

Filmfarsi's Inception and the Indian Parsi Community

The Lor Girl (Dokhtar-e lor, 1934)

Filmfarsi is a term that is attributed to the popular Iranian films of Pahlavi era— from 1934, the year of the emergence of the first Persian talkie to the 1979's Revolution. First coined by Houshang Kavousi, a well-known Iranian film critic, Filmfarsi refers to the film productions that with poor filming-editing techniques aimed to entertain the audience with escapist trends. Filmfarsi by large implies the use of sexual tensions in addition to the fighting, dancing, and singing scenes. For Kavousi, Filmfarsi productions were nothing but some unworthy copies of Hindi, Egyptian and Turkish commercial films. Kavousi's term, however, was applied to many films, made after the arrival of sound films in Iran in the period 1950-1979, which according to a no-official statistics could be aroused to some 1000 titles.

Broadly considered the epitome of low culture, Filmfarsi conversely enjoyed huge popularity in Iran. From our historical perspective of the present, it should be considered an important phenomenon of Iranian popular culture in the dawn of the entrance of modernity. My first approach to the Filmfarsi, therefore, is based on its formation years, when it arose as a response to the historical needs of the Iranian people in contact with a new way of life and modern technologies. In this regard, my focus will be on the very origin of the film phenomenon, as the result of professional contacts between Iran and India in the context of the first sound film productions. This approach leads us to the role of Parsi community in India—Persian Zoroastrian diasporic communities who migrated to India in the 8th century—in forging the first scaffolds of the sound film. Experimenting with sound, the first Parsi film producers followed the quite popular Parsi theatres in India, which were remarked fundamentally by a “mixture of realism and fantasy, music and dialogue, narrative and spectacle and stage ingenuity, all combined within the framework of melodrama” (Goklusing and Dissanayake, 1998: 17). The huge popularity of this theatrical method has been proved in India since the late 19th century. The adaptation of a scenic hit called *Alam Ara* in 1931 by Ardeshir Irani results in a turning point in the history of film in India. Based on the same combination of different scenic/dramatic genres of Parsi theatres—fantasy, melodrama, action, and musical—the film becomes a great attraction for Indian people at the time and makes, henceforward an aesthetical pattern that persists through the time.

Alam Ara also plays a structural role in Iranian cinema. As it will be argued, in the very moment of its filming, the historical circumstances make possible the contact between Abdolhosein Sepanta—an Iranian intellectual who visits India—and Ardeshir Irani. This contact resulted in the production of the first Iranian talkie, *The Lor Girl (Dokhtar-e lor, 1934)* in Ardeshir Irani installations in Bombay, following also Parsi theatres patterns and *Alam Ara* aesthetical structures.

It will be explored also how important was the relationship between Iranian intellectuals and the Parsi communities of India to the entrance of sound films in Iran and particularly to the formation of Filmfarsi. It should be recalled that India has a special place in the history of Iranian modern media. The first Persian newspaper, *Mirat ol Akhbar* has been published in India in 1822, and undoubtedly Bombay has a special place for Iranian memories because it is the city in which Sadeq Hedayat's *Blind Owl (Buf-e kur)* one of the most important Iranian modern novels was published first in 1937. But

India's role in the entrance of modernity in Iran follows a large history of relations between the two nations. The Parsi community was crucial to the formation of this network of exchange and relationship, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, when public attentions in Iran have been drawn to them, as an original ancestor of the Iranian nation and Persian identity. Nationalism as the dominant ideology in Pahlavi I era was vital to the emergence of this nativist quest for the nation's origins. In this context, both Sepanta and Hedayat visit India during the 1930s to follow their interest in studying Pahlavi, an ancient pre-Islamic language of Iran, before Bahramgore Anklesaria and Dinshah Irani Salister, eminent Parsi members in Bombay and two of the most important Iranologist at the time. The years of staying in India for both Hedayat and Sepanta were quite fruitful: Hedayat wrote *Blind Owl* under the impact of his visit to India, becoming to the most powerful voice of his generation, and Sepanta co-produced in Bombay with his Parsi colleague Ardeshir Irani, the first sound film in Persian, *The Lor Girl*, one decade before the sound film productions were possible in his own country.