Constituting Love in Persianate Cinemas

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Abstract

Critics have long regarded the popular cinemas of India, Iran, and Turkey as nothing more than cheap Hollywood knock-offs. While scholars have recognized the geographic and economic ties between these film industries, few have noted their engagement with themes and images particularly associated with earlier Persianate courtly entertainments. Persianate cinemas have challenged modernist ideas of love, marriage, and family life exemplified in Hollywood features and instead taken up older aristocratic conceptions of the family in order to apply them to contemporary society.

Keywords

eroticism – family devotion – homosociality – cinema – India – Iran – Turkey

Introduction

Representations of love, both divine and profane, were for many centuries an important part of cosmopolitan courtly entertainments in the “Persianate world.” The heroic epic, ghazal lyric, mystical treatise, and romance both drew upon and shaped understandings of the experience of love in the courts of predominantly Muslim rulers from the Bosphorus to Bengal. In more recent times, films have for audiences practically everywhere overshadowed past literary and artistic forms in their depictions of the attitudes and behaviors of love. If cinematic performances of love have enjoyed any rivals for people’s attention, this competition has largely come from other audio-visual media like television. In the Persianate world, no single cinematic source has dominated modern representations of love. A number of film industries took form in this “region” that encompasses much of what scholars have called the Middle East
and South Asia. Arguably, Bombay or Mumbai (India), Istanbul (Turkey), and Tehran (Iran) have housed the most important of these native industries. The production of films in India, Iran, and Turkey began not long after the invention of film technology itself, but “professional” studios and a large film-going public generally did not emerge until after World War II. In fact, it was in the immediate post-war decades of the 1950s to the 1970s that the cinemas I designate as Persianate enjoyed their greatest period of sustained commercial success. In the decades since, a number of social, political, and technological developments have negatively affected the fortunes of these commercial industries. This period of intermittent crises and reorganizations has seemingly coincided with the dimming of the stylistic and narrative coherences that previously marked Persianate cinemas. The analysis to follow is especially concerned with the commercial “golden age.” Of course, any study that takes seriously these three film cultures is a departure from standard narratives. Most critics and academics have viewed the products of these commercial industries almost uniformly in a negative light, more often than not as poorly conceived Hollywood knock-offs. The prevailing discourse has presented the films that people have watched as alienated from their cultural past or, worse, promoting the most backward and “feudal” elements of that past. However, I argue that one of the accomplishments of these much maligned film cultures is precisely their articulation with pre-cinematic, often courtly entertainments in a new context and for a new audience.

What were once primarily aristocratic conceptions of the extended patrilocal family as a historical, physical, and moral entity have taken on wider significance in more recent times to provide Persianate cinemas with their drama and even modern coloring. To some degree, the modernity of the middle classes in India, Iran, and Turkey has involved the democratization of practices associated with a now-lapsed Persianate elite. If middle-class viewers have

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1 There are certainly other film cultures that have narrative, stylistic, and even audience overlaps with the Persianate cinemas named above. The “regional” cinemas of India, including the Telugu- and Tamil-language industries in Hyderabad and Chennai (Madras) respectively, number among them. Popular Egyptian films are also left out of the analysis to follow, but a case could be made for their inclusion in the web of aesthetic and structural relations linking the popular Hindi-language, Iranian, and Turkish cinemas (e.g., Armbrust).

2 The narrative of a fleeting post-war commercial “golden age” is especially prevalent in histories of the Iranian and Turkish cinemas, which both reached a high-water mark in production and profitability in the 1970s followed by a precipitous and enduring decline (e.g., Arslan).

3 Consequently, attacks on domestic commercial productions have stressed their lack of cultural authenticity (e.g., Ray).
understood their material and moral well-being as vested in the family and its social circle, then many film narratives have centered on threats to family solidarity. The films have invariably represented the family and familial love as that which brings order and prosperity to life, allowing people to realize their life wishes and fulfill themselves. By contrast, representations of characters’ erotic love have stressed its seductive appeal and even nobility but, in the end, those erotic emotions are stifled by or subsumed under familial devotion and obligation. The centrality of the family in national life has perhaps only been challenged by the friendships of male protagonists, which filmmakers have often depicted as making family possible.

The tying of family well-being to national well-being in the popular cinemas of the Persianate world not only diverged from the prevailing developmentalist perspective of national leaders and foreign advisors in the post-war Middle East and South Asia, but also from the prevailing narrative thrust of many Hollywood titles after which the products of these film cultures were supposedly modeled. Hollywood filmmakers have over the years problematized the erotic love of their characters, but rarely have they questioned its pivotal role in the reproduction of social life. In fact, Hollywood depictions of erotic love have at the very least promoted American middle-class views of the heterosexual couple’s intense mutual attraction successfully leading to marriage. In contrast to Persianate cinemas, erotic love in many Hollywood films has thus been the very basis of marriage and the constitution of a family, rather than an impediment to these social institutions and practices.

**Persianate World, Persianate Cinemas**

Academics and critics have generally turned to economics or geography (or both) to explain the similarities between the commercial features produced in India, Iran, and Turkey. Thus, a shared aversion to creative risk-taking and desire for quick profit has contributed to the shameless theft of plots, dialogue, and characters from successful Hollywood productions to be awkwardly paired with variety-show elements of both a Western and Eastern

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4 Of course, the very claim that popular films in India, Iran, and Turkey have addressed largely urban middle-class interests and audiences is fraught with controversy. Critics at home have frequently distanced themselves and their class compatriots from such films whose greatest appeal, they have alleged, lie with poorer and less-educated segments of society left out of the processes of modernization. Such characterizations have especially dogged the Iranian and Turkish cinemas of the immediate post-war decades (e.g., Mutlu).
provenance. Likewise, geographic proximity and the ready availability of hit titles from neighboring countries has meant that some domestic productions were actually re-makes of re-makes.\(^5\) Hamid Naficy (2011) has encapsulated these critiques, at least in reference to popular Iranian cinema during its pre-revolutionary heyday, by claiming it to be the product of a then-prevalent “montage culture” (148). However, few have turned to history to describe the shared aesthetic sensibilities and narrative concerns of these three film worlds. The popular cinemas of India, Iran, and Turkey have enjoyed a dialogical relationship that draws on as well as mirrors interlinked literary and performative traditions of the medieval and early modern Persianate world.

“Persianate” is a contentious term that deserves its own extended discussion as part of a broader re-thinking of social scientific approaches to “Islamic history.” For now, I will say that my use of the term employs different points of emphasis than some previous interpretations. Marshall Hodgson (1974) has often been credited with coining the term in description of a late-caliphal and especially post-caliphal high culture “in Persian or reflecting Persian inspiration” dominant in the “Muslim East” (Mashreq) of West, Central, and South Asia (11, 293). To be sure, Persianate cultures in a pre-modern context were courtly cultures, which ironically owed much of their existence to Turkic-speaking patrons. Likewise, Persianate cultures had their start in texts and aesthetic practices closely connected to the Persian language. I wish to stress this composite and cosmopolitan character of the Persianate, but reject any readings of Hodgson’s work that insist on an ethnic or national “genius” at the center of it.

