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Representations of Afghans in the Iranian Cinema

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Abstract

This article explores the shifting cinematic representation of Afghans in Iranian fiction films from the 1980s to the mid-2020s, focusing on their social, spatial, and gendered positioning. Drawing on geocritical, feminist, and postcolonial frameworks, it conducts qualitative content analysis of 34 key films to trace how portrayals of Afghans evolved in relation to Iranian state policies and societal attitudes toward Afghans in Iran. Early cinematic depictions largely confined Afghans, in this case, all men, to marginal rural or suburban spaces in Iran, portraying them as undocumented laborers with limited agency, while Afghan women were strikingly absent. As national policies moved from a posture of welcome to repatriation and, more recently, partial integration, filmic narratives shifted. Afghans increasingly appeared in films in urban, domestic, and public settings, with more nuanced representations of gender and generational experiences. Since the 2010s, Afghan women have gained visibility in selected Iranian films as complex figures challenging both Iranian and Afghan patriarchal norms. Post-2015 films also explore aspirations and mobility of second- and third-generation Afghans—toward Europe or back to Afghanistan—revealing imaginaries of identity and belonging. Cinematic developments reflect broader socio-political transformations and contribute to public discourse on immigration, integration, and social change in contemporary Iran.

Keywords

cinema, Afghan, Iran, film, representation

Introduction

Iranian cinema is both a nationally celebrated cultural form and a globally acclaimed art. Iranian filmmakers enjoy strong domestic audiences and sustained international recognition, reflected in multiple Academy Award nominations and wins across categories, as well as major prizes, such as the Oscar, Golden Globe, Golden Bear, Golden Lion, Palme d'Or, and Sundance Awards.

Situated at the intersection of social, political, national, and international forces, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been shaped by evolving state–society dynamics. Scholars emphasize its close engagement with political change and ideological shifts (Atwood, 2016; Démy-Geroe, 2020; Mottahedeh, 2008; Naficy, 2012a, 2012b; Partovi, 2024; Rekabtalaei, 2019; Sadr, 2006).

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While authorities have not usually mandated specific topics, film content is routinely reviewed to ensure consistency with official political, social, and religious values. As renowned scholar of Iranian cinematography Anne Démy-Geroe (2020, p. 11) observes, Iranian cinema is often "the result of or the response to government policy"—at times nurtured and at times censored (see also Poudeh & Reza Shirvani, 2008, p. 323). This negotiation between artistic freedom and ideological oversight has produced a dynamic field in which films variously reflect, reinforce, or contest dominant narratives (Tapper, 2002). There are complex behind-the-scenes negotiations between film directors and the national authorities, which constitute a major part of the workings of film censorship in Iran (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2009). Iranian film scholar Pedram Partovi (2024) further indicates that the Islamic revolution in the late 1970s entailed the Islamization of mass media, including state-supported "moral cinema" and the Sacred Defense cinema of the 1980s on the Iran–Iraq War. In the war film genre of the late 1980s and early 1990s, women remained invisible, desexualized, and submissive (Derayeh, 2010). From the 1990s onward, the state at times supported or tolerated art-house currents, rehabilitating key figures, such as Abbas Kiarostami, who had built on pre-revolutionary experiments, such as early-1970s' "dark realism."

Despite a substantial literature on Iranian filmmaking, portrayals of Afghans remain comparatively understudied, even though Afghans have been a large and visible presence in Iran since the late 1970s—numbering in the millions over decades and reaching an estimated 3 to 4 million in the 2020s (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, 2025). Their legal, social, and spatial positions are diverse, ranging from recognized refugees and authorized labor migrants to undocumented residents. Public and state responses regarding them have alternated between support and marginalization. Any analysis of Afghans on screen must therefore be situated within broader post-revolutionary politics and media regulation (Démy-Geroe, 2020; Naficy, 2012a, 2012b; Sadr, 2006; Siavoshi, 1997).

This study examines evolving representations of Afghans in Iranian fiction film, focusing on social roles, spatial positioning, and gendered portrayals. It situates these depictions within shifting state policies toward Afghans and the wider negotiation between artistic autonomy and censorship, as well as societal perceptions of Afghan communities in Iran. In doing so, the analysis clarifies how Iranian cinema constructs and at times contests ideas of Afghan identity, nationhood, and otherness.

This article investigates the following key research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How are the spatial and gendered portrayals of Afghans in Iranian fiction films connected to Iranian national policies toward Afghans?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do Iranian films represent Afghan women?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Finally, how were second- and third-generation Afghans in Iran depicted in the mid-2010s in terms of identity formation and senses of belonging?

Following this introduction, the article introduces the theoretical framework, drawing from geocriticism, feminist film theory, and postcolonial critique. Together, these interdisciplinary perspectives collectively provide lens for analyzing how immigrant identities are constructed spatially, socially, and visually in film and how these constructions engage with broader structures of power, exclusion, and belonging.

The "Material and Methods" section illustrates 34 Iranian fiction films selected for their evident inclusion of Afghan characters and narratives. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine the films' thematic and visual strategies in representing Afghans. The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions: the relationship between state policy and cinematic discourse; the spatial, social, and gendered encoding of Afghan figures; and the ways these films articulate or obscure the identities and belonging of Afghan individuals, including the youth, within Iranian society.

