

# Gendered Hybridity in Refugee Spaces: Baran's Double Identity as a Woman and a Worker

Gabilan Anutharsi

Department of Media Studies, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

anutharsi@univ.jfn.ac.lk

## Introduction

*Baran* (Majidi, 2001) is an important film in Iranian cinema, known for its poetic style and focus on social issues, especially under challenging political conditions. Iranian filmmakers often use minimalism and symbolic storytelling to discuss themes like displacement, identity, and marginalization, especially regarding migrant and refugee communities. *Baran* is notable for its sensitive depiction of Afghan refugees in Iran, a group that often remains ignored in policies and popular culture (Deb, 2020).

Understanding *Baran* in the context of refugee cinema is vital. The film contributes to discussions about borders, migration, and identity in the Middle East. The study highlights how Iranian filmmakers have historically navigated themes of displacement, identity, and marginalization within restrictive sociopolitical contexts.

## Research Problem

Iranian cinema has gained worldwide recognition for its ability to address social issues under restrictive conditions. The experiences of refugees, particularly Afghan women in Iran, remain underexplored in refugee studies. *Baran* is a rare cinematic text that brings these marginalized voices to the forefront. The problem this study investigates is how *Baran* constructs a cinematic space in which refugee identity is negotiated through both invisibility and visibility. The dual identity exposes a larger dilemma. Refugee women are often forced to navigate survival by inhabiting hybrid identities.

## Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine how *Baran* portrays the intersection of gender and labour within the refugee experience.

The secondary objectives are:

- To analyze the symbolic significance of the construction site as a hybrid space of survival and belonging

- To apply Bhabha's "third space" and Naficy's "accented cinema" to interpret the film's treatment of displacement and identity.
- To contribute to broader debates about cultural hybridity, gender invisibility, and refugee cinema.

The present study tries to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How does *Baran* (2001) represent the intersection of gender and labour in the context of Afghan refugees in Iran
2. In what ways does the construction site in *Baran* function as a symbolic "third space" that mediates survival, belonging, and hybridity.
3. How can Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" and Hamid Naficy's theory of "accented cinema" be applied to interpret *Baran's* treatment of displacement and identity?
4. What insights does *Baran* offer to broader debates on cultural hybridity, gender invisibility, and the precarious conditions of refugee communities in Middle Eastern cinema?

## Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research methodology, using qualitative content analysis to explore film themes and narratives. The central aim is not to compare *Baran* with other films, but to unpack the nuanced ways in which identity, gender, and displacement are represented within a single cinematic text. This method examines films' dialogues, visual elements, and character interactions to understand how the film *Baran* deals with identity and borders. The current study focuses on the main aspects such as plot, Storytelling techniques, film setting, characterization, visual elements, and audio, with an explicit focus on conversations between the main characters through the textual analysis of the key sequences in the film.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Homi Bhabha's Third Space*

The construction site is a 'third space' where identity is constantly negotiated. Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'Third Space' emerges from postcolonial theory as a conceptual site. Cultural identity is not fixed in the conceptual site but produced through processes of negotiation, translation, and hybridity. Cultural encounters generate a dynamic space of in-betweenness, where new forms of identity and meaning emerge. Therefore, the "Third Space" resists binary categorizations such as colonizer/colonized, male/female, or national/foreign, instead emphasizing fluidity, ambivalence, and hybridity (Bhandari, 2022).

In the context of *Baran*, this theoretical lens helps illuminate the protagonist's dual identity as both a woman and a worker. *Baran* is an Afghan refugee girl forced to

disguise herself as a male construction worker. The text shows the uncertainty central to Homi Bhabha's ideas. She is not entirely accepted as a woman or a man. Similarly, she is neither entirely Afghan nor Iranian. Her presence at the construction site puts her in a special space of belonging. A risky area where she constantly redefines her identity through work, disguise, and survival.