The Persianate world has consisted of a series of specific historical formations that have been situationally and relationally contingent, rather than linked by some eternal Persian “essence.” The turn to New Persian in the tenth-century provincial courts of the Mashreq was likely not motivated by chauvinism or anti-chauvinism but was instead part of a push for autonomy from a declining Abbasid court whose claims to universal rule were fading. Courtly entertainments, centered on the practices of heroism and romance, were perhaps of special importance in asserting the cosmopolitanism of Persianate courts as part of their projections of power. The Shāh-nāma, or Book of Kings, of Ferdowsi (940–1020), which would be the paradigmatic text of Persianate elites, provided a cultural space for taking up “new” ideas and institutions in

\(^5\) Sadr, for example, has noted (57, 74–78) the imposing shadow that Hollywood, Egyptian, and Indian cinemas cast over the early Iranian studio productions of the 1950s. He has assigned special blame to popular Egyptian and Turkish titles for inspiring the Iranian industry to fill their releases with cabaret performances and Oriental dance of sometimes dubious relevance to the plot.
order to initiate yet another cycle of universal rule. A Persianate Sufism similarly presented a cosmopolitan alternative to an increasingly assertive Sunni orthodoxy and the growing connection of Arabic with the scriptural sciences (Lewisohn). Persianate aesthetic models thus offered the East a sophistication and ecumenism that the declining or absent caliphate no longer could and that an austere and parochial Shari’a-based aesthetics (or “anti-aesthetics”) had rejected. Cosmopolitan Persianate ideas and practices would take on new layers in the centuries to come as a succession of dynasties and their subjects continuously re-worked them with Chinese, Turko-Mongolian, Indian, and European elements (e.g., Kadoi).

Persianate cultures supposedly reached their apogee under the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires in the early modern era (Hodgson, 111, 46–52). Their courtly cultures linked the three empires but also served as a point of intense rivalry (Soudavar). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Mughals and Ottomans dramatically expanded the footprint of the Persianate world, bringing the texts and practices connected with it to new groups of people who would make them their own (e.g., Algar). The Mughals and Ottomans would also contribute to the rise of Urdu and Ottoman Turkish, respectively, as Persianate literary languages alongside Persian. The courtly traditions and entertainments of these three early modern empires, or “padishahates” as I prefer to call them, have cast a long shadow over subsequent cultural transformations

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6 In the introduction to his translation of the *Shāh-nāma*, Davis (Ferdowsi xix–xx) has written that Ferdowsi’s appropriation of “pre-Islamic” mythology to re-frame human history bypassed the Islamic cosmologies and chronologies that had organized the Abbasid universal histories of Tabari (839–923) or Ma’sudi (896–956). In departing from the prevailing historiographical model, Ferdowsi opened a path for the transformation of the kinds of political and religious authority that these earlier histories had represented. Of course, the situation in North Africa and its periphery (Maghreb) in the later and post-Abbasid period was very different as the “utopian” ideal of the caliph and Arabic as the language of cosmopolitan courtly culture continued under the Fatimids and the Caliphate of Córdoba and subsequently under the Mamluks and Almohads. Crone and Hinds have noted (17) that the Fatimids and Umayyads in Spain made claims to caliphal authority in similar terms as the Abbasids.

7 Leaman has acknowledged the shadow that a Shari’a-based anti-aesthetics has cast over much of the modern study of “Islamic aesthetics.” He has argued (3) that “[m]any commentators on Islamic art do not regard it as really art.” Yet, “secular” courtly as well as “heterodox” Sufi aesthetics would appear to challenge the limitations that an Islamic aesthetics interpreted by legalists sought to impose.

8 Fetvacı has argued for the central role of illustrated manuscripts of classic Persian texts, often plundered from rival dynasts further east, in not only the education of the Ottoman royal household during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also in the formation of a uniquely Ottoman Turkish courtly identity during that period.
in the Middle East and South Asia—including the rise of popular cinemas in India, Iran, and Turkey.

Most scholars have argued that modern elites largely abandoned the “traditional” aesthetic models associated with the padishahates and some of their successors. European imperialism and local nationalisms have been accorded much of the blame for this cultural move.9 However, the spread of modernism, with its universalist claims, has undoubtedly played a supporting role (Walkowitz). The relatively-new scholarly field of Persianate studies has taken up this archaization and parochialization of the Persianate world by focusing much of its attention on the past, especially the era of the padishahates, or on modern societies where Persian has attained the status of a national language. What is invariably left out of these modern accounts of the Persianate past or accounts of modern Persians is the democratization of Persianate courtly practices in mass entertainments like film that may or may not be in Persian.

Mukul Kesavan (1994) is among the few scholars to consider the reappropriation of cultural practices once linked to a Persianate aristocracy in popular film, specifically in the Hindi-language commercial cinema based in Mumbai. Writing at a time when Hindu nationalists were attacking symbols of India’s Muslim past and communal violence was on the rise, he employed the even less refined but, in this context, more provocative term “Islamicate” from Hodgson’s work to trace the historical roots of this cinema to the period in which Muslim rule prevailed.10 In Kesavan’s view, Mumbai-based popular filmmakers have deemed the courtly pleasures of early modern Islamicate dynasties, with their emphasis on sensuous, material experiences, as well-suited to cinematic appropriation. Thus, the richly textured language of popular cinema, and especially the emotional content of film songs, has drawn in particular on the heavily Persianized Urdu of the later Mughal courts and their successors in North India, despite the post-independence state’s privileging of a Sanskritized Hindi.11 The eroticism and corporeality that has characterized many Hindi films and film songs likewise drew on elite entertainments, especially those

9 According to Arjomand (3), “The unity of the Persianate world was undermined with the rise of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century, and shattered by the creation of nation-states in the twentieth.”

10 For Hodgson, “Islamicate” referred to the society and culture that first emerged under Muslim rule, which was neither made up entirely of Muslims nor was necessarily “Islamic” in character or content (1, 58–59). Although the relationship between “Islamicate” and “Persianate” is never clearly defined, “Persianate” would appear to be in Hodgson’s informal taxonomy a sub-set of “Islamicate.”

11 By contrast, the Sanskritized Hindi of the supposedly modern and secular Indian republic became the idiom of Indian neorealism and “serious” filmmaking (Kesavan, 251).
connected to the *tavāʾef*, or courtesan. The Urdu-language drama, supposedly the immediate precursor of popular cinema in India, had itself started in the Lucknow court of Wājed ʿAli Shāh (1822–1887) as a reflection of the cosmopolitanism that the Navāb wished to project—re-telling a love story from Hindu mythology through largely Persian poetic modes (Gupta, 183–190). During the final decades of the nineteenth century, troupes led by secularized Zoroastrian Parsis further developed and adapted this theatrical form combining song and stylized melodrama for a wider audience. The Parsi theater drew inspiration from Indian mythology and history but also from Persianate courtly romances and epics like *Khosrow va Shirin* (*Khosrow and Shirin*) and the *Shāh-nāma*. Some of these Parsi theater families eventually transitioned to filmmaking, especially in the sound era, with the subjects of their theatrical productions now making the leap to the silver screen. Kesavan’s genealogy of the popular “Hindi” cinema not only points to the foundational role played by what he has called Islamicate culture but also highlights the irrelevance of its “Muslimness” for filmmakers and filmgoers, as the practices and symbols connected to this “decadent” past are taken to belong to all Indians rather than the Muslim community alone.