The article traces the co-evolution of Iranian cinema and society since the 1980s, showing how fiction films responded to shifting socio-political conditions, and especially in relation to

Afghans in Iran. It argues that on-screen representations track three policy phases: a **welcoming** period (1980s–early 2000s), a **repatriation** phase (early 2000s–mid-2010s), and a selective **partial-integration** phase (mid-2010s–early 2020s). Across these stages, Afghan characters become more diverse in role, class, and gender, with a growing presence of Afghan women. The conclusion synthesizes how these portrayals map onto changes in immigration and hosting policies and public discourse about Afghans in Iran, and it closes by acknowledging limitations and proposing avenues for future research.

Theoretical Framework on Immigrant Representations in Cinema

This study integrates three theoretical lenses—geocriticism, feminist film theory, and postcolonial critique—to examine the representation of Afghan immigrants in Iranian fiction films. A geocritical approach (Westphal, 2007) treats cinematic space not as neutral backdrop but as ideologically charged and narratively active. The approach analyzes how films construct and encode places, such as center/periphery, thresholds, routes, and borders, and how access and mobility map power (visibility, exclusion, and belonging). It also links on-screen locales to real geographies and insider and outsider viewpoints (insider/outsider). For example, migrant characters frequently occupy peripheral or liminal sites, such as urban margins, border zones, and construction sites whose spatial coding signals exclusion, temporariness, or precarious legality (Berger & Winkler, 2012; Ponzanesi, 2012). These spatial hierarchies materialize state ideologies: the "center" connotes citizenship and belonging, while the "periphery" marks alterity. Yet space can also be a vector of resistance. As Magali Peyrefitte and Sanders-McDonagh (2018) show, immigrants may rework marginal spaces into zones of agency by entering schools, clinics, or homes previously closed to them. Geocriticism thus illuminates how space simultaneously encodes marginality and enables emergent forms of belonging.

Feminist film theory examines how films construct and contest gendered power through representation, gaze, narrative form, and production: who looks, who is looked at, and who speaks and acts. Gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and nationality, and their spatial representation. In many national cinemas, women are visually tethered to domestic interiors, while men dominate public and transitory spaces (Mennel, 2010; Moore, 2005). These divides intensify for immigrant women, who confront both patriarchal and ethnonational exclusions. As discussed later, Afghan women in Iranian films are often absent or confined to passive roles, however, when they appear in professional or public domains as athletes, students, or workers, they transgress both cinematic and social boundaries. Such moments reconfigure space as a gendered battleground, challenging norms of visibility, mobility, and agency.

Postcolonial film theory analyzing othering, hybridity and diaspora, borders and language, and decolonizing aesthetics to foreground subaltern perspectives and whether films depict, reproduce, or resist colonial power and its legacies. It notes how immigrant characters are rendered alien, criminalized, or subordinated, including when they belong to culturally proximate yet hierarchically governed populations. World-famous scholar of Iranian cinema, Hamid Naficy (2012a) suggests the notion of "accented cinema" that captures diasporic filmmakers' hybrid aesthetics: code-switching, fragmented narration, and multilingualism that register dislocation and layered identities. In authoritarian settings like Iran, accented forms are constrained by censorship, yet filmmakers deploy subtle cinematographic tactics, such as allegory, temporal ambiguity, intergenerational storytelling to navigate ideological boundaries while humanizing immigrant experience. In the Iranian context, such hybrid cinema is crucial for rethinking borders and belonging and for advancing a transnational approach to the study of Iranian cinema (Langford et al., 2024, p. 14), including depictions of Afghans (Khamsy, 2024; Langford, 2007).

More broadly, the cinematic portrayal of immigrants and ethnic minorities has been central to film studies for long, particularly regarding diasporic communities in Europe (Cortés, 1984; Erigha, 2015; Loshitzky, 2010; Malik, 1996; Merivirta et al., 2013; Noriega, 1992; Rogin, 1996). Scholars have framed these representations through the "cinema of duty" and "cinema of hybridity" (Göktürk, 1999; Malik, 1996), highlighting tensions between state-sponsored integrationist agendas and more fluid, culturally hybrid storytelling. Approaches range from integrationist, quasi-documentary portrayals common in publicly funded British films (Malik, 1996) to German cases in which immigrant filmmakers negotiated aesthetic autonomy within restrictive cultural programs (Göktürk, 1999). Since the 1990s, European cinema has increasingly embraced multifaceted, hybrid depictions (Loshitzky, 2010; Mennel, 2010). By contrast, in tightly regulated media environments, such as Iran, nationalist discourse and state censorship shape portrayals of immigrants (Démy-Geroe, 2020; Naficy, 2012a), though independent filmmakers continue to subvert such constraints that is an issue examined empirically below in relation to Afghans in Iranian films.

Material and Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to analyze the representation of Afghans in Iranian fiction films. We began by compiling a comprehensive film corpus through a systematic review of Iranian film catalogs, critical reviews, and academic studies (e.g., Démy-Geroe, 2020; Naficy, 2012a, 2012b; Sadr, 2006; Tapper, 2002). This and the recent films in the 2020s yielded 34 fiction films, ranging in length from 11 to 110 min, in which Afghans played prominent roles and/or were the key themes. The year 1987 was taken as a starting point as then started to appear films in which Afghans were portrayed as a key theme in the film. The release of the Afghan-related films was followed until 2025.

