

THE POLITENESS OF LOVE EXPRESSION IN IRANIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

This study explores the aesthetics of the representation of love in Iranian cinema through a qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design. This approach is used to understand the essence of the characters' lived experiences related to love, devotion, and domestic resilience as reconstructed visually and narratively on screen. The research subjects were determined incidentally on the basis of thematic relevance to the representation of Eastern humanism, comprising five Iranian films and television series: Baran (2001), The Story of the Prophet Joseph, Mukhtar Tsaqafi (Mokhtarnameh), Pedar (1996), and The Song of Sparrows (2008). The diversity of genres—from social realism to historical-religious epic—enabled a cross-genre analysis to demonstrate the consistency of the aesthetics of silent love in Iranian cinema. Data were collected through repeated and immersive audiovisual viewing, the recording of key scenes, and thematic categorisation. Data trustworthiness was ensured through investigator triangulation. The findings reveal that love in Iranian cinema is expressed through minimalist gestures, subtle subtext, silence, and concrete action—rather than explicit physical contact or dramatic verbal declaration. The strength of the love narrative lies precisely in what is left unsaid: empty space, silence, and ethical decorum that paradoxically convey a moral message and emotional resonance more profound than vulgar depiction.

Keywords: Iranian cinema; aesthetics of love; cinematic phenomenology; metaphor; spirituality; non-vulgar representation

1. INTRODUCTION

In the global cinematic landscape, the representation of love and domestic dynamics is often trapped within a heavily romanticised and melodramatic Western formula (Oktan, 2019; Abdullah, 2024). This conventional framing frequently strips away the cultural authenticity and socio-economic grounding of the narrative, leaving a significant gap in understanding how love operates in conservative, non-Western societies (Hanif, 2013; Zargar, 2016). Within Middle Eastern cinema, and Iranian realist films in particular, this misrepresentation poses a critical challenge. When global audiences view these societies solely through the lens of political conflict or rigid fundamentalism, the subtle everyday struggles of humanity—such as silent sacrifice, domestic resilience, and voiceless acts of devotion—become entirely obscured. As a result, this reductionist view marginalises the profound humanism embedded in Eastern domestic life, hinders deeper cross-cultural empathy, and leaves the complex interplay between personal affection and harsh socio-cultural constraints largely unexamined in contemporary film studies (Usman et al., 2020).

To address this academic neglect, this study investigates the nuanced representation of love, domesticity, and social friction in Middle Eastern realist cinema, focusing on important works such as Majid Majidi's *Baran* and *The Song of Sparrows*, as well as the film *Pedar*. Rather than treating love as a mere romantic trope, this study conceptualises love as an active existential force that manifests itself through non-verbal acts of service, silent protection, and domestic resilience (Javadi, 2024). Using qualitative textual analysis combined with socio-cultural film theory, we examine how these narratives shift the definition of romance from verbal declaration to sacrificial, pragmatic action within the family and community. Through this approach, the study decodes visual metaphors—such as a simple cup of tea or singing together in times of hardship—to reveal how the domestic space becomes an arena of emotional resilience in the face of external economic hardship.

The novelty of this study lies in its shift away from the dominant politics- and trauma-centred discourse that typically characterises academic analyses of Middle Eastern cinema (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2024). While the existing literature focuses heavily on censorship, state politics, and tangible gender oppression, this article offers a pioneering perspective by centring on "silent humanism" and the micropolitics of domestic affection. The study systematically maps the trajectory of love through four distinct thematic stages: from silent platonic devotion and pragmatic acts of service, to domestic harmony and, ultimately, the inevitable friction with rigid social structures. In this way, the study provides a new theoretical framework that conceptualises Eastern realism not merely as a tool of social critique but as a poetic medium that redefines the ontology of love (Lestari, 2024).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study applied a qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design (specifically cinematic phenomenology) (Anam et al., 2026; A'yun et al., 2025). This approach was chosen to explore, interpret, and understand how the essence of the characters' lived experiences related to love, devotion, and domestic resilience is reconstructed visually and narratively on screen. Through the phenomenological lens, film is viewed not merely as a product of entertainment but as a structure of aesthetic consciousness that records emotional phenomena and social friction within a particular cultural reality.