In “neighboring” Iran and Turkey, film entertainment would likewise take inspiration from popular understandings of early modern courtly pastimes and pleasures, which involved the enjoyment and enactment of many of the same “texts” of heroism and love as in India. As politicians and intellectuals across the Middle East and South Asia increasingly equated cosmopolitanism with modernism, filmmakers working in commercial studios instead looked to this Persianate “past” (as well as to other popular regional cinemas, like that of India) for an aesthetic model responsive to the incipient “masses” of the modern nation. Like in the past, the creation of Persianate cinemas has been situational and relational in that the courtly themes of heroic action and erotic love that filmmakers in India, Iran, and Turkey took up were not simply some reflex action but gave shape to alternative ideas of citizenship and social relations from those promoted by national leaders. More often than not, cinematic appropriations of courtly “texts” and practices concerning erotic love and heroism would also serve as the “pleasure-seeking” and “idolatrous” outside of prohibitive clerical or legalist interpretations of worldly existence, which ironically gained their greatest relevance during the twentieth century in the absence of a hegemonic Persianate ethical or aesthetic model.12 While

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12 As noted above, austere and exclusionary worldviews in the Persianate world have been present since at least the later caliphal era but largely subordinate to the power of the courts in the pre-modern era. However, the decay and eventual collapse of cosmopolitan...
I acknowledge the difficulty of separating out older courtly ideas and practices of heroism from the discussion below, my focus will be on the recuperation of the tropes of heterosexual and homosocial love (or their Sufi spiritualization) in Persianate cinemas.

**Love, Erotic and Familial**

The literary and artistic traditions of the padishahate era highlighted the intense emotions associated with erotic love but also stressed their long-term “impossibility,” thereby suggesting the incompatibility of such passionate relationships between men and women with the social world of their largely aristocratic patrons. By the same token, such traditions and their performances, in problematizing the beloved, could validate intimate male homosocial or homoerotic relationships in public life. In a modern national context, filmmakers in India, Iran, and Turkey would bring to life in unprecedented ways aspects of the Persianate epic, romance, and lyric poem (along with their visual accompaniments) to extend the “threat” that erotic love posed to nearly all citizens of the nation.

*Ghazal* lyric poetry was perhaps of special importance to early modern discourses on erotic love (*ʿeshq*) in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu. Recitations from illuminated manuscripts of *ghazal* collections were a central element of courtly entertainments. The performance of lyric poetry in the court (or as part of mystical practices) were connected to attempts to give earthly form to the Qorʾānic paradise, where ecstatic experiences in the presence of the divine Beloved and heavenly companions like the houri and *gholām* characterized the afterlife (Rustomji, 83–97). Indeed, the garden in spring bloom as the locus of Qorʾānic paradise was not only the typical setting for the intense emotional and bodily experiences of erotic or divine love in lyric poems and their manuscript illustrations, but also where such “texts” were ideally to be recited or, more accurately, sung. The experiences depicted and elicited through such

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13 The phenomenological, physiological, and sociological terms provided here exist in all three major languages of the Persianate world but are in some cases more familiar to Persian and Urdu than to Turkish. Nevertheless, there are often more commonly used Turkish terms that carry much the same weight and meaning.
performances were, however, ultimately fleeting—not unlike the effects of wine and other intoxicants that could accompany such occasions or their parallel Sufi devotional practices. Consequently, love poetry had an equal, if not greater, concern with separation (jodāʾi), exile (ghorbat), and their devastating effects on the “lovesick.”

This focus in much of ghazal poetry on the problems of erotic love perhaps suggests that courtly recitations, at least in the padishahate era, were likely not occasions for male and female elites to celebrate their real-world relationships. Instead, the invariably male lover/poet sang of nostalgia and longing to an invariably male audience. Of course, the Qorʾānic paradise that such convivial gatherings (majāles, sing. majles) sought to realize was itself heavily oriented towards men (Mernissi, 14–36). In line with the momentary or anticipatory pleasures of earthly paradise, there was also a growing tendency among ghazal poets to stress the ineffable and otherworldly character of the beloved. No earthly relationship could quite measure up to the pleasures and pain of erotic love in its poetic representations. As Andrews and Kalpaklı have written about Ottoman lyric poetry, beloveds were rarely named and often represented androgynously or as young men, “who could be the objects of a love untainted by the inevitably sexual, worldly, and familial overtones of love between men and women” (55).

The representation of erotic attraction and love as something outside marriage and society in lyric poetry facilitated its mystical allegorization but could also endorse the values of the existing social and political order in the padishahates. For royals and notable families, filial devotion and the reputation (nāmus) of the paternal family line (khāndān) embodied by the honor of its women (ʿezzat) could conflict with erotic love relationships, explaining the “absence” of the beloved from the ghazal and its performance. Indeed, the emotional experiences associated with erotic love in many lyric poems were not only placed outside the social world metaphorically, but also literally—in “otherworldly” pastoral settings out of the reach of society or, as first popularized by Hāfez, in more sordid and transient “ruins” (kharābāt) on the edge of civilization. The “conspiracies” of fate (taqdir) depicted in many poems and

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14 Ertuğ has argued, based upon artistic depictions of such festivities found in manuscript collections, that the male-dominated Ottoman festive gathering (meclis) was perhaps a departure from the Timurid, Ilkhanid, and Aq Qoyunlu courts that preceded them (127).

15 Some have especially credited Hāfez (1319–1389) with cultivating an “esthetic of wonder” in the ghazal form (Davis). However, poets associated with the Mughal-era “Indian” literary style (sabk-e Hendi) in particular rendered this indescribable love, often in dialogue with Hāfez, in even more complex terms (e.g., Losensky 2003).
related romances also pointed to the difficult status of erotic love in the transitory world and the limits of its denizens in realizing union. The sobering message often conveyed to readers was that the only relief from the pain of separation and the ultimate vindication of love, whether physical, spiritual, or both, was to be found in the radical action of self-abnegation (shahādat). Of course, such concerns about family honor implicit in the poetry were of particular relevance to their aristocratic patrons who were best positioned to indulge in “inappropriate” affairs and did so. Thus, the private quarters in the palace complexes of elite households could at once be sites of earthly paradise but also where oppressive family dynamics and dangerous personal rivalries ruled.16

Ironically, homoeroticism in the ghazal and related courtly romance traditions was less problematic because male intimacy was not necessarily perceived as a danger to the social and political order but in some ways a vital aspect of it.17 Male public gatherings like those associated with ghazal recitations, and the more private “couplings” that could precede or follow them, created or strengthened bonds of interest and affection between the participants that might extend to the more practical concerns of life. That female poets and courtesans attending such gatherings could be accorded “honorary” manhood (e.g., Matthee, 144) speaks to the importance of courtly majāles to practices of male bonding. The honor and prosperity of the extended patrilocal family were understood to be an adjunct of male friendships, of the company one kept. In some cases, the bonds between male elites in the padishahates could be formalized through the creation of actual family ties (e.g., Lal, 193–194).

To be sure, the texts and practices connected with courtly love traditions were not the sole preserve of early modern elites. Folk forms could explore in similar terms the transcendent pleasures of erotic love and the exquisite pain of lovesickness. Mystical lyric perhaps best highlights the problem of separating

16 A number of important studies of harem politics in the padishahates, based in part on expanding scholarly access to archival records, have appeared in recent decades. Peirce has forcefully argued (esp. 91–112) for the vital role of the queen mother (valide sultan) in Ottoman affairs during the seventeenth century through her management of the sexual and social links of the Ottoman palace. Sharma, in turn, has demonstrated how courtly gossip about affairs in Mughal India could itself become literary fodder.