In the first, quantitative phase, we categorized these 34 films by thematic focus and by the gender and ethnic background of the directors. Afghans were key protagonists and/or central themes in 20 films, a secondary theme in six, and featured in key scenes in the remaining eight. The vast majority (85%) were directed by Iranians, though a notable emergence of Iranian–Afghan filmmakers occurred in the 2010s, including Jamshid and Navid Mahmoudi, Hasan Noori, and Samereh Rezaei. The films were overwhelmingly directed by men (94%) and most (79%) were produced in Tehran, though not at all were set there. This analysis provided a foundation for examining broader patterns of representation across gender, ethnicity, and spatial production.

The second, qualitative phase involved content analysis. We systematically coded 34 films for thematic elements, focusing on the social, spatial, and gendered portrayals of Afghan characters. Particular attention was paid to differences in the depiction of Afghan men and women and to the symbolic roles of public space, private space, and marginal spaces. Notes and excerpts were compiled into a structured database, allowing us to track changes across three periods of Iranian public policy toward Afghans.

As a methodological thematic framework, the theory-informed content analysis of focused on three core theoretical concepts deriving from geocritical, feminist and postcolonial approaches to analyze films, structure their analysis, and interpret their meaning: spatiotemporality, transgressivity, and referentiality (Westphal, 2007). *Spatiotemporality* helped to trace how places—urban, rural, and liminal—were represented across time and narrative, revealing evolving relationships between Afghans and Iranians through spatiality portrayed in Iranian films. *Transgressivity* captured the potential of Afghan characters to cross material and symbolic spatial, social, and gendered boundaries, often between Iranians and Afghans, particularly as a measure of Afghans' agency portrayed in films. *Referentiality* allowed us to explore the relationship between fictional

cinematic spaces and real-world social geographies, that is, how spaces in film reference, distort, or symbolize actual places and Afghans' lived experiences in these places, and its connection to the Iranian national policies toward Afghans. This methodological combination allowed us to contextualize filmic representations of Afghans within broader Iranian social, political, and spatial dynamics.

Our analysis traces how Iranian fiction films construct, reinforce, or contest prevailing discourses about Afghan presence in relation to specific state policy regimes but direct audience reception lies beyond this study's scope. At the same time, as Pedram Partovi (2024) notes, cinema audiences in Iran are active participants: from the pre-revolutionary era to the present, cinema has also been mass entertainment, and viewers' expectations and interpretive habits shape both filmmakers' choices and state regulatory strategies, especially across the thousands of mainstream, commercially oriented films. Our claims in the article are therefore textual and cinematographic rather than reception-based, while acknowledging the audience's constitutive role in Iranian film culture.

Results: Representation of Afghans in Iranian Fiction Films

Between 1987 and 2009, Iran produced 1,284 films—an average of 56 per year—rising to nearly 100 annually in the 2010s (Naficy, 2012a, 2012b). Iranian cinema is nationally very popular and several films have achieved international acclaim. However, not all internationally rewarded Iranian films have gained popularity among audience and authorities in Iran. Over years, scholarly attention has focused on wide political, aesthetic, and social dimensions of Iranian cinema (e.g., Atwood, 2016; Démy-Geroe, 2020; Langford, 2019; Langford et al., 2024; Naficy, 2012a, 2012b; Sadr, 2006; Tapper, 2002). Yet, the portrayal of Afghans, despite their long-standing presence in Iran and historical, cultural, and linguistic ties between Afghans and Iranians, has received limited attention (Khamsy, 2024; Langford, 2007). Afghans rarely appear as key characters in celebrated films and Afghans also remain a peripheral topic in film scholarship about Iranian cinematography.

The portrayal of Afghans in Iranian fiction films tracks three policy phases. In the first period (1980s–2003), when the Islamic Republic admitted Afghans fleeing Soviet occupation and subsequent civil wars, Afghan characters appeared in 11 fiction features, the first in 1987, amounting to roughly two titles every 3 years and constituting well under 1% of national output. During the state-led repatriation phase (2004–2013), the motif declined further to five films, making it about one every other year. In the selective partial-integration phase (2014–2024), representation rose markedly to 18 films, averaging one and occasionally two titles per year (Table 1).

Depiction of Afghans in Iranian Society and Films During the Welcoming Period From 1987 to 2003

Between 1987 and 2003, Iranian state discourse largely framed Afghans through a humanitarian–religious lens, casting them as Shiʿa Muslim refugees fleeing Soviet occupation and subsequent civil war (Strand et al., 2004; Yarbakhsh, 2018). Shared religious affiliation and linguistic proximity (Dari–Persian) fostered cultural familiarity. With UNHCR support, refugees were granted open-ended stay but faced significant barriers to naturalization and were formally treated as temporary "guests." Many first lived in camps before moving to cities, including specially constructed "guest cities" that persist today (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008; Jauhiainen et al., 2020; Strand et al., 2004). Public discussion of Afghans remained limited, and their cinematic presence marginal. Although repatriation initiatives occurred, for example, in 1989 (Hugo et al., 2012), most Afghans were able to remain in Iran.

Table 1. Afghans in Iranian Films in 1987–2025.