The construction site acts as a symbolic "third space." It is not a home or homeland, but a temporary and unstable area that reflects the experience of refugees. Within this space, different identities, such as legal and illegal, male and female, visible and invisible, come together and overlap. *Baran* explains that the 'Third Space' is not just an idea but a real experience for refugees, women, and displaced people. The film highlights hybridity as a state of vulnerability but also as a possible source of resistance. This relates to Bhabha's idea that identity is not fixed but is instead dynamic, fragmented, and shaped in spaces that exist between different cultures.

### ***Hamid Naficy's Accented Cinema***

Majidi's style is part of Iranian cinema that addresses displacement, exile, and border-crossing. The use of non-professional actors, location shooting, and minimalist narrative reflects accented aesthetics. Hamid Naficy's concept of 'Accented Cinema' (2001) refers to films produced by exilic, diasporic, or postcolonial filmmakers whose works carry the marks of displacement and border-crossing. These films are 'accented' in the sense that, much like a spoken accent, their cinematic form bears traces of their creators' cultural hybridity and marginal positionality. Rather than reproducing dominant cinematic norms, accented films construct narratives and aesthetics that embody dislocation, in-betweenness, and cultural negotiation (Andersson & Sundholm, 2019).

According to Naficy, accented cinema often includes the Use of non-professional actors, Location shooting, Minimalist or fragmented narratives, and Themes of borders, exile, and belonging. These characteristics make *Baran* a significant example of accented aesthetics in Iranian cinema, as it features non—professional actors. Many cast members were chosen from actual Afghan refugee communities. Their performances blur the line between fiction and lived experience, reinforcing the film's authenticity and socio-political urgency. The construction site becomes more than a backdrop. It is a lived space of instability, precarity, and survival, visually capturing the refugee condition. The plot is simple. *Baran's* disguise as a male worker and Latif's gradual recognition. This sparseness allows viewers to focus on gestures, silences, and labour, foregrounding human dignity amidst marginalization. Afghan refugees in Iran inhabit a liminal zone where they are both necessary (as cheap labour) and invisible (due to their illegal status).

The film dramatizes this paradox, aligning it with accented cinema's focus on exile and statelessness. Naficy's framework helps us interpret *Baran* not only as a national Iranian film but as part of a transnational cinematic tradition. Majidi's filmmaking style produces a visual and narrative accent that reflects the tension of living between cultures, genders, and legal statuses. By emphasizing authenticity, silence, and liminality, *Baran* conveys the aesthetic of displacement central to accented cinema.

## Data Analysis

### *Plot & Narrative Structure*

*Baran* works at a construction site disguised as a boy under the name Rahmat. Since *Baran/Rahmat* is too weak to lift the heavy bags of bricks, the master builder assigns her/him the role of cafeteria attendant. This decision deprives Latif of his job in the cafeteria, forcing him to lift heavy weights instead of preparing tea for the workers. Frustrated, Latif begins to bully *Baran/Rahmat*. However, one day, he unexpectedly discovers Baran hiding while she combs her long hair. Shocked by this revelation, Latif suddenly falls in love with *Baran/Rahmat* and becomes her protector. The film shows visibility and invisibility as connected rather than opposites. *Baran* is visible when she erases her womanhood and invisible when she asserts her gender identity. This paradox reflects broader socio-political realities. Women and refugees are necessary for the survival of the economy, yet are denied recognition in the social order. In *Baran*, a girl becomes visible through her work, but only when she ignores her identity as a woman. Her gender makes her invisible, overshadowing her contributions and limiting her role. The film highlights this struggle through disguise, silence, and Latif's realization. It shows how systems push women, especially marginalized refugees, into invisibility, even though their work supports a visible world.

At first, Latif feels annoyed by Rahmat's weakness, but he becomes protective when he learns his true identity. This change shows how the visibility of womanhood leads to protective feelings rather than economic recognition. In the final scene, Latif looks silently at *Baran's* footprint in the mud. This moment captures the tension, even though she is physically absent, her footprint makes her presence felt deeply in meaning.