17 As Losensky (2009, 754) has written about two love stories, one heterosexual and one homoerotic, by the Safavid-era poet Mohtasham Kāshāni (d. 1588), “[f]or modern readers, the gender of the young male beloved in The Glorious Epistle may be more scandalous than that of the courtesan in The Lovers’ Confection. But the opposite was likely the case for Muhtasham’s contemporaries, for whom homoeroticism would have been a normative form of romantic love ....”
out courtly æsthetic sensibilities from more popular ones. Oral narratives, including song and image, delivered in public houses or town and village squares also featured the love affairs and connected heroic feats of historical and mythical characters who could equally figure in courtly entertainments (e.g., Hanaway). Nevertheless, courtly forms likely served as the referent for all other contemplations on love in the early modern Persianate world. If the texts and practices of erotic and divine love were at some level concerned with realizing paradise in the here and now, then they were perforce of primary significance to elites and courtly networks of cultural production that circulated, reproduced, and reconfigured these traditions.

Even as the courtly love genre grew outmoded during the past century, the ideas and forms behind it took on new interpretations and relevance. New national governments instituting modernizing reforms had seemingly alienated their citizens from this cultural past. Yet, politicians and intellectuals had at the same time made Persianate “classics” a standard component of school curricula with the expansion of education and literacy beyond predominantly urban and elite settings (e.g., Fortna, 175–205). The social themes of this classic literature too gained greater relevance among the newly-educated and upwardly-mobile who could now at least aspire to having family honor. Of course, Western social theorists from a variety of political orientations had, beginning in the nineteenth century, identified the expansive ties of family and friends that often characterized the lives of Persianate elites as burdensome and a major culprit in the “backwardness” of the East (Curtis, 217–298).

Some Western-educated intellectuals and nationalist reformers in the Middle East and South Asia would accept these critiques and call for the cultivation

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18 Besides storytelling, shared and parallel popular(-ized) venues for performing love in the Persianate world included theatrical forms like the kārāgöz shadow play and ruhovzi improvisational theater. Even the Shiʿite taʿziya plays contributed to pre-modern discourses on love, as the taʿziya of Hasan b. ʿAli’s son, Qāsem (668–680) attests (Richard, 101).

19 The ghazal, for example, remained a favorite of public intellectuals across the Persianate world who increasingly put it to use in their explorations of the new ideas of constitutionalism and nationalism in the face of weak monarchies and European imperialism. In doing so, they sought to emotionally link their readers to a different kind of love and estrangement from what had characterized earlier lyric poems (e.g., Sevea, 62–93).

20 The "de-Orientalization" of the Turkish language initiated under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1923–1938), is perhaps the most obvious example of this modernizing trend (Lewis).

21 This educational expansion did not necessarily have the effects intended by modernist elites but, as Fortna has pointed out (104), the intellectual connections that the new reading classes made with the past were themselves evidence of an “unprecedentedly modern consciousness.”
of independent-minded patriotic men and women beholden to one another, often through companionate marriage, rather than to the stifling, corrupt atmosphere of “patrimonialism,” “tribalism,” and “feudalism” in which their societies were supposedly mired (e.g., Sirman). School curricula, military training, state media outlets, family law, and youth or women’s groups were all to contribute to this transition to so-called modern values (e.g., Kashani-Sabet, 51–72). Development experts, who became a fixture in government circles after World War II, vigorously endorsed and advised official and unofficial campaigns to create a “participant society” and “empathic individuals” that would allow the “new” nations of the Middle East and South Asia to achieve their full potential (Lerner 43–75). However, such reform efforts, to which national leaders sometimes only half-heartedly assented (e.g., V. Nasr), were increasingly challenged by a citizenry who resented such government interference in their private lives. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that official problematization of the extended patrilocal family in India, Iran, and Turkey coincided with its rising importance to new segments of society that previously had little in the way of family prosperity or social mobility. Likewise, male homosociality would for many still dominate public life and family relations with the outside world even as official and unofficial campaigns for “productive” heteronormative sexuality and companionate love targeted the exemplary middle classes. Consequently, the seeming embrace by elites of individualism, heterosocial marriage, and the nuclear family—as part of their transition to modernity—was matched by a larger movement, especially among those rising (or falling) into the middle classes, that took up with some adjustments older Persianate aristocratic models for organizing their private and public lives.

The Persianate cinemas that gained a mass following in the decades after World War II took up the narrative modes and emotive mechanisms at the center of the ghazal, romance, and their folk equivalents to apply them to the exemplary middle-class family as the subject, explicit or implicit, of their titles. In tapping into this cosmopolitan past, such features complicated ideas of the nation and its history promoted by intellectuals and politicians in India, Iran, 

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22 Among the few scholars who have examined the social history of the family institution in the Middle East and South Asia, Duben and Behar have contended that extended family networks in nineteenth and early twentieth century Istanbul were primarily of relevance to the upper classes whereas lower class families were mostly small in size, nuclear, and neolocal. Moreover, marriages were contracted among the Istanbul lower classes without much concern for social advancement. It is perhaps logical that increasing educational and social opportunities would contribute to the spread of such “family values” beyond elites in the modern Persianate world.
and Turkey.\textsuperscript{23} It is unlikely that industry people or audiences were always conscious of the films’ historical links to older courtly practices, even less so of their part in a longer history of cultural dialogue across the Persianate world. Such dialogue did not require direct or contemporaneous communication but it did require a shared set of references and experiences. Only the Persianate past can shed light on the similarities encountered between the preoccupations and concerns of popular features and their audiences in India, Iran, and Turkey, especially during the post-war decades when the modernist trajectories of these three nations most converged.

While modernists across the board have dismissed the aesthetic model offered up in Persianate melodramas as a historical residue, at best of temporary appeal to those on the margins of the processes of modernization, such films’ mainly urban, educated audiences and their lasting imprint on filmmaking styles in this region would seem to argue otherwise. Who, after all, had the means to attend the cinema hall on a regular basis besides the modernizing middle classes? Likewise, the notion that the “backward” and “reactionary” flocked to such filmed entertainment, which upheld “their” dated attitudes and ideals, while the educated classes mainly indulged in sophisticated, forward-looking art does not explain how the supposedly traditionally-minded enjoyed the drinking, overt sexuality, and other unsavory behavior that they encountered in the homegrown melodramas. Indeed, popular films in India, Iran, and Turkey have not only challenged modernists’ official ideas of the nation and their marginalization of the Persianate courtly past, but also the cultural purification movements of recently-empowered religious reformists.\textsuperscript{24}

**Popular Cinemas, East and West**

Not all popular films have been “popular” in the sense of drawing large audiences. There have been many poorly-conceived, technically-deficient, and

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\textsuperscript{23} Inden (2013, 496) has similarly argued for the democratization and massification of “earlier performative representations of high-ranking families” in portrayals of modern-day families and their social circles in the Hindi-language cinema as part of a critique of national development policies.