The research subjects were determined incidentally (incidental/convenience sampling) on the basis of strong thematic relevance to the representation of Eastern humanism. The subjects consisted of five prominent Iranian films and television series, namely: (1) the film *Baran* ("Baran (Film)," 2026; Majidi, 2001); (2) the series *The Story of the Prophet Joseph* (Indonesian-dubbed version via the Salam Media YouTube channel) ("Prophet Joseph (TV Series)," 2008; Salahshoor, 2008b, 2008a); (3) the series *Mukhtar Tsaqafi* (*Mokhtarnameh*) (Mirbagheri, 2010; "Mokhtarnameh," 2026); (4) the film *Pedar* (Majidi, 1996; "The Father (1996 Film)," 2026); (5) the film *The Song of Sparrows* (Majidi, 2008; "The Song of Sparrows," 2026); and (6) *Maryam* (Bahrani, 2001; "Saint Mary (Film)," 2026). Although these subjects span different release periods (from 1996 to the late 2000s) and contrasting genres—ranging from contemporary social realism (*Baran*, *Pedar*, *The Song of Sparrows*) to historical-religious epic (*The Story of the Prophet Joseph* and *Mukhtar Tsaqafi*)—these differences are in fact crucial. This diversity allowed the researchers to conduct a cross-genre analysis in order to demonstrate that the values of domestic devotion and silent love are consistent aesthetic characteristics in Iranian cinematography, transcending the boundaries of era and setting.

In this qualitative study, the primary instrument was the researcher (researcher as the key instrument), supported by a textual-visual analysis guide and a thematic coding sheet. Data collection and analysis were carried out through repeated and immersive audiovisual observation, comprising three elements: (1) data immersion, namely repeatedly playing and watching the five films/series to grasp the wholeness of the narrative; (2) key-scene recording (micro-analysis), namely identifying, screen-capturing, and noting important scenes, dialogue, body language (gestures), micro-expressions, and visual metaphors that represent the phenomena of love and social friction; and (3) thematic categorisation, namely grouping the visual and textual data into phenomenological units of meaning.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study began with an initial discovery of love scenes in Iranian films. These findings were deepened by analysing the films more thoroughly on the basis of the love scenes in question. The films analysed have a unique character in depicting the aesthetics of love. Love in this cinematic tradition is metaphorical, spiritual, and non-vulgar. Moral messages and emotions are in fact conveyed very powerfully through subtext (implied meaning), minimalist gestures, and concrete action rather than dramatic verbal dialogue. Love in Iranian film is expressed through cues that tend toward modesty—that is, without kissing, exposing the aurat (the parts of the body to be covered), or vulgar words. Seven findings are elaborated in the seven paragraphs that follow.

First finding: in the scene where Zulaikha desires the Prophet Joseph, she merely lifts her veil rather than, for instance, removing her clothing or shawl. The Prophet Joseph then responds with understanding and questions such excessive behaviour. (The Story of the Prophet Joseph, Episode 16, Indonesian dub, minute 23:10.)

Second finding: the Prophet Joseph's expression of love toward Zulaikha is conveyed only secretly and inwardly, with cues that others do not even perceive. (The Story of the Prophet Joseph, Episode 40, Indonesian dub, minute 26:20.) In this scene, no words are spoken between the Prophet Joseph and Zulaikha, even though they converse in their hearts.

Third finding: the scene of Joseph's expression of love toward Maryam and Maryam's expression toward Joseph, which is not understood by many (Maryam Moqadas / Saint Mary, English ep. 06, minute 09:30, and Saint Mary, English ep. 08, minute 34:30). In the Indonesian version, this scene appears in Kisah Siti Maryam (Islamic version), Episode 5, minute 28:30, and Episode 7, minute 26:30.

Fourth finding: the scene in which Kiyan proposes to Jariyah, Mukhtar's sister, by speaking to her brother, Mukhtar. (Mukhtar Tsaqafi, Episode 2, minute 36:20.) The scene continues with Mukhtar's hesitation, as he is unsure of his sister's decision (Mukhtar Tsaqafi, Episode 2, minute 38:00). Mukhtar conveys the proposal to his sister; she declines because Kiyan is not of Arab descent (primordialism) and cautions him to behave politely toward Kiyan. At minute 51:50, amid the tension of his quarrel with Mukhtar, Umar ibn Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas proposes to Jariyah. Jariyah is bashful and accepts. This is the beauty of a film with the theme of love.