Title	Year	Director
Bysikelran/The Cyclist	1987	Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Dastforoush/The Peddler	1987	Mohsen Makhmalbaf
Delam Baray-e Pesaram Tang Shode/I've Missed My Son	1989	Alireza Zare Mirakabad
Badkonak-e Sefid/The White Balloon	1995	Jafar Panahi
Ta'me Gilas/Taste of Cherry	1997	Abbas Kiarostami
Rooban-e Ghermez/The Red Ribbon	1998	Ebrahim Hatamikia
Djomeh	2000	Hassan Yektapanah
Delbaran	2001	Abolfazl Jalili
Baran	2001	Majid Majidi
11.09.01 (Segment: God, Construction and Destruction)	2002	Samira Makhmalbaf
Tehran 7 Sobh/Tehran 7:00 a.m.	2003	Amir Shahab Razavian
Man Bin Laden Nistam/I am not Bin Laden	2004	Ahmad Talebinezhad
Gonah-e Man/My Sin	2006	Mehrshad Karkhani
Akharin Malake-ye Zamin/The Last Queen of the Earth	2006	Mohammad Reza Arab
Majnoon-e Leyli/In Love with Leyli	2008	Ghasem Jafari
Heiran	2009	Shalizeh Arefpour
Chand Metr-e Moka'ab Eshgh/A Few Cubic Meters of Love	2014	Jamshid Mahmoudi
Chelipa	2016	Amin Karimi
Raftan/Parting	2016	Navid Mahmoudi
Abad-o Yek Rooz/Life and a Day	2016	Saeed Roustayi
Shanel/Chanel	2017	Hossein Kondori
Eynak/Glass	2017	Reza Aghaei
Rona, Azim's Mother	2018	Jamshid Mahmoudi
Sonami/Tsunami	2018	Milad Ameli
7.5	2018	Navid Mahmoudi
Deport	2019	Amir Sajjad Hosseini
Mantageye Parvaz Mamnoo/No-Fly Zone	2019	Amir Dasargar
Bacheyi ba Joorab-e Ghermez/A Baby with Red Socks	2019	Khodadad Jalali
Mordan Dar Ab-e Motahhar/Dying in Holy Water	2020	Navid Mahmoudi
Khorshid /Sun Children	2020	Majid Majidi
Barandehā/Winners	2022	Hassan Nazer
Marzhā-ye Bi Pāyān/Endless Borders	2023	Abbas Amini
Dar Sarzamin-e Barâdar/In the Land of Brothers	2024	Raha Amirfazli and Alireza Ghasemi
Mard-e Aram/Calm Man	2025	Behnoosh Sadeghi

This policy framework shaped portrayals in fiction film: Afghan characters were typically depicted as marginalized, vulnerable, and often undocumented, their lives unfolding in spaces of precarity and transience. Representations focused predominantly on men engaged in low-status labor on urban peripheries and in industrial zones: "non-places" whose anonymity illustrates social invisibility (Ponzanesi, 2012). Recurrent visual markers, such as shantytowns, derelict construction sites, and factory floors reinforced a stereotype that an Afghan man is poor and undereducated, yet disposable (Naficy, 2012a, p. 234). In Iranian movie industry, this was often rendered in a neo-realist idiom akin to what Sarita Malik (1996) terms a "cinema of duty," where ethical engagement with social problems is foregrounded.

A major opening came in 1987 with two films by Mohsen Makhmalbaf—*The Cyclist* and *The Peddler*—which brought Afghan experiences to the fore. Both present Afghan figures as morally serious yet structurally constrained, combining explicit social critique with realist aesthetics to make visible the systemic marginalization and dehumanizing conditions Afghans faced in Iran in the 1980s.

The Cyclist follows Nasim, an Afghan father and refugee, and a former cycling professional. He undertook an extreme endurance ride to fund his wife's surgery. His unending circular motion through city streets and squares was a spectacle for a jaded crowd. It was partly filmed in Pakistan as the film director had seen as a child in Tehran a similar Pakistani cyclist performance for raising funds for suffering Pakistani, though some Iranians suspected the motive (The Makhmalbaf Film House 2025). The film depicts the harsh suburban environments where many Afghan refugees struggled to survive, including in Iran, and it became a stark metaphor for Afghan migrants' liminality, economic exploitation, and constrained mobility (Dabashi, 2001; Naficy, 2012b).

The Peddler (an anthology in three stories combining realism and imagination) also stages Afghans' precariousness and critical attitude of authorities toward them. In one scene of a dim working-class restaurant, an Afghan protagonist has witnessed a crime by a group of smugglers and he is pushed toward lethal danger. Arrived police ignore the armed, supposedly Iranian gang leader and arrests all Afghans present. Despite an official discourse of welcome in the Iranian society, the film's spatial and narrative design crystallizes social hierarchy and state violence: Afghans, as the always-suspect "Other," are collectively punished, reinforcing presumptions of criminality and non-belonging.

Police officer: Take the Afghans. Who is Afghan here?
Police officer to an Afghan: Do you know Abbas Zaboli [the victim]? Are you a smuggler?
Afghan: No.
Police officer: You [Afghans] are all suspected. You should introduce us the murderer . . .

During the 1980s to late 1990s, Iranian state censorship tightly regulated the depiction of women on screen; female characters were often excluded or confined to desexualized, ideologically conforming roles (Derayeh, 2010; Ghorbankarimi, 2015; Rezai-Rashti, 2007). This regime also functioned as a deliberate counter to the experimental pre-revolutionary films of the early 1970s in which sexuality and nudity were foregrounded. Incensed segments of the public attacked those films and, in some cases, even burned movie houses (Partovi, 2024).