\textsuperscript{24} Inden has gone so far as to claim that popular Hindi-language cinema has served as a vehicle for a “national theology” (2009, 252), springing from ideas and practices rooted in the conventional religions of India in support of the Indian family as the nation. This national theology diverges from both the dry legalism of official secular ideology and the purification programs of Hindu nationalists.
dramatically-incoherent titles in the catalogs of these three film cultures, just as some critics and academics have claimed. However, I would argue that audiences have also recognized these shortcomings by generally assigning the thematically- and technically-poorer films to commercial failure. The analysis provided below relies in particular on features from the heyday of Persianate cinemas that struck a chord with audiences and have, as such, stood the test of time by surviving multiple advances in video technology. Few of these popular favorites are explicitly referenced in the text. I leave more detailed case studies to confirm or refute my hypotheses to others. Instead, I highlight similar approaches to the depiction of erotic love and the erotic love relationship by popular filmmakers in India, Iran, and Turkey, which would seem to be more inspired by the literary and performative past and by each other’s films than by any Hollywood model. Persianate cinemas have, through a variety of techniques, problematized erotic love relationships between men and women to stress the primacy of the family and its social circle to the material and moral basis of the nation. Even as political and economic transformations in recent decades have prompted new genres and even claims of new cinematic eras in the Persianate world, which supposedly challenge earlier representations of the nation and family life, the older conventions of erotic love, homosociality, and family obligation have seemingly remained relevant.

According to Norman Denzin, the development of cinema did not merely offer up a more faithful means for capturing “reality,” but contributed to the

25 While available box office data is spotty, especially for the boom years of the 1950s to the 1970s, there is nevertheless some ancillary evidence to support the claim that unprofitable releases outnumbered profitable ones in all three of these film cultures. In fact, the lack of information about the box office takings of many films is perhaps the best evidence of their less than impressive performance with audiences. Moreover, the financial crises that especially weighed down the Iranian and Turkish industries towards the end of the 1970s were not just a matter of commercial over-expansion or general political and economic conditions but also due to a lack of filmgoer interest in many releases (e.g., Yıldırım, 343–345).

26 The similarities in approach were most apparent in those post-war decades when the greatest dialogue and collaboration between the commercial industries of the Persianate world took place. Cooperation between film studios in India, Iran, and Turkey was most intense in the 1970s, with Iranian studios often acting as the go-between. A number of films were produced in Iran during the decade with stars and behind-the-camera talent from India and Turkey. The Turkish actor Cüneyt Arkın, for example, was simultaneously a major star in the Turkish and Iranian cinemas in these years, going by the name Fakhr al-Din in Iran (Arkın). Post-production sound recording, long a standard feature of Persianate cinemas, made such cross-over stars possible.
ways in which people apprehended that reality—making modern society in his reckoning a “cinematic society” that increasingly experienced the world through its cinematic representations (21–22). Denzin’s primary concern lay with Hollywood and American society but his argument may be extended to nearly all parts of the world where a viable commercial cinema industry took root. Cinematic productions helped to make the present and, in doing so, oriented the future. Those involved in Hollywood and, especially before World War II, the major European film industries have historically been at the forefront of technological advances bringing to the screen ever more “naturalistic” representations of the world. The reliance on technology and “special effects” in many Western features has corresponded with the aestheticization of technology and machinery on screen (Rutsky, 48–72). However, the transfer of film technology to the Persianate world did not broadly contribute to a similar fetishization of technology as the defining character of modern life. For some commentators, the divergence of popular film in India, Iran, and Turkey with these core cinematic principles established in the West underlined the aesthetic “confusion” of those involved in the commercial industries (e.g., Ray, 19–24). Yet, it is my contention that filmmakers and audiences in India, Iran, and Turkey have instead focused on the potential of film technology to represent inner rather than outer realities, the unseen rather than the material. Persianate cinemas have offered up a privileged view of characters’ private emotions and thoughts springing from their interactions with other human actors, but also with the unexplainable, extra-human forces of love and fate (e.g., Dwyer).

Like the special effects in many Hollywood films, the spectacular effects of popular Indian, Iranian, and Turkish cinemas have intended to thrill and awe their audiences. Persianate cinemas, especially during the post-war golden age, sought to induce experiences of awe and ecstasy like the ghazal and their illuminations had before. In fact, the cinematic medium stood apart from these earlier performative modes in its ability to represent more vividly and efficiently the operation of erotic love. Ghazal writers devoted many lines to celebrating the physical beauty of the beloved, but paid far more attention to the transformation of such sensual phenomena into emotional experiences related to erotic attraction. Love was not simply resident in individuals

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27 Most avant-garde filmmakers in the Middle East and South Asia have not only lamented the “rootlessness” of home-grown commercial cinema while rejecting their own aesthetic traditions but have also kept their distance from the machine aesthetic undergirding Hollywood and other Western film cultures. The result has been a cinema with an even murkier provenance than the popular films of the region.
awaiting activation but an invisible extra-bodily force that penetrated and took command of its victims.28 Indeed, poets presupposed a complex psychophysiology of love and longing, highlighting the role of the eyes, heart, and liver in its processes. Thus, the “love-struck” was the victim of the gaze (nazar) from an object of beauty that entered him through the eyes and infected his heart, blood, and liver with the turbulent forces of erotic love (e.g., Shamīsā 1, 312–313, 345–352, 474–477). Taylor has in turn written about the dramatization of nazar and its effects in Hindi-language features. Through shot selection, mise-en-scène, audio cues, song lyrics, and even billboard advertisements, the eyes [Fig. 1] have given voice to the “illicit” erotic emotions of film characters.29 The emergence of more “permissive” attitudes towards on-screen sexuality has in recent decades encouraged new and more physical forms of intimacy, but for many viewers the eyes have remained the most important erogenous zone.30 Such “penetrating frontal gazes” would seduce spectators, too, as Taylor’s opening cinematic example, Guddi/Darling Child (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1971),

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28 The prevailing conception of erotic love in the modern West as something individuals possess rather than something that comes to possess them would seem to have its roots in nineteenth-century psychology and the theories of William James and Carl Lange of the emotions as bodily manifestations (Prinz, 45–47). Even as this particular theory of the emotions has come under heavy scrutiny in the decades since, it remains “entrenched” in contemporary psychology discourse (Solomon, 92). Previously, the Persianate etiological understanding of erotic love was also more common in European thought. Andrews and Kalpaklı have noted the many similarities that existed between Ottoman and European literature on love in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not only in their understandings of amatory infection but also in their incorporation of love into courtly power relations (251–269).

29 The above techniques have often worked in combination to represent erotic love. As Taylor has noted (311), “[in] popular Indian cinema close shots of eyes and sequences of lovers gazing intensely at each other are never depicted in silence.”

30 In fact, Taylor has argued (304) that filmmakers have long represented nazar as an “almost physical” contact between film characters, recalling its poetic understandings as bodily penetration.
portraying a schoolgirl’s passion for the 1970s film icon Dharmendra, underlines (297–300). In my view, any discussion of film stardom in Persianate cinemas must start by considering the projection of the star’s nazar to fans. The sensual experience of the characters’ gaze in the Mumbai cinema may well have connections to Hindu devotional practices (namely, drīṣṭi or the vision of an object of worship), but its visuality and aurality surely owe a debt to the secular and Sufi love poetry of early modern Persianate courts [Fig. 2].