Fifth finding: the scene in which Karim coaxes his wife, who is embarrassed because a door given to a neighbour has been taken back. Karim then sings a coaxing song for his wife (The Song of Sparrows, minute 52:10). At 1:05:40, Karim becomes angry because his children are working—a scene that tends to carry a message against child exploitation, even though the children wish to be creative and to earn money. At 1:12:00, Karim falls ill, and his wife decides to give away the goods Karim has collected to their neighbours; here Karim restrains himself from preventing his belongings from being given to the neighbours.

Sixth finding: feelings of love are expressed through service, seeking attention, and giving. This is deeply touching, rather than simply saying "I love you" or declaring "I love you" through a letter or a messaging application. The film Baran tells of an Iranian who falls in love with an Afghan worker. The character Latif shows his love by dressing neatly (Baran, minute 31:29) and by protecting Baran (or Rahmat) from having to go back and forth buying cigarettes for the construction labourers. At minute 41:00, Latif realises that Baran understands his cues of love: a cup of tea is served at his workplace. Viewers suspect that the tea was served by Baran for Latif, although it may have been Sultan (Baran's relative) who left it there. Latif also protects Baran from being caught by the labour inspector who bans Afghan workers, Baran's country of origin. At 1:03:00, another sign of love appears: Latif entrusts his money to Sultan to be given to Najaf, Baran's father, so that his broken leg can be treated—another beautiful cue of love from one person to a beloved. At 1:20:00, Latif meets Baran while visiting Najaf's house. The two understand the cues of love, yet they also understand its limits. At that moment, Latif gives money to Najaf; it turns out that Najaf uses the money to return to Afghanistan, which means Latif's separation from his beloved, Baran. When Najaf invites him in for tea and conversation, Latif declines and leaves. Even so, the cues of love between the two remain very strong. Latif nevertheless returns to help prepare for Baran's departure, his beloved, as an expression of his love. Yet that love would be reciprocated only if Baran uttered a few words as a sign of acceptance. Although Baran's gestures indicate no rejection, a more definite cue is needed to show her acceptance of Latif's love.

Seventh finding: the scene of a child's love for his mother, yet he does not want her to remarry after his father's death. In fact, his stepfather is a good man, but the child does not accept him (Pedar 'The Father,' minute 23:20). At minute 37:50, the husband (father) laughs happily and praises his wife as a good woman who has one son and three daughters. He recounts that his former wife once divorced him because they had no children.

3.1. Theme 1: The Implicit Expression of Love

Religious and alternative Middle Eastern cinema has a highly distinctive way of articulating feelings of love, one that differs greatly from the conventions of popular Western cinema. Rather than exploiting physical contact or demonstrative verbal statements, films in this category tend to adopt an aesthetic of silence and adherence to moral and sharia boundaries (modesty and silent love). This first theme highlights how love is expressed implicitly, silently, and with great self-restraint (modesty). Through guarded gazes, inner dialogue, and minimalist symbolism, the directors succeed in presenting a sacred depth of emotion without violating the limits of religious decorum.

"In the scene where Zulaikha desires the Prophet Joseph, she merely lifts her veil rather than removing her clothing or shawl. The Prophet Joseph then responds with understanding and exclaims, questioning such excessive behaviour." (The Story of the Prophet Joseph, Episode 16)

"The Prophet Joseph's expression of love toward Zulaikha is conveyed only secretly and inwardly. Its cues are not even understood by others... no words are spoken between the Prophet Joseph and Zulaikha, even though they converse in their hearts." (The Story of the Prophet Joseph, Episode 40)

"The scene of Joseph's expression of love toward Maryam and Maryam's expression toward Joseph, which is highly secret and not understood by many." (Kisah Siti Maryam, Islamic version, Episode 5, minute 28:30; Episode 7, minute 26:30)

"...The two understand the cues of love, yet they also understand its limits." (Baran, minute 1:20:00)