The story centres around gender identity, which plays a key role in the plot, allowing the director to tell a love story between two teens whose sexual identities are unclear. By setting the story in the Afghan community, the director highlights the important issue of gender identity while distancing it from mainstream Iranian society. This gender ambiguity is shown within a strong subculture, where many Iranians view Afghans as inferior. This setting not only explores gender but also critiques how Afghan refugees are treated in Iran. This way, the film represents power and its abuses.

## ***Characterization & Gender Hybridity***

**Baran:** *Baran* disguises herself as a boy to get a job at the construction site. This choice shows that she must take on a masculine role to be noticed in the job market. Unlike other workers who joke, argue, and complain, *Baran/Rahmat* stands out by being quiet and withdrawn. Her physical weakness and calm behaviour differ from the tough masculinity seen on the construction site. As an Afghan refugee, she represents cheap and undocumented labour that supports urban development in Iran but is often overlooked. As a woman, her work is even less recognized. When her gender is known, she is often pushed out of the workforce, and her contributions are ignored.

Silence has two meanings. It shows that someone is pushed aside and lacks a voice, but it can also be a way to resist. By staying silent, she disrupts the male-dominated order without engaging in their aggressive speech. *Baran* is a character who experiences both economic invisibility due to her Afghan heritage and gender invisibility because she is a woman. This creates a mixed identity for her, where her work is essential but does not receive the recognition it deserves.

**Latif:** At first, Latif shows a self-centred view of masculinity. He feels annoyed by Rahmat's weaknesses and dislikes doing heavier tasks when Rahmat cannot. He believes that strength equals worth in a man's work. When he finds out that Rahmat is actually *Baran*, Latif's views change. Instead of seeing masculinity as a way to dominate, he starts to value protection, sacrifice, and kindness. Latif stops competing and becomes caring. He quietly watches over *Baran* and helps her family in secret. He even gives up his own pay to support her. His love is not controlling or overly romantic. It is marked by patience, distance, and respect.

In traditional views, masculinity is often associated with authority, control, and ownership of women. However, Latif learns to love without trying to own anyone. His idea of masculinity becomes a mix of responsibility, which is often seen as a masculine trait, and care. The final image of Latif looking at *Baran's* footprint in the mud represents this mix. He accepts her absence without trying to control her, making her invisibility a type of presence. Latif's character development challenges the idea that masculinity is all about power. Instead, it shows masculinity as a quiet form of protection, which complicates how Iranian films typically portray male power.

*Baran's* silent work symbolizes both the exploitation of refugee labour and the lack of women's voices in patriarchal systems. Latif's protective nature shifts the traditional view of masculinity by changing love from possession to sacrifice. This models a new type of masculinity that resists domination.

### ***Construction Site as Symbolic Space***

Economic exploitation and job insecurity are significant issues. The site has many Afghan refugees working illegally. They are underpaid and often at risk of deportation. This situation illustrates the hidden basis of Iran's economy, where marginalized groups support the visible city while lacking rights and recognition. The half-finished structure represents the unstable lives of refugees, who always face uncertainty.

The site is mainly male-dominated, valuing physical strength and endurance. *Baran* enters this space disguised as Rahmat, highlighting the gender-based barriers in labour. She can only fit in if she hides her femininity. Her fragility contrasts with the tough manual work, showing the tension between being seen as a worker and being invisible as a woman.

Initially, the site is a place of competition, particularly Latif's frustration with Rahmat. However, it turns into a place where Latif learns about responsibility, empathy, and sacrifice. He shifts from focusing on himself to caring for others. The construction site serves as a moral training ground, where Latif's character develops just like the building is being built.

The half-finished structure also symbolizes incomplete justice. The social system that exploits refugees and sidelines women is as unstable as the building itself. The site's fragility shows that society relies on the unseen labour of marginalized people, which could collapse if ignored. By pointing out the gaps and mess of the site, Majidi indicates that the foundation of social life is morally flawed. The site becomes a crossing point between visibility and invisibility, exploitation and recognition, rivalry and care.

