef discovers that the young girl is not in love with him and that she has a boyfriend. Soon thereafter, Youssef finds that he is again no longer able to see. Youssef has lost his eyesight, his wife, his daughter, and his happy life.

Looking more closely at the lessons unveiled at the beginning of the movie, Youssef learns he has a life-threatening brain tumor. He writes a letter to Allah, and cries out, "Have You forgotten all about me? I'm Youssef. I'm the one You deprived of the beauties of the world and who never complained. Instead of light and brightness, I lived in darkness and gloom and I didn't protest. I found happiness and peace in my small paradise. Are all these years of suffering not enough that You now want to cause me even more suffering? Will I come back from this trip to my loving family? Will this illness bring me to my knees? To whom should I complain about what You are doing to me? I beg of You to show me some compassion. Don't take my life away."

When Youssef goes to France, he learns from the French doctors that his tumor is not as threatening as his doctors back home had thought. In fact, the French doctors think there is hope that he will be able to see again. Fortified with the hope that he may be able to see again, Youssef prays and writes another letter to Allah. In this letter he says, "I know I was wrong. My biggest mistake was not knowing You well enough. Now I know that You didn't cross me off Your book of Compassion. You didn't forget about me. You're with me and protecting me. If only Your goodness could be complete. Now that You've taken my hand, I beg You to lead me all the way. More than anyone, I long for the light. If I come out of this darkness, I'll be with You forever." This is what the Qur'an says about Youssef's situation: "Say, who rescues you from the darkness of the land and the sea when you call upon Him in humility and in secret (saying), 'If He (Allah) only saves us from this, we shall truly be grateful.'" ²⁷ The Qur'an also says, "And whatever of blessings and good things you have, it is from Allah. Then, when

²⁶ Gönül Dönmez Colin, *ibid*, p. 62

²⁷ Holy Qur'an, Surah An'am, verse 63.

harm touches you, unto Him you cry aloud for help.”²⁸

In spite of Youssuf’s sincere promises and good intentions, once he has the operation and he can see again, he doesn’t keep them. When Youssef returns home, he sees a young girl named Pari and he falls in love with her. Now Youssef no longer appreciates his wife’s beauty and he hates his job and his life. Youssef wants a new life—he is a different man now and his values have changed. For instance, when Youssef sees a pickpocket at the subway, he merely watches as the pickpocket steals his victim’s money. Youssef is dispassionate and silent as he casually observes the pickpocket ply his trade. Youssef does not keep his promises to Allah.

This is a general human behavior about which the Qur’an says: “And when harm touches man, he invokes Us, lying down on his side, or sitting or standing. But when We have removed his harm from him, he passes on his way as if he had never invoked Us for a harm that touched him! Thus it seems fair to the Musrifun that which they used to do.”²⁹ In addition, the Qur’an says, “Then, when He has removed the harm from you, behold! Some of you associate with others in worship with their Lord (Allah).”³⁰

6. *The Song of Sparrows* (2008)

Karim works at an ostrich farm in Tehran, Iran. He has a contented life in his small home with his wife and three children.

One day, Karim’s daughter Haniyeh loses her hearing aid. Karim realizes that he needs to earn a great deal of money in order to purchase a new hearing aid for her. One day when Karim is bringing new ostriches to the farm, one ostrich escapes, and Karim is held responsible for the loss of the ostrich. Karim is fired from his job on the farm, and he goes to the city. In the city, Karim finds a job as a motorbike taxi driver. Driving the motorbike taxi, Karim begins to earn more money than he was earning on the farm. With his new job in the city, Karim sees many discarded items that he is able to bring home. Eventually, Karim’s new job changes him from the once generous and honest man he was.

As Karim continues to bring more and more discarded items from the city to his home, he becomes more and more greedy. Then one day when Karim is in his garden trying to arrange the mounting pile of junk that he has collected, the pile collapses injuring him. Karim’s leg is broken. As Karim recovers from his broken leg, he is finally able to spend more time with his family and it slowly causes him to realize that the most important thing in his life is his family—not wealth.

Karim is a devout person. When he was fired from his job at the ostrich farm, he trusts in Allah. Then Karim goes to Tehran to purchase a hearing aid for his daughter, and he finds a better job. Karim takes the new job as a reward because of his trust in Allah. There are many verses in the Qur’an about trusting in Allah, including, “If Allah helps you, none can overcome you; and if He forsakes you, who is there after Him that can help you? And in Allah (Alone) let believers put their trust.”³¹ and “Put your trust in the All-Mighty, the Most Merciful.”³² Another verse is, “Allah! None has the right to be worshipped but He, and in Allah (Alone), therefore, let the believers put their trust.”³³

Even though Karim and his family are poor, they share their food with their neighbors as the Qur’an instructs us to do: “Worship Allah and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the neighbour who is near of kin, the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet), and those (slaves) whom your right hands possess. Verily, Allah does not like such as are proud and boastful.”³⁴

²⁸ Holy Qur’an, Surah Nahl, verse 53.