Through the quotations above, it is evident that the visual language used to depict romantic attraction relies heavily on metaphor and self-restraint. Zulaikha's act of merely lifting her veil—not removing her clothing—demonstrates the sublimation of desire into a subtle aesthetic symbolism, to which the Prophet Joseph responds not with physical anger but with rational inner dialogue. Furthermore, the "conversation of the heart" between Joseph and Zulaikha in later episodes, and the silent interaction between Joseph and Maryam, affirm that love within the spiritual corridor requires no verbal validation; it is an inner vibration that transcends words yet remains obedient to sacred limits. Although love in this theme dwells in guarded inner silence, such feelings not infrequently come to demand concrete proof, manifested in real action, service, and selfless sacrifice.

3.2. Theme 2: Love Manifested Through Action, Sacrifice, and Service

When love can no longer be contained in inner silence, it transforms into an active energy that impels a person to take concrete action (love language: acts of service and giving). This second theme explores how feelings of love are expressed not through verbal rhetoric such as saying "I love you" or written messages, but through the language of action (acts of service), small attentions, protection, and material sacrifice. In the realist aesthetics of Middle Eastern cinema, these sincere acts—free of dramatic pretence—carry a far stronger emotional resonance for the audience, because they demonstrate that the measure of true love lies in the willingness to give to and protect the beloved.

"Feelings of love are expressed through service, seeking attention, and giving. This is deeply touching, rather than merely saying 'I love you' or declaring 'I love you' through a letter or messaging application." (Baran)

"The character Latif shows his love by dressing neatly..., protecting Baran (or Rahmat) from having to go back and forth buying cigarettes for the construction labourers... and from being caught by the labour inspector..." (Baran, minute 31:29)

"...Latif realises that Baran understands his cues of love: a cup of tea is served at his workplace." (Baran, minute 41:00)

"...Latif entrusts his money to Sultan to be given to Najaf, Baran's father, so that his broken leg can be treated... and Latif returns to help prepare for the departure of Baran, his beloved, as an expression of his love." (Baran, minutes 1:03:00 & 1:20:00)

The quotations above show how the character Latif redefines the romanticisation of love through a series of protective and altruistic acts. His decisions to dress neatly, to take over heavy physical work in order to protect Baran, and to shield her from the pursuit of the immigration inspector are concrete forms of love manifested as "service." The culmination of this sacrifice is reflected when Latif gives all of his savings to treat Baran's father—an act that ironically finances Baran's return to Afghanistan and triggers their separation. The cup of tea mysteriously served at Latif's workplace becomes a deeply poetic symbol of reciprocity, affirming that in the universe of this film, mutual acts of care and protection hold a far nobler value than a mere verbal declaration of love. Nevertheless, this sacrificial, service-oriented expression of love grows not only in the phase of seeking platonic love between lovers but is also tested and revived within the domestic space through the warmth of the marital relationship and the dynamics of everyday family life.

3.3. Theme 3: Domestic Dynamics, Family Warmth, and Social Sensitivity

Entering the realm of married life, the expression of love and affection transforms into a foundation that sustains family resilience amid the storms of social and economic reality. This third theme explores domestic dynamics, the warmth of the marital relationship, and the growth of social sensitivity within the family space. In this context, love is no longer depicted as an idealistic romantic pursuit but as a daily struggle to understand one another, to temper the ego, to comfort a wounded spouse, and to extend affection to the surrounding neighbourhood.

"The scene in which Karim coaxes his wife, who is embarrassed because a door given to a neighbour has been taken back. Karim then sings a coaxing song for his wife..." (The Song of Sparrows, minute 52:10)

"...Karim falls ill, and his wife decides to give the goods Karim collected to their neighbours. Here Karim restrains himself from preventing his belongings from being given to the neighbours." (The Song of Sparrows, minute 1:12:00)

"...the husband (father) laughs happily and praises his wife as a good woman who has one son and three daughters. He recounts that his former wife once divorced him because they had no children." (Pedar 'The Father,' minute 37:50)