Majidi captures the construction site with both realism and beauty. He shows rain, mud, scaffolding, and dust as poetic symbols. In the final scene, Latif looks at Baran's footprint in the mud, turning the site into a place of absence that feels present, connecting love to the physical signs of hard work and sacrifice.

The construction site in *Baran* is not just a place to work. It represents society, highlighting the exploitation of refugees, gender barriers in labour, and the weak social structures. It also serves as a moral test, where Latif rebuilds his humanity, and a symbolic boundary where visibility and invisibility, masculinity and care, oppression and dignity come together.

### ***Cinematography, Visual Elements, Dialogues & Audio Elements***

Majid Majidi carefully shapes the cinematography, visual design, dialogue, and soundscape to emphasize themes of invisibility, silence, and humanity

### *Cinematography:*

The film employs earthy colours such as brown, grey, and blue to show the mud, scaffolding, and tough conditions of the workers' environment. This simple show reflects the harsh realities of refugees' lives. The camera focuses on the construction site, making it feel real. Long shots highlight the repetitive nature and physical challenges of labour, helping the audience experience the work rhythms.

When Latif notices *Baran's* femininity, like her hand touching her veil or her briefly revealed face, the director uses close-ups to show intimacy without words. Rain appears often in the film as a symbol; it is both cleansing and sad. The rain softens the harsh construction site, while the mud represents struggle and traces, shown in the final scene with the footprint.

### *Visual Elements:*

*Baran* undergoes a visual change, moving from "Rahmat" in boys' clothes to a veiled Afghan girl. This change shows the tension between being seen and being unseen. Her clothing becomes a sign of mixed gender identity. These elements dominate the scene, symbolizing incompleteness, fragility, and the uncertain lives of refugees. The construction site represents a public, masculine, noisy, and exploitative place. In contrast, domestic settings appear private, silent, feminine, and fragile. This visual difference emphasizes how gender and labour are separated by space. Instead of showing *Baran* directly, Majidi often uses glimpses (like a footprint, a glimpse of her hand, or her silent gaze). This approach fits with the theme of being invisible.

### *Dialogues:*

Dialogue is minimal, often limited to practical discussions about work, wages, or survival. This reflects the marginalized existence of the workers, as the struggle for survival leaves little room for verbal expression. Latif's speech transforms: he moves from impatient complaints to softer, more tender tones when he speaks about or in the presence of *Baran*. This reduction in words mirrors the growth of his emotional depth. Silence plays a vital role. *Baran* never engages in extended dialogue. Her presence is conveyed visually, suggesting that her silence becomes her voice in a patriarchal context that denies her the opportunity to express herself.

### *Audio Elements:*

The sounds of metal clanging, hammering, footsteps on scaffolding, and rain fill the air. These noises help us feel the hard work and struggle. The music is simple and only plays during strong emotional moments, like when Latif realizes something important about *Baran*. The music does not take over but highlights feelings, making silence more powerful.



Moments of near-silence, where we only hear the wind or distant sounds, are important. They show *Baran*'s invisibility, focus on Latif's personal growth, and make significant moments, like the final footprint, stand out. Occasional Afghan melodies remind the viewer of *Baran*'s cultural background. They connect her to her displaced community without being too obvious. All of these elements work together to create *Baran*, a film about invisibility, tenderness, and human dignity, where what is unsaid and unseen carries more weight than words.

## Conclusion

*Baran* illustrates how gender and labour intersect to construct hybrid refugee identities. *Baran*'s dual identity (woman and worker) embodies the precariousness of refugees who must constantly negotiate visibility and survival. The construction site as a cinematic "third space" dramatizes displacement and belonging, allowing Majidi to challenge fixed notions of identity. By situating *Baran* in refugee cinema, the film underscores how cinematic representations can illuminate the complex realities of border politics, gendered invisibility, and cultural hybridity.

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