Afghan women were almost entirely absent from Iranian fiction films during this period despite their substantial demographic presence among refugees. When referenced at all, they appeared voiceless and invisible. This erasure is epitomized in *The Cyclist*, where the Afghan wife whose illness motivates the plot almost never appears on screen. Her physical invisibility mirrors wider social and cinematic marginalization, rendering Afghan women peripheral to both narrative and society. The purposeful decision to keep a key female protagonist mostly off-screen operates as a narrative and spatial strategy that crystallizes hierarchy and control, aligning with contemporaneous Iranian state policies. In effect, a dual exclusion as women and as immigrants reveals intersecting layers of patriarchy, censorship, and nationalist discourse: Afghan women are stripped of voice and agency and reduced to symbolic functions reinforcing male-centered stories of suffering and endurance. Furthermore, many conservative people considered the presence of Afghan women on-screen unsuitable. Furthermore, there have been also later very few Iranian–Afghan movie actresses.

Afghans also surface obliquely in celebrated art-house works. In *The White Balloon* (by Jafar Panahi, 1995), a young Afghan balloon seller stands on the margins of Nowruz festivities; his silence and immobility, set against the celebratory flow around him, visualize Afghans' socially and politically "frozen" status (Chaudhuri & Finn, 2003; Naficy, 2012b). Yet he quietly assists a

little Iranian girl who has lost her money, a brief gesture that intimates everyday solidarities and complicates simple binaries of host and guest.

In allegoric *Taste of Cherry* (by Abbas Kiarostami, 1997), an Afghan seminarian appears as a secondary yet symbolically resonant figure. Among the several "voices" Badii consults while seeking someone to bury him after his planned suicide, the seminarian's religious-ethical argument against self-killing injects a moral counterpoint. His Afghan identity is acknowledged but not foregrounded, signaling ethnic plurality and intercultural dialogue within the national frame in Iran.

Other notable examples—Delbaran (by Hasan Yektapanah, 2000), *Djomeh* (by Delbaran Abolfazl Jalili, 2001), and *Tehran 7:00 a.m.* (by Amir Shahab Razavian, 2003)—locate Afghan characters in hostels, containers, and makeshift shelters, spaces that lack permanence and intimacy. Long takes dwell on mundane routines and quiet hardship, underlining displacement and tenuous belonging. *Delbaran*, set near the Iran–Afghanistan border, stands out for its focus on Afghan youth amid the long aftershocks of war (Sadr, 2006). A young Afghan boy works menial jobs at a remote truck stop, occasionally hearing warplanes across the frontier; the film's minimalist style links spatial austerity to curtailed life chances—no schooling, scant services—mapping precarity, vulnerability, and survival at once as youth and as Afghan.

Cinematic space in Iranian films from this era was also heavily symbolic, reinforcing Afghan characters as marginal and "out of place." As Michelle Langford (2007) and Barbara Mennel (2010) note, spatial positioning routinely encodes hierarchy: domestic interiors, such as homes, schools, and clinics index stability, belonging, and moral legitimacy, whereas exteriors and transitory sites, such as construction zones, roadways, and city outskirts connote precarity, danger, and moral ambiguity. Afghans in Iranian films were overwhelmingly placed in the latter. The absence of private, stable interiors for Afghan characters mirrored their legal and social precariousness. Urban peripheries and rural margins served as cinematic metaphors for invisibility and exclusion from the mainstream society. These spatial patterns align with Hamid Naficy's (2012a) account of an "accented cinema" of exilic and diasporic subjects: works that register displacement through recurring visual motifs, narrative delays, and allegorical spaces.

From the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, representations of Iranian women in Iranian cinema started to evolve, with symbols of veiling, modesty, and domesticity mobilized to explore marital abuse, legal inequity, and moral ambiguity (Aqababaee & Khademolfogharaei, 2016; Naficy, 2012b). There was a gradual transformation of female roles to more active and rational roles connected to slightly more reformist national policies in Iran that supported women's social presence and involvement in the public sphere (Aqababaee & Razaghi, 2022). Filmmakers, such as Rakhshan Banietemad and Tahmineh Milani reframed female characters also as agents of resistance and critique (Derayeh, 2010; Ghaffari, 2020; Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2009). In parallel, a shift in the gendered positioning of Afghans emerged, most notably with the appearance of Afghan female characters in films of the early 2000s.

Majid Majidi—Academy Award-nominated—employs a neo-realist idiom, naturalistic performances, and poetic visual storytelling. *Baran* (by Majid Majidi, 2001) marks a turning point. The film situates Afghan refugees on Tehran's outskirts, where they live and work amid postwar (after Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988) reconstruction and the city's economic growth. Settings that range from dusty construction sites populated by Afghan laborers to Tehran's bazaars and impoverished districts illustrate spatial marginalization and socioeconomic constraint. Though varied, these spaces share a grammar of exclusion. The narrative centers on an Afghan girl, Baran, who disguises herself as a boy (Rahmat) to work after her father, Najaf, is injured on site. This subversive cross-dressing transgresses legal and gender norms around women's labor in Iran. Lateef, an Iranian adolescent who serves tea and prepares food for Afghan workers, initially bullies Rahmat but undergoes a gradual transformation once he learns "his" true identity.

Hamid Naficy (2012b, p. 235) reads the Baran/Rahmat ambiguity through the lens of *bacha posh*, a tradition in which Afghan girls adopt male presentation to navigate patriarchal constraints. In *Baran*, female visibility is achieved through concealment, underlining how agency must be masked to gain recognition. Michelle Langford (2008) interprets Lateef's subsequent self-denial as "self-sacrificing behavior," emblematic of the Iranian host society's moral responsibility toward Afghan refugees and legible within Islamic ethics of hospitality and compassion. Iranian film scholars Hamid Reza Sadr (2006) and Mehdi Purrezaian et al. (2016) further read the film as an allegory of shifting attitudes toward migration, racism, and sexism, centered on the humanizing force of love. Poetics of love is connected to Afghans' migration and presence in Iran (Khamsy, 2024). Baran's emergence as both subject and symbol parallels the broader evolution in Iranian cinema from female invisibility to strategic visibility, even as the necessity of passing as male highlights the enduring structural limits surrounding gender and migration in filmic and social discourse.