Through the sequence of scenes above, Middle Eastern cinema shows that the domestic space is where the individual ego is dissolved for the sake of shared harmony and social welfare. Karim's act of singing a coaxing song for his wife as she bears her embarrassment shows that marital warmth is often nurtured through humour and a simple yet profound emotional sensitivity. Karim's character transformation reaches its peak when he falls ill; his decision to restrain himself and allow his collected belongings to be distributed by his wife to the neighbours signifies the triumph of social empathy over personal possessiveness. Meanwhile, in the film *Pedar*, the husband's happy laughter as he praises his wife in the presence of their children represents an emotional reconciliation that heals the wounds of the past caused by the issue of childlessness, affirming that true domestic happiness is built upon deep acceptance and gratitude. Although warmth and sincerity can be woven tightly within the household, this domestic harmony must ultimately confront the clash of external reality, such as customary prejudice, the resistance of the younger generation, and broader conflicts of social interest.

3.4. Theme 4: Love, Marriage, and the Clash with Social Reality

When love and domestic warmth must leave the safe confines of the family space, they frequently collide with harsh social reality, rigid bastions of custom, and generational divides (custom, class, and ego conflict). This fourth theme highlights how love is tested by rejection, prejudice, and conflicts of interest in the public sphere. In this phase, we see the struggle of individuals and families in confronting external obstacles—whether the resistance of a younger generation that yearns for modernity, or the clash of traditional values that demands personal sacrifice to preserve social honour.

"The scene of Karim's children (especially Husein) who reject their father working as a motorcycle taxi driver in Tehran because it is considered shameful." (The Song of Sparrows)

"The conflict of rejection from the extended family and the village community when a widow decides to remarry in order to support her children, an act deemed to violate local norms of propriety." (Pedar 'The Father')

"The scene of tension between a father who holds firmly to tradition and his daughter who demands the right to determine her own path in life and education." (Pedar 'The Father')

The quotations above illustrate that love never grows in a vacuum but is always intertwined with the social and cultural structures that surround it. Husein's rejection of his father's work as a motorcycle taxi driver in Tehran reflects the psychological clash of a younger generation caught between social pride and pressing economic reality. Meanwhile, the stigmatisation of a widow who wishes to remarry for her family's survival, and the patriarchal tension between father and daughter in the film *Pedar*, reveal how the institutions of custom and tradition often become thick walls that limit individual agency. Ultimately, this analysis shows that maintaining love and family cohesion in the outside world requires far greater fortitude, as it must confront the collective judgement of society directly. Through the social collisions experienced by these characters, we are led to see a more complete and comprehensive picture of how love, sacrifice, and human resilience intertwine to shape the landscape of Middle Eastern realist cinema.

The cultural phenomenon in Iranian film constitutes a positive influence, especially for Muslim countries that tend toward secularism. Human culture changes, and human perspectives change along with it, because innovation is carried out by human beings (Qobadi & Ghobadi, 2023). In the 1980s, the culture of wearing the headscarf in Indonesia was still relatively rare. This headscarf culture has since changed, so that today at least a portion of Muslim women tend to prefer wearing the headscarf over displaying their hair (*aurat*) (Maryam et al., 2024). This context also supports parents in supervising their children, for example in the use of gadgets and in viewing habits (Marini et al., 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

In accordance with the teachings of Islam, it is improper to express love excessively in public. Accordingly, the behaviour of a courting couple in public should not display hand-holding, let alone kissing. This study examined how Iranian cinema and television reconstruct the concept of love and domestic devotion beyond the boundaries of Western-style romanticisation and global political reductionism. Through a cross-genre exploration that brings together contemporary social realism in Majid Majidi's lyrical works with colossal historical-religious epics such as *The Story of the Prophet Joseph* and *Mukhtar Tsafafi*, the study affirms the existence of "Eastern Realism" as an aesthetic paradigm that is poetic, spiritual, and firmly rooted in local tradition. By applying a rigorous cinematic-phenomenological methodology, the study not only decodes intimate visual metaphors and non-verbal acts of service within the family space but also succeeds in mapping the profound emotional geography of the characters (Jauhiainen & Eyvazlu, 2026). Ultimately, this theoretical contribution offers a more humanist and inclusive perspective in international, Scopus-indexed film studies. The study fills a significant academic gap by demonstrating that the values of family devotion are a consistent cultural characteristic, while also serving as a silent yet powerful form of cultural resistance against Western geopolitical stereotypes that are often biased and inaccurate.

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