**Figure 2**
Early seventeenth century Mughal illustration depicting woman’s nazar in mirror reflection, framed by ghazal distichs of Amir Khosrow (1253–1325), top, and Āsafī Heravi (d. 1517), bottom (Leach, 77).
While generally less discursive in their representations, popular Iranian and Turkish filmmakers would also emphasize the operation of *nazar* in character interactions. The explicit sexuality of many Iranian and Turkish titles during the post-war boom years, and especially during the 1970s, seemingly precluded a more “innocent” eroticism revolving around quivering eyelashes and coquettish looks. Yet, this hyper-sexualized content was often carefully demarcated as the province of prostitutes, cabaret entertainers, and dancing girls in order to protect “respectable” characters and even storylines (e.g., Büker).\(^{31}\) Thus, avoidance of *nazar* through the use of veiling, architecture, landscape, and other blocking devices could signal a character’s chastity and honor. Nevertheless, just as these veiling practices could work as a literal and metaphorical cap on eroticism, they could also work to intensify erotic emotions—again following the lead of *ghasal* literature (Tourage, 156–157). Ironically, film audiences through their privileged perspective could sometimes witness characters’ shared passion before they themselves acknowledged it. The 1971 Iranian feature *Kucheh mardhā/Men of the Alley* (Sa’id Motallebi), for example, uses camera-work, *mise-en-scène*, and music in an early scene where the hero, ‘Ali (Mohammad Ali Fardin), encounters his neighbor’s daughter, Aqdas (Puri Banai) at the bread-seller, to alert the audience to their mutual attraction even as they strain to abide by the informal rules of public morality [Fig. 3].

Persianate cinemas have also represented the frequent intervention of fate in bringing together lovers or introducing obstacles for their union. A variety of devices have been employed both singly and in combination to announce the presence of fate as an extra-human character in film narratives—including via film title references, character dialogue, song lyrics, extra-diegetic music, editing techniques such as the cross-cutting of scenes to imply fate’s orchestration of events, and the depiction of weather phenomena like lightning or wind gusts. Again, earlier courtly literary and artistic representations of *taqdir* in shaping the destiny (*qesmat*) of human actors would appear to contribute to these cinematic depictions. The scene from *The Pure One* referenced in Figure 1 relies on the operation of fate for its logic, as a series of extraordinary events deliver Sāhebjān to the unoccupied tent of a forest ranger (Raaj Kumar) on an uninhabited islet. After falling asleep on his bed, she is awoken by a sudden gust of wind that riffles the pages of the ranger’s diary, revealing a parrot feather inside that she recognizes as her own. In the entry marked by the feather,

\(^{31}\) Much the same can be said about popular Hindi cinema narratives with courtesans, dancing (“nautch”) girls, and vamps usually set apart from “respectable” and sexually-chaste female characters. As Booth has demonstrated, some films also attempted to problematize these character conventions.
Sāhebjān reads about the ranger’s “chance” encounter years earlier aboard a train when he had fallen in love with her sleeping form.

Isolated arcadian settings, far from civilization or the prying eyes of society, that in the *ghazal* and related romance had commonly served as a venue for indulging erotic emotions also transitioned to Persianate cinemas in new and vivid detail, as the scene from *The Pure One* described above demonstrates. Scenes of “paradise on earth” in the form of a garden or exceptional natural landscape have long featured in Hindi-language titles where characters in seeming solitude freely communicated their erotic (and anti-social) emotions, usually in the form of song. Of course, scholars have claimed that song was itself the default performative medium for *ghazal* lyric (e.g., Clinton, 1–21).

The “standard” location for such scenes in the Hindi cinema has changed through the years. As Inden (2013, 507) has written, “[once] upon a time, scenes of paradise were to a large extent limited to staged interiors of mansions, movie sets, or the hilly areas of the Deccan not too far from Mumbai. Occasionally, the production team would venture to the vale of Kashmir, considered the place in the Indian subcontinent most endowed with the characteristics of a paradise on earth. Since the nineties it has become commonplace...
The “fantasy” element in Hindi film songs encouraged critics’ claims of “escapism” and audience manipulation, but their “unreal” content also blatantly marked these scenes as the product, either partly or wholly, of the minds of the character or characters involved. Similar production standards did not apply to many Iranian or Turkish titles during the 1960s and 1970s when song sequences were regularly featured on screen. More ordinary settings were generally employed in such sequences, but they too could serve as venues for communicating in rare private moments (or in the manufactured privacy of alternating close-ups) characters’ most intimate thoughts and emotions—particularly those connected to erotic love. In fact, the historical prominence of film songs in Persianate cinemas may be partly explained by the prominence of love themes in film narratives.

“Paradisiacal” film songs, like their poetic predecessors, were in their settings, lyrics, and musical composition often marked by the mood of masti, or exhilaration through real or imagined union with the beloved. However, that sentiment was almost unfailingly countered by song sequences communicating despair, or gham, springing from separation and exile from the object of love. Filmmakers would use a similar combination of techniques to represent the despair of the lovesick in isolation as they did to represent the lovers’ private experience of masti. However, unlike exhilaration, the characters’ despair was always in and of the world. Consequently, the mood of gham would both answer and overshadow masti, stressing the difficulty of consummating an erotic love relationship without its drastic reconstitution.

Regular viewers of Persianate cinemas have thus watched their melodramatic content, with or without song sequences, anticipating disruptions to the erotic love relationship at the center of the films. The devastating cinematic representations of erotic love, set against and outside society, would again seem to point more to their dialogical relationship with older literary and religious models of chaste love rather than a sophisticated response to state-directed...
censorship regimes. Where sex has appeared in these cinemas, it has for much of their history remained largely independent of the unfulfilled erotic love relationship. The conflicts contributing to the separation or exile of the lovers have taken many different forms, including class divisions, material seductions, lust, villainous relatives or step-relatives, treacherous rival suitors, and tragic misunderstandings between lovers, family members, or close friends. Usually, the obstacles presented to the consummation of the erotic love relationship have involved some combination of the above factors. While Western film discourse and fan talk have historically associated romantic melodrama with “women's films” (Gledhill), audiences of Persianate melodramas were at least during their 1950s to 1970s heyday overwhelmingly male (e.g., ‘Asadi and Mehrdād, 87–89). In light of the audience’s composition, some writers have suggested that narrative action primarily centered on male characters (Najafi, 110). Yet, the role of women in such films was vital, and not merely as an object of the competing interests of male characters. The threat of erotic love to family honor called on female characters to save love interests and male relatives from catastrophic ends through the suppression of their own passions, with veiling an important aspect of these efforts (e.g., Thomas, 167). Their efforts, however, were not always fruitful. Ultimately, the social incompatibility of these powerful emotions could often only be resolved through exile, martyrdom, or their sublimation into familial love via a marriage sanctioned or managed by family members. Heroic sacrificial acts have long involved a renunciation of the social world at odds with the erotic love relationship—ranging from characters’ rejection of their own opportunities for personal fulfillment to a willing death—and contributed to a resolution of the conflict at the heart of the melodrama but in the process transformed the erotic love relationship at stake. The sacrificial act (or acts) of the male protagonist, a close friend, or family member in particular has invariably functioned as the emotional climax of popular melodramas in India, Iran, and Turkey with its aftermath—the reunion and shared “life” of the star-crossed couple—rarely attended to.