Depiction of Afghans During the Repatriation Policy Period From 2004 to the Early 2010s

The second societal period (2004–early 2010s) marked a policy shift in Iran. With Afghanistan deemed safer after the fall of the Taliban, and Iran turning more conservative, Iran launched large-scale repatriation programs. New arrivals generally no longer received refugee status, and a growing share of Afghans in Iran became undocumented, fueling circular migration. Although Afghan labor remained economically vital especially in construction and agriculture, tightened regulations curtailed their mobility and rights (Farzin & Jadali, 2013; Hugo et al., 2012; Milani, 2006).

Cinematically, depictions of Afghans declined relative to the earlier "welcoming" phase: fewer films with Afghan presence were directed (Table 1). Afghan women were particularly underrepresented in public and cinematic spheres. As Démy-Geroe (2020) argues, the period saw film mobilized to reinforce Iranian national ideologies emphasizing cultural specificity and cohesion. This shift registered on screen: Afghans were framed more distantly, relegated to transitory spaces or marginal roles. Iranian cinema garnered major international awards (including Academy Awards), yet Afghans were not central to those celebrated narratives.

Afghan characters were frequently located in temporary or liminal sites, such as roadsides, deserts, borders, and suburban peripheries signaling their persistent outsider status. While many films humanized Afghan figures, allegorical structures often suggesting exclusion: cross-border romances between Afghans and Iranians proved untenable, and women suffered disproportionately. *The Last Queen of the Earth* (by Mohammad Reza Arab, 2006) follows Afghan workers moving by bicycle, tractor, cart, and on foot through barren, indeterminate landscapes, with an Afghan family at the narrative center. These settings contrast sharply with the spatial permanence often afforded to Iranian protagonists, particularly men in war films (Pak-Shiraz, 2017), thus reinforcing Afghan precarity.

Afghan female visibility increased modestly, but portrayals tended to cast women as victims and men as criminal or morally ambiguous. In films, emerging affective ties between Iranian women and Afghan men routinely collapsed under social and familial prohibitions. In *My Sin* (by Mehrshad Karkhani, 2006), Afghan men harass a female co-worker and entice a young Iranian into crime. In *Love with Leyli* (by Ghasem Jafari, 2008) depicts an Afghan woman secretly married and publicly humiliated by her Iranian employer, reinforcing gendered vulnerability and their moral order.

At the same time, films began to probe the legal complexities of Afghan–Iranian families. *Heiran* (by Shalizeh Arefpour, 2009) is a rare example by a female director thematizing Afghans.

It dramatizes the plight of undocumented workers and mixed-status households. Iranian women married to Afghan men could not confer citizenship on spouses or children, leaving families in legal limbo. The film follows Mahi, a young Iranian who marries Heiran, an undocumented Afghan. The film charts a spatial descent from pastoral rural scenes to congested urban and then transitory border spaces. Overall, urban spaces in Iranian films tend not to be considered as places for in-depth social interactions but work merely as spaces of movement and passage (Habibi et al., 2016). The checkpoint sequence starkly stages bureaucratic erasure, foregrounding statelessness, and belonging while critiquing legal frameworks that render mixed-parentage children invisible.

Police officer: "Is this [child] yours? Show me his birth certificate. If someone takes this child away from you, how will you prove he is your own?"

Mahi's grandfather: "Your child is born and asks: Who am I? Iranian or Afghan? You won't be able to answer. Your child will have no name, no papers—won't even exist."

Some films introduced Afghan protagonists in more nuanced roles, challenging state narratives of exclusion. In *I Am Not Bin Laden* (by Ahmad Talebinezhad, 2005), Lateef, an Afghan father facing deportation, takes hostages in a desperate attempt to shield his family. The act, while criminal, is rendered with psychological depth; his care for the captives humanizes him and complicates the figure of the "threatening immigrant." The allegorical framing lays bare contradictions in Iran's approach to Afghans: vilified institutionally yet granted moral sympathy on screen.

Similarly, *The Last Queen of the Earth* centers on Alibakhsh, an undocumented Afghan laborer in Iran who rushes home in Afghanistan upon learning of his wife's suffering. The director locates Afghans at the film's emotional and narrative core. Despite Taliban checkpoints, ruined villages, and the threat of organ traffickers, he perseveres and rescues his wife. When his boss remarks, "The U.S. has come [to Afghanistan] and you are in a hurry?," Alibakhsh replies, "I should reach my home country before the foreigners arrive." This exchange distills the friction between geopolitical scripts and personal urgency. His journey illustrates enduring attachments to homeland despite harsh conditions there and in the host society.

Heiran and *The Last Queen of the Earth* also deploy spatial transitions from rural to urban to border zones as metaphors for shifting identity, legality, and belonging. Urban spaces, in particular, function as arenas of surveillance and exclusion. This accords with a geocritical reading (Westphal, 2007), wherein space is active agent rather than neutral background, shaping characters' mobility, legitimacy, and autonomy. In these narratives, rural milieus are governed by social norms, whereas urban and transitory spaces are dominated by bureaucratic control.