²⁹ Holy Qur’an, Surah Yunus, verse 12.

³⁰ Holy Qur’an, Surah Nahl, verse 54.

³¹ Holy Qur’an, Surah Aal Imran, verse 160.

³² Holy Qur’an, Surah Shu’ara, verse 217.

³³ Holy Qur’an, Surah Taghabun, verse 13.

³⁴ Holy Qur’an, Surah Nisa, verse 36.

Because Karim's family members are devout Muslims, Allah protects them from sins as well. For example, one day a client accidentally gives Karim 2,000 tomans instead of 1,000. Karim realizes the mistake and tries to give back the 1,000 tomans. However, he is unable to return the tomans. As Karim turns around and starts back home, he buys some greengage plums for his children. He pays for them with the 2,000 tomans. On the way home on his motorcycle, the nylon bag holding the tomans tears and half of the plums fall out. Therefore, Karim ends up with plums worth only the 1,000 tomans that he had actually earned.

During the time Karim is earning so much money, he is slowly losing his values and his devotion to Allah. Daily he brings discarded items home from the city and collects them in his garden. As Karim becomes more and more greedy, he finds that he does not want to share what he has with his neighbors. One day, Karim's wife gives a beautiful blue door to a needy neighbor for her house. When Karim learns of it, he takes back the door while promising the neighbor another one. Karim's wife's behavior is according to the Qur'an, but Karim's behavior is not. This is what the Qur'an says about selfishness: "Those who spend their wealth in the cause of Allah, and do not follow up their gifts with reminders of their generosity or with injury, their reward is with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."³⁵ "O you who believe! Spend of the good things which you have (legally) earned, and of that which We have produced from the earth for you, and do not aim at that which is bad to spend from it, (though) you would not accept it save if you close your eyes and tolerate therein. And know that Allah is Rich (Free of all wants), and Worthy of all praise."³⁶

Karim is constantly torn between being devout and being greedy. One time Karim has a job of putting a refrigerator on his bike and moving it from one store to another. There are other bike riders doing the same, so Karim just follows them on his bike to the new store. Suddenly, Karim's bike breaks down and he has to stop and repair it. Unfortunately, he cannot find anyone to help him repair his bike. During this time, the other bikers just keep going until they are out of sight. The next day, Karim decides he will sell the refrigerator that does not belong to him and pocket the money. Unexpectedly, he sees some ostriches. He instantly remembers how he had lost his job on the farm because of an escaped ostrich, and he feels great empathy for the person who owned the refrigerator. Because Karim realizes that someone could lose his job if he keeps the refrigerator, Karim changes his mind about selling the refrigerator, and he returns the refrigerator to the store. The store manager is so happy to have the refrigerator back that he rewards Karim with 19,000 tomans. As Karim returns home, he spies a poor girl and he wants to give her a donation. Karim realizes he has 500 toman bank note in his pocket but he thinks that 500 tomans is too much to donate, so he decides not to give anything to the poor girl.

As Karim works in the city, he continues to collect junk and put it in his garden. One day he decides to arrange his stuff and he climbs on top of the pile of junk. Suddenly the pile of junk collapses and Karim's leg is broken and he is badly injured. The Qur'an advises that this world is only temporary and we should reach for eternal happiness. People are to work for the other world. The Qur'an says, "O you who believe! Let not your properties or your children divert you from the remembrance of Allah. And whosoever does that, then they are the losers."³⁷ . The Qur'an also says, "Beautified for men is the love of things they covet; women, children, much of gold and silver (wealth), branded beautiful horses, cattle and well-tilled land. This is the pleasure of the present world's life; but Allah has the excellent return with Him."³⁸

Karim's son is also greedy. In fact, the son wants to be a millionaire. So, he and some of his friends go into the business of selling fish. All of them work very hard, but everything is lost when the plastic aquarium holding the fish leaks and they lose all their fish. Feeling sad

³⁵ Holy Qur'an, Surah Baqarah, verse 262.

³⁶ Holy Qur'an, Surah Baqarah, verse 267.

³⁷ Holy Qur'an, Surah Munafiqun, verse 9.

³⁸ Holy Qur'an, Surah Aal Imran, verse 14.

and disappointed, the men return home from the city. On the way home, Karim sings a Turkish song. The song tells the theme of the movie:

The world is a lie.

The world is a dream.

The world became my punishment.

The world makes me sick.

Conclusion

Majid Majidi portrays Islam in a unique way in his movies. Majidi doesn't tell but rather shows Islamic values, Qur'an verses and Prophet Muhammad's sayings (Hadith). He doesn't use any verses in his movies as part of the script; he never gives a speech about values or preaches a sermon. He uses many references to the Qur'an and Hadith that are main sources of Islam. That is why watching a Majidi movie is like reading the Qur'an. It is a divine experiment for those who not only watch movies, but also read the message within them.

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