

A comment on the Iranian film, *Mermaid*, and an interview with writer-director Saber Mostafapour: “Cinema is nothing without reality”

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Directed and written by Saber Mostafapour

Mermaid (2020), from Saber Mostafapour, is one of a number of recent Iranian short films that stand out not simply for their aesthetic quality, but also for their realistic approach and the seriousness with which they treat the problems of wide layers of the population. Seemingly elementary, everyday feelings and desires, when acted upon, may generate large conflicts and even tragic crises.

The film is a portrait of Milad (Mehrali Ghazvini), a transgender high school student who identifies as a female, but she is not accepted in her parents’ home or in her school. To sustain herself emotionally and spiritually, she relies on her imagination and her depictions of mermaids in sketches and in murals that she paints on the walls of an abandoned building where she goes to change into women’s clothing.

In the opening scene, as Milad gets ready to leave home in the morning, we learn that Milad’s father has been asked to pay a visit to his child’s school. Milad’s mother (Mahla Eslami), like Milad, appears with bruises and abrasions—signs of physical abuse. She strongly suggests that something bad will happen if Milad’s father finds out that Milad has been skipping school.

Later, after changing clothes at the dilapidated building that serves as Milad’s sanctuary, she is discovered by a group of her classmates. Milad is called a “rabid boy” and physically assaulted. As writer-director Mostafapour explained to me about the high school students who attack Milad, “Schools in Iran are gender segregated and adolescents do not reach sexual maturity and this vacuum leads to their inappropriate behaviors. Sexual emptiness persists in children from adolescence and leads to inappropriate behaviors in adulthood.”

Milad manages to escape from her attackers and in a touching scene is helped by a driver (Meysam Vahhabi) who picks her up on the side of the road. The driver looks a little uneasy when he realizes that his passenger may be transgender, but when Milad’s classmates pursue them in another car, the man does not hesitate to help Milad evade her attackers, and he loses them with a few quick maneuvers.

Afraid of what her father will do to her if she goes home, Milad

starts to wander by the sea when her classmates find her again. Trapped, Milad goes into the ocean and does not emerge.

The film takes a naturalistic approach that gives one a sense of the broader social forces at play in the lives of its characters. Beyond Milad’s very personal situation and the ostracism she faces for being transgender, *Mermaid* also realistically conveys the specific social context within which Milad finds herself. It is a lower-middle-class household headed by a physically and emotionally abusive father (unseen in the film), whose intolerance toward his transgender child is driven by his concern for his reputation amid social pressures to uphold traditional values. And Milad’s attackers even seem distraught and ashamed of themselves at the end when they realize what they have done, which speaks to the humanity of the film.

Mostafapour, who wrote and directed *Mermaid* before the pandemic, is from the Iranian port city of Nowshahr on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. He studied filmmaking in Tehran, at the Iranian Youth Cinema Society and the Free Film Workshop School. One of his teachers was renowned filmmaker Masoud Kimiai (*Qeysar*, 1969; *The Deer*, 1974), a pioneer of the Iranian New Wave of the 1960s.

The WSWs recently interviewed Mostafapour by email.

Frank Anderson: I have seen your short film *Mermaid*, which you directed, and the recent short film *Mannequin* (directed by Mahnaz Valipour), on which you worked as the sound recordist. Both of these films, as well as several other recent Iranian short films, demonstrate a serious and humane approach to showing real life. Could you tell me about your background, and how you and your colleagues have come to make these kinds of films? Do you see yourselves as part of a tradition of Iranian cinema?

Saber Mostafapour: I have been involved in many film projects as a writer, editor and sound designer and have made two short films and several student films so far. *Dogs and Wolves* was my first short film in 2019 and *Mermaid* was my second short film in 2020.

Before the Iranian revolution in 1978, Iranian cinema experienced a “new wave,” while the mainstream of Iranian

cinema was popular films that were strongly influenced by Egyptian and Indian cinema. After the revolution, Iranian cinema was divided into two parts. Some filmmakers made feature films and were influenced by the new wave of European cinema, and others made war cinema. Continuing, social and human cinema became the mainstream of Iranian cinema.