Depiction of Afghans During the Selective Partial-Integration Policy From the mid-2010s to the Early 2020s

In the third period (mid-2010s–early 2020s), Iranian policies toward Afghans grew more accommodating. While formal integration and certainly naturalization were not an objective, Afghans' access to education, health care, and selected employment sectors broadened, in some cases even for undocumented Afghans. Legal reforms extended limited citizenship rights to children born in Iran in mixed marriages between Afghan fathers and Iranian mothers, and public debate about Afghan contributions became more open (Jauhiainen et al., 2020; Nasr Esfahani, 2019). Nonetheless, Afghans remained legally precarious, and cultural inclusion in media, including cinema, was incomplete. The rise of Afghan asylum-related mass-migration toward Europe in 2015 to 2016, often via Iran and Turkey, underlined the transnational dimensions of displacement, while mobility slowed considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jauhiainen, 2020). Afghan migration and identity thus became explicit themes in Iranian films of this period.

From the mid-2010s onward, fiction films increasingly depicted Afghans less as outsiders and more as embedded members of Iranian society. Narratives emphasized cultural commonalities as well as differences regarding Iranians, situating Afghans not only in workplaces but also in domestic and public spheres. Afghan women gained prominence and agency; their roles were often mobilized to critique patriarchal norms in both Afghan and Iranian contexts. This evolution paralleled the emergence of Afghan–Iranian filmmakers—Navid and Jamshid Mahmoudi, Samereh Rezai, and Hasan Noori—whose work offered insider perspectives on economic hardship, legal vulnerability, and intergenerational adaptation.

Drama–romance films, such as *A Few Cubic Meters of Love* (by Jamshid Mahmoudi, 2014), *Rona, Azim's Mother* (by Jamshid Mahmoudi, 2018), *7.5* (by Jamshid Mahmoudi, 2018), and *Dying in* Holy Water (by Navid Mahmoudi, 2020) rendered Afghan lives through nuanced, humanizing storytelling. Sometimes encouraged by reformist cultural currents (Démy-Geroe, 2020), these works challenged reductive stereotypes on Afghans and fostered public empathy toward them. Afghan men, too, were portrayed more sympathetically than before, though still negotiating traditional masculinities. In *7.5* and *Life and a Day* (by Saeed Roustayi, 2016), male characters straddle norms of protectiveness and emotional restraint, highlighting complexities of diasporic identity. Gendered and generational vulnerabilities, such as child sexual and labor exploitation, social neglect, identity loss, received new sensitivity; *7.5* and *Hush! Girls Don't Scream* (by Pouran Derakhshandeh, 2013) confronted such taboos, placing Afghan and Iranian girls in shared frames of suffering and resistance.

Works like *Chanél* (by Hossein Kondori, 2017) and *Dying in Holy Water* engaged themes of exploitation, empowerment, and transgression, casting women as protagonists who resist structural barriers. These narratives also foregrounded education and social mobility as levers of change. Afghan women, for example, in *Tsunami* (by Milad Sadrameli, 2019) and *Chanél*, appeared as professionals and athletes, challenging dominant gender norms and reflecting real-world shifts among Afghans in Iran, noted by scholars (Adelkhah & Olszewska, 2007; Hoodfar, 2004).

Reflecting broader mid-2010s international asylum migration trends, several films addressed Afghan journeys toward Europe—*Parting* (by Navid Mahmoudi, 2016) and *A Baby with Red Socks* (by Khodadad Jalali, 2019). Borders, buses, and hostels function as transitory spaces of liminality and uncertainty, while Afghan characters, especially women, navigate them with determination, signaling both literal and metaphorical boundary crossings (Westphal, 2007).

Beyond character work, some filmmakers envisioned practical models of coexistence, in particular among second- and third-generation Afghans with Iranians. *Glass* (by Amir Dejhakam, 2017) and *No-Fly Zone* (by Amir Dasargar, 2019) depict Afghan and Iranian youths collaborating, deliberately downplaying ethnic distinctions to foreground mutual support. Similarly, *Sun Children* (by Majid Majidi, 2020) highlights cross-national solidarity through child protagonists and everyday acts of compassion, including having Afghan–Iranian female actor Shamila Shirzad in a significant supporting role in the film, also featuring a few years later in *Calm Man. Endless Borders* (by Abbas Amini, 2023) features an exiled Iranian teacher aiding a Hazara Afghan refugee family in a border village, placing the Afghan household at the film's core. *The Land of Brothers* (by Raha Amirfazli & Alireza Ghasemi, 2024) follows three members of an Afghan refugee family over two decades in Iran, offering a rare longitudinal portrait of evolving lives. *Calm Man* (by Behnoosh Sadeghi, 2025) centers an Afghan man, Zaman, and continues to engage themes like child marriage and community attitudes. Overall, it is a socially minded story that humanizes Afghan migrants in Iran and pushes back stereotypes on them.

Taken together, films from this selective partial-integration period, despite a post-COVID turn toward stricter policy, register a marked shift in Afghans' representation in Iranian cinema: from

marginalization to emerging multidimensionality, from laborers to lovers, and from victims to agents of change. Afghan characters become integral to cinema's evolving narration of Iranian society, signaling a broader reimagining of national identity that wrestles with exclusion while envisioning inclusion, at least partial integration.