The Turkish film Kara Sevda/Ill-fated Love (Seyfi Havaeri, 1968) highlights some of the common conflicts at the center of Persianate melodramas and their resolutions. Hasan (Nuri Sesigüzel), the son of a lowly farmhand, and Selma (Hülya Koçyiğit), the landowner’s daughter, grow up together and, as they approach maturity, their relationship blossoms into a romance. Selma’s father, however, is disapproving of the relationship and forces her to marry Necdet (Önder Somer) whose family background and education make him a better match—a decision that would seem at once to be an endorsement and critique of traditional patriarchy very much in force among the modernizing Turkish middle classes. As Arslan has argued (148), the film mirrors in
important respects the narrative structure of the classic romance of *Laylā va Majnun* (*Laylá and Majnun*), with its countless renderings in courtly and popular literature a source of inspiration for perhaps hundreds of films in the Persianate world. The heart-broken Hasan, however, does not (at least forever) forsake the world and wander half mad into the wilderness like Majnun. Instead, he leaves for the big city, where he is seemingly swallowed up by lusty, materialistic moderns. He becomes a pop music star, as Sesigüzel was in real life, living in great luxury and surrounded by adoring women. News of Hasan's career and life only exacerbates the pain of separation for Selma, which eventually leads to physical illness, itself a nod to certain versions of the *Laylā va Majnun* story. Of course, Hasan's "pure" love for Selma had never diminished and he arrives in time to carry her from her deathbed to their favorite tree planted in childhood on the farm. Here, he commits suicide to be with his love in death if not in life. The final scene depicts the ghostly apparitions of the couple ascending hand-in-hand to heaven.

Critics and academics have long accused the commercial industries in India, Iran, and Turkey of peddling happy endings and unrealistic dreams to a deluded public. However, this is far too simplistic an assessment. A major problem with such critiques has been the tendency to treat popular films as an undifferentiated mass by refusing to acknowledge audience tastes as not only legitimate but also complex and shifting. During the golden age of Persianate cinemas, what usually resonated with audiences were more complicated and bittersweet outcomes—with a contest between erotic love’s seductive power and family love and solidarity frequently figuring into these outcomes.

Yet, family love and family dynamics have also been problematized in Persianate cinemas, drawing on and contributing to their composition in real life. The patrilocal extended family as a social institution has in modern times become an ideal for many in the Persianate world but the relationships that individuals have had with various family members have not been identical. Thus, family love and devotion may be especially characteristic of the grandparent-grandchild relationship or the relationship enjoyed with maternal relatives while family obligation may be something overwhelmingly associated with paternal relatives—in connection with the ideal patrilocality of family in much of India, Iran, and Turkey. Persianate cinemas have represented the complexity of these different family relationships as well as played around with them and the ideals backing them—sometimes for shock value but also

35 Family situations and ideals have not been identical across the Persianate world and changes in family values, relationships, and marriage patterns can and have occurred (e.g., Bromberger).
to emphasize their importance. Thus, the depiction of maternal relatives in villainous roles has been a relatively common cinematic trope. Most notably, popular filmmakers in the Persianate world have depicted many of their protagonists as lacking family or family honor altogether. Yet the fact that those with no social standing and often orphan status are even willing to commit the ultimate sacrifice to preserve or make possible family life for others would seemingly underline the social importance of the family institution for viewers.

At the same time, not all members of the extended patrilocal family in the modern Persianate world have had a blood tie and many have been happy to extend family relations to non-family members. In fact, there would appear to be an understanding that a successful family requires friends. Since Persianate cinemas have for much of their existence been largely for men and about men, it is not altogether unusual that their narratives have frequently stressed the mutual love and devotion of male friends to be the central, defining relationship in the characters’ lives, bearing resemblance to earlier courtly narratives. Ironically, the privileging of male homosocial love at the expense of heterosexual erotic love or familial obligation has often been more acceptable in the films, perhaps because many have considered male friendship to be the institution that makes the world outside the home work, just as familial love makes sense of the world at home. The presentation of film heroes as orphans or suffering from some kind of family handicap would seemingly highlight the need for friends as a surrogate family. Likewise, heroic action could involve a sacrifice of one’s own worldly happiness (and even one’s own worldly existence) to open the way for the personal fulfillment of a friend via marriage and family. Male friendship, then, has operated both as a substitute for and the saving grace of the family in Persianate cinemas.

The film *Men of the Alley* would on the surface appear to revolve around a love triangle, with ʿAli and his troubled friend Hasan (Iraj Qaderi) competing for the affections of Aqdas. Yet, some viewers might consider its true subject to be the love between ʿAli and Hasan, two orphans and surrogate brothers. When Hasan tells ʿAli that he intends to ask Aqdas for her hand in marriage, he has no knowledge of ʿAli’s secret love for her. ʿAli, for his part, immediately forsakes his erotic emotions to ensure his friend’s happiness. In doing so, he raises himself above the concerns of material existence to achieve a Sufi-like martyrdom. The filmmakers present through montage editing ʿAli’s symbolic death in the scene by transforming the color of his shirt to mourning black. They subsequently stress his detachment from the world by depicting his engagement in the physical and spiritual exercises associated with the *zurkhāna*, or wrestling club, where, according to S. H. Nasr (18–19), Sufi devotional practices had lived on in post-Safavid Iran. When Hasan learns of his friend’s great sacrifice, he
breaks off his engagement with Aqdas and seeks out ‘Ali, who could not bear to attend the wedding ceremony, to tell him the news. However, he is tragically killed before reaching him. Of course, Hasan’s death revives the possibility of ‘Ali and Aqdas’ union but the film ends not with their “wedded bliss” but with ‘Ali holding his dying friend in his arms.

The representations of erotic love and its consequences in popular films have rarely appeared in the parallel “art” cinemas of the Persianate world. Of course, art filmmakers have long defined their work in opposition to the narrative and audio-visual conventions of commercial cinema (e.g., Nayeri, 28). Mohsen Makhmalbaf is one filmmaker well-received on the art-house and festival circuit who has addressed older Persianate ideas of love in his films. Yet his interventions, in keeping with art film conventions, have been more self-reflexive and ironic in character. A film of particular interest in this regard is the autobiographical Nun va gulduñ/A Moment of Innocence (1996), based on Makhmalbaf’s 1974 botched attempt to steal a police officer’s gun in aid of an underground opposition group. The incident resulted in his imprisonment for stabbing the officer. Interestingly, the film idea came from the former officer who now wished to become an actor. Makhmalbaf instead suggested to him that they each set out to recreate that day on film with actors playing their younger selves. But in the course of “filming” the story, it becomes clear that what had contributed to that particular turn of events was their shared and ultimately unfulfilled love for Makhmalbaf’s cousin.

In recent decades, Persianate cinemas have undergone significant changes, to the extent that the shared narrative and stylistic concerns enumerated above no longer seem to hold up as well as they once did. Since the late 1970s, commercial film industries in the region have suffered from multiple crises of identity, linked to a number of events and processes of both individual and shared concern. The rise of television and digital media technologies have shaken these industries’ foundations, sometimes to the point of collapse.36 Political upheavals culminating in the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the 1980 military coup in Turkey would paralyze Iranian and Turkish popular cinemas and eventually force massive reorganizations to flush out “undesirables.” The adoption of neoliberal economic policies, especially in India but also in Iran and Turkey, have supposedly brought about dramatic shifts in audience values, ridding the
films of the bitter conflicts of family and class that had characterized the past. Producers have chased a demographic that increasingly “transcended” the nation, both literally and figuratively (e.g., Inden 1999). Yet, it is not entirely clear that the narrative themes and stylistic preoccupations of the former golden age have wholly disappeared. “Bhojpuri” films have emerged in India to answer for Hindi-language commercial features’ pivot to more upwardly mobile and “Non-Resident Indian” audiences at home and abroad (Ghosh). Likewise, revolutionary leaders in Iran had claimed to forever banish the vulgar and un-Islamic Pahlavi-era commercial cinema and create a new, spiritually uplifting film movement in the “cinema of sacred defense (sinemā-ye defā’-e moqaddas)” about the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Yet the pre-revolutionary cinema’s themes, especially male homosociality’s centrality to characters’ lives and the heroes’ anti-social and renunciatory impulses, have pervaded the war films (Partovi, 530–532). Of course, television in all three countries has also drawn on Persianate cinemas for content and inspiration in producing its own melodramatic serials. Home video, too, would make the older films available to Indians, Iranians, and Turks living abroad. In some ways, home video formats and, later on, satellite television and the internet have allowed for the spread of Persianate cinemas to new locales.