The reason why Iranian cinema paid so much [attention] to social cinema was that Iranian cinema officials were not interested in supporting genre cinema, and filmmakers had to take their cameras out [into] the community as much as possible. Since the Iranian people experienced economic and political problems at different times and [because] Iran has different climates with different cultures, there are always attractive cinematic subjects in Iran that become the basis of cinematic drama.

In recent years, filmmakers who started making short films are creating a new spirit in Iranian cinema and are trying to introduce new genres into Iranian cinema. I am also trying to support this new wave.

FA: In your film *Mermaid*, the main character Milad uses art to imagine a different world. What can art do for people living in intolerable conditions?

SM: The task of art is to display the scream. The scream of people no one cares about. The artist's job is to display the screams of these people in artistic language.

In *Mermaid*, I tried to run two different plots parallel to each other. The main plot tells the story of a young man who cannot live a peaceful life with his identity because society cannot accept him with a new identity and in the end a tragedy occurs. Most of the story told in this film comes from reality. At present, Iran is engaged in a sharp clash between tradition and modernity, and this has caused different generations to understand each other less, and this clash of generations sometimes leads to tragic events.

The subplot and subtext in *Mermaid* expresses the psychoanalytic and mythological aspects. In the mythical subtext, water is an element that represents the identity and womanhood of "Milad." In the end, drowning in water has a less tragic meaning because [the character] merged with water and chose its true identity. A mermaid does not end her life by reaching the water, but just begins her life!

FA: While nothing positively fantastical happens in your film, the ending does bring to mind certain fairy tales, not only the obvious Hans Christian Andersen story "The Little Mermaid," but also Andersen's more socially conscious "The Little Match Girl" and the "socialist" fairy tales of Oscar Wilde. How did you conceive the story of *Mermaid*, and what were the impulses behind it?

SM: I am very interested in the world of myths. The use of myths and archetypes have a greater impact on the audience and the appeal of the films. In *Mermaid*, I tried to bring reality and imagination together, but since the story of *Mermaid* originates from reality, the main plot had more of a sense of reality, and imagination was transferred to the subtext of the film. I did not read Mr. Andersen's stories, but I think the reason for the similarity between the stories you mentioned and the mermaid story could be the use of myths, especially mermaid myths.

FA: What has been the response to *Mermaid* in Iran and

internationally?

SM: As I expected, it was not well received at national festivals due to its social critique and the theme of the *Mermaid*! But in international festivals, the film has been well received so far and has been premiered in 20 countries on different continents and has received several awards.

FA: In the United States, there is an endless promotion of the supposed value of "escapism" in movies about lifeless fantasy worlds in which filmmakers and audiences are expected to forget real life. What is the value of realism, or of pictures of real life, in movies?

SM: In my opinion, the reason why real life in American cinema has diminished is that film companies are sacrificing the artistic and cultural values of cinema to capital and money. Cinema is an endless world with space for different films with different genres. Cinema is nothing without reality, just as it is meaningless without fantasy. The artist's task is to bring the audience closer to the cinema by telling attractive cinematic stories.

FA: It is outrageous that Iranian filmmakers are prevented from participating in American film festivals that require payment of festival fees, due to US sanctions against Iran. And because of the official American propaganda against Iran, it is especially important for American audiences to see Iranian films, to see the complexity of Iran's highly cultured society and the humanity of its people. What kind of relationship should the American people and the Iranian people have?

SM: I think the problem of the United States with Iran and their differences is not the differences of their people, but the reason for this difference is the political problems between the two countries. If sometimes the people of the two countries have an enemy view of each other, it is only because of the media, which try to involve the people of their country with their policies through false propaganda.

Short filmmakers in Iran have many concerns because it is very difficult to find an investor for short films in Iran and many brilliant screenplays do not lead to the production of short films due to the difference between the currency of Iran and the international currency. It is very difficult to submit films at festivals. But some festivals do Iranian filmmakers a favor [by allowing] Iranian films to submit at their festival without paying the festival fee.

FA: What are some of the themes or subject matters that you would like to take up in future films?

SM: The environment, cultural issues and the world of children are some of the issues I am interested in making films about.



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