By the mid-2020s, amid reimposed and renewed international sanctions on Iran, policies on Afghans tightened again. Approximately, 750,000 Afghans were registered refugees, while around 2.6 million lacked legal status (UNHCR, 2025). Iran reportedly intensified deportations removing about 750,000 people in 2024 and announced plans to expel up to 2 million in 2025. To curb irregular crossings, authorities initiated a 300-km barrier along the Afghanistan–Iran border. Although Iran has not formally recognized the Taliban government, the two states cooperate pragmatically on migration management (Mehr News Agency, 2024). It is to be seen, if these policies continue and how they impact on the presence of Afghans in Iranian films.

Conclusion

This article traced how Iranian fiction films have represented Afghans across three policy phases. Empirically, we identified 34 films in which Afghans featured as key protagonists or theme between 1987 and 2024: 11 in the welcoming period of 1987 to 2003, five during repatriation of 2004 to 2013, and 18 in the selective partial-integration phase of 2014 to 2024. These are the key films on this topic, however, they make only about 1% of all films produced in Iran during that time.

This study demonstrates how Iranian cinema both shapes and is shaped by the Iranian national immigration policy, censorship and wider socio-political change. From the late 1980s onward, Afghan characters emerge in Iranian films, and soon not merely as narrative figures but as barometers of public sentiment, state ideology, and transnational dynamics. Their representation closely tracks shifts in governance, and it is mediated by cinematic space: constructed, traversed, and symbolically coded.

In the "welcome" phase (1980s–2003), Afghans appear chiefly as victimized, often undocumented laborers confined to marginal "non-places." These portrayals echo official discourses of religious duty and humanitarian solidarity, with scant attention to domestic life and almost no visibility for Afghan women. During the repatriation phase (2004–early 2010s), screen time narrows and tones harden. Afghans are placed in deserts, borders, and urban fringes and are more frequently criminalized or rendered suspect, aligning with policies encouraging return and with narratives that keep them at a distance. Under the period of selective partial-integration policies (mid-2010s–early 2020s), portrayals diversify. Afghan women emerge as agents who contest patriarchal, spatial, and national exclusions; Afghan men remain more unevenly developed, with greater complexity in youth-centered stories. Afghan–Iranian filmmakers introduce insider perspectives on identity, hybridity, and mobility. Everyday, aspirational settings proliferate, signaling a move from state-centered scripts toward intersectional, humanizing accounts.

Afghans cinematographic representation clearly tracks governance: Afghans are most visible when their access to and presence in Iran expand, and retreat when their status contracts. Spatially, most often Afghans appear in films on construction sites, peripheries, borders, and transitory locations, while stable interiors are withheld, in particular until 2010s. Spatiotemporally, films chart a movement from refugee camps, suburban construction sites and peripheral streets (1980s) to transitory corridors (2000s) and, later, to more socially integrated milieus (2010s), often with direct reference to real identifiable place types. This arc maps the policy trajectory from religious solidarity to repatriation to selective partial integration, each phase inscribed into filmic landscapes. A referential reading of space underlines how urban peripheries, border zones, and liminal interiors operate as proxies for legal precarity and statelessness, while schools, sports fields, and living rooms in recent films prefigure emergent imaginaries of belonging.

Gender is decisive: Afghan women are largely absent early in the 1980s and the 1990s, partly due to state policies suggesting the absence of (Afghan) women in film as they could be seen as targets of desire as they were during many of the last pre-revolutionary films. In some films, the off-screen visual absence of Afghan women while they were otherwise present was a cinematographic tool to emphasize women's significance. From the 2000s onward, the gendered narratives shifted from a cinema of duty toward humanizing, multidimensional portraits, with recent films centering Afghan families and solidarities.

Moments of Afghans' transgression in Iranian films existed: Afghans' boundary crossing, gendered rupture, and acts of civic care illuminate their agency. Yet these gains are uneven: adult men are at times narratively immobilized as bearers of patriarchal tension or as coded risks to Iranian society.

The study makes three contributions to Iranian film scholarship from cultural and spatial perspectives. First, it offers a policy attentive periodization linking representational rhythms to Afghan immigration and residency governance, showing how legal categories, deportations, and selective partial integration are connected also to their visibility in films. Second, it integrates geocritical, feminist, and postcolonial lenses to show how space, gender, and accented aesthetics in films coproduce Afghans' belonging and otherness, refining accounts of Iranian art cinema beyond auteur centered readings. Third, it foregrounds Iranian and Afghan Iranian filmmakers depicting also Afghans' transnational routes Iran–Turkey–Europe and connections with Afghanistan, expanding the field's geography and how border mobilities are encoded in cinematographic narrative structure.

Limitations remain: The analysis in this article is textual rather than entirely visual or reception based; audience research, censorship archives, and distribution data would strengthen observations and track circulation. Comparative work across Iranian regions, Afghanistan, and near-by countries could clarify the specificities of Iranian cinema when treating Afghan diaspora. Nevertheless, the evidence points to a decisive shift in Iranian cinema from narrow marginalization to multidimensionality: Afghans move from not being present to background labor and further to protagonists, from invisibility to strategic visibility, and from objects of policy to subjects of narrative ethics. Contemporary Iranian cinema thus emerges as a key arena where Iranian national identity is addressed with, not without, Afghans. Nevertheless, Afghans' presence in Iranian cinema is still marginal.

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Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statements

The project adhered to all ethical regulations at the universities in which the study was conducted.

Author Contributions

Jussi S. Jauhiainen is responsible for the collection of the empirical material, analysis of the empirical material, writing of the draft, and revision of the draft.
Davood Eyvazlu is responsible for the collection of the empirical material, analysis of the empirical material, and writing of the draft.

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