The German production Gegen die Wand/Head-On (2004), written and directed by Turkish-German filmmaker Fatih Akın, makes clear that a drastic departure from earlier Persianate filmmaking models has not been achieved by the current generation of filmmakers at home or in the diaspora. At the very least, the film presupposes Turkish titles of the 1960s and 1970s (Berghahn, 252–253) and their narrative focus on erotic and familial love in conflict, which Akın proceeds to subvert. In fact, Akın presents marriage as a means to save a German-born Turkish girl, Sibel (Sibel Kekilli), from the weight of family obligation. Sibel, in a psychiatric ward after attempting suicide to avoid living by the stifling rules of her “traditionally-minded” family (or male relatives), proposes marriage to a much older and serially depressed Turkish immigrant, Cahit (Birol Ünel), whom she met in the ward after his own failed suicide attempt. Her marriage of convenience with the down on his luck Cahit allows her to escape the family home and enjoy the (paradisiacal?) pleasures of drinking, drugs, clubbing, and carnal love but within the bounds of married life and with men other than her husband. The cuckolded Cahit accepts this arrangement in exchange for drink and rent money while continuing an abusive relationship with Maren (Catrin Strieback), a friend of his late wife—whose unexplained death is the source of his own gham. However, as their lives become more entangled, Cahit and Sibel begin to fall in love, again with the added irony of it happening within their married life. Cahit nevertheless resists acting on these
emotions. Her carrying on with other men now fuels his drinking binges and depression until one night, in a drunken rage, he accidentally kills Sibel’s latest fling. Akın subsequently recovers the earlier noted theme of separation so common to Persianate melodramas. Cahit is given a lengthy prison term for his crime. Sibel, fearing her violent brother’s desire to clear the family name of this shame, flees to Istanbul. Once Cahit is released, he goes to Istanbul to find Sibel, who has seemingly accepted a stable home life with a live-in boyfriend and their child. It is only at this point, with their marriage effectively dissolved, that the couple finally consummate their love. Furthermore, these nights of passion do not take place in “free” and “foreign” Hamburg, where they had at various times resisted their erotic emotions, but in Istanbul, which for them serves as a space beyond the prying eyes of society. Cahit asks her to leave her life in Istanbul and join him in returning to his “hometown” of Mersin. But the following morning, she does not make it to the bus station. In the end, Akın validates the enduring theme in Persianate cinemas that erotic love does not belong to this world.

What audiences and filmmakers have thought of as love in Persianate cinemas has differed from common representations of love in the Hollywood romance. Erotic love with sexual intercourse as its embodiment (in other words, “making love”) has for some time been viewed especially among the middle classes in much of the Western world as no longer an impediment to—but the very basis of—marriage. Todd has argued (99–101) that nineteenth-century European social theorists like Comte, Durkheim, and Weber gave this idea of love marriage a modern provenance and linked it to their conceptualizations of the “individual” as the agent of human progress. The proponents of this “individualist model” of evolution differed considerably in their political orientations and theoretical approaches, but all accepted the preeminence of the modern individual over the so-called rigid structures of traditional society. From this modernist perspective, the individual mapped out his own social future within a love-based marriage to an equally free mate. Together they created a nuclear family that, in conjunction with a modern social, educational, and legal environment, would perpetuate itself in future generations and across the globe. In the twentieth century, modernization theory and its derivative discourses promoted the spread of this evolutionary model to the Third World, including to India, Iran, and Turkey. Hollywood features, rooted in a culture that has claimed to prize individualism above all else, have in turn regularly affirmed these modernist values of personal autonomy and salvation in an erotic love-based, egalitarian marriage (Lindholm, 244–245). Moreover, such films have generally subordinated male friendships and the interests of the extended family to the heterosexual erotic relationship of the protagonists.
Indeed, the centrality of heterosexual desire in marriage may perhaps be seen best in Hollywood titles where marriage without erotic love is problematized. For example, in *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), the two cowboys, Ennis (Heath Ledger) and Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal), are trapped in “loveless” marriages due to their “unacceptable” erotic emotions for each other. Their love, thus, must take place outside these unions and outside society—quite literally in the mountains of Wyoming. In its handling of erotic love, it ironically resembles Persianate melodramas.

Nevertheless, one should not get the idea that middle-class citizens in India, Iran, Turkey, or the United States are the simply the patients or instruments of some universalized, set pattern—whether modernist or Persianate—for the operation of love in marriage and family life. Firstly, it is not clear that individualism, erotic love-based marriage, and the nuclear family have been integral to the modern world or modernization. In fact, Todd has contended (100) that Comte, Durkheim, and Weber, among others, provided little evidence for their claims that the transformative events of the Enlightenment (or the Reformation before it) precipitated a shift in social organization and values in the West from extended family structures to individualism and the nuclear family. Rather, he has cited as one counter-example the work of social historians of medieval England, who determined that, at least since the thirteenth century, the so-called traditional family was in fact a nuclear family. If modernist histories of erotic love, marriage, and the family are questionable, then so too are modernist claims of Persianate views of the same as traditional. Secondly, neither the modernist nor Persianate model of marriage and the family has solved the “problem” of erotic and familial love. Hollywood and Persianate cinemas, for their part, have also not failed to highlight, sometimes unintentionally, the conflicts and contradictions in these disparate ways to see and live the roles of love in everyday life. The idea that people can automatically reconcile erotic love with companionate marriage and family in the United States (or elsewhere in the West) disregards the divorce rate as well as the need for marriage therapy and other rehabilitative strategies. Likewise, the Persianate idea that familial love and obligation will, with marriage, overcome an individual's erotic feelings has also been a fantasy.37 It is not as if erotic love has been entirely impossible in marriages in the Persianate world or that married couples have not enjoyed a sexual relationship. Moreover, it is not obvious that arranged or socially-engineered marriage and free love are necessarily in conflict. To be sure, people in the United States and elsewhere in the

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37 Note the phenomenon of “white marriage” in Iran (Mostaghim and Parvini).
West may also try to manipulate the social world around them to land the man or woman of their dreams.  

The social ideals and values that filmmakers and audiences have upheld or dismissed in both Persianate and Hollywood cinemas have given shape to and have been shaped by two different cinematic societies. While critics and academics have generally viewed popular cinemas everywhere through the universalizing lens of “mass entertainment,” Persianate and Hollywood cinemas would appear to have contrasting histories and concerns. In the case of Persianate cinemas, their output has not simply been a series of poor imitations of Hollywood productions, but has at least in part drawn on a set of aesthetic and thematic elements rooted in native performative traditions. In doing so, Persianate cinemas have advocated a set of social practices and relationships that deviate from modernist (but not “modern”) approaches. The concept of Persianate cinemas that this essay introduces through its analysis of on-screen depictions of romance, friendship, and family not only challenges political and intellectual elites’ ideas of modern citizenship in India, Iran, and Turkey, but also the standard readings of these nations’ recent histories as necessarily characterized by a conflict between tradition and modernity.

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38 Note the phenomenon of internet dating sites that seek to transform romantic fate into a computer code.


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