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Elham Hosseini & Miki Flockemann

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Elham Hosseini

University of Western Cape, South Africa (PhD Candidate)

Miki Flockemann

University of Western Cape, South Africa (Extraordinary professor)

Facing the World, All Alone: New Perspectives on Iran's Nuclear Negotiations Via Ehsan Abdipour's *All Alone*

Abstract: The major focus of the present paper is *All Alone* (2013), an Iranian film by Ehsan Abdipour which narrates the life of a boy from Boushehr, whose friendship with the son of a Russian engineer at a nuclear plant has to end as the result of the sanctions against Iran's nuclear capacity at the time. Using the lens of young adults and children, the film tangibly illustrates the impact of the sanctions on the lives of individuals. The power of cinematic representation in highlighting the significance of child perspectives is that it can reveal the human effect of sanctions not directly addressed in the adult world. In addition, the liminal position of the pre-adolescent can provide new space for negotiating the 'unspoken' or unrecognized effects of the sanctions. At the same time, as an Iranian who followed the progress of nuclear talks closely between 2013-2015, the recent release of Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) triggered an immediate association with recollections about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known more commonly as Iran's Nuclear Deal. In particular, *Oppenheimer*'s self-reflexive recollections of the questions he grappled with as a youth about the nature of the universe struck a chord with the dilemma faced by the young protagonist in *All Alone*. In the light of this, the paper will also briefly consider the controversies around nuclear talks at the time *All Alone* was made.

Keywords: Child-centered cinema, cinematic representation, Iran's nuclear program, *All Alone*

"I was homesick, emotionally immature, troubled by the visions of a hidden universe" (*Oppenheimer*, 3:32-45)

"Dear Mr. Najafpour, is there a job in the world to turn one's nightmares into sweet dreams?" (*All Alone*, 1:27:43-52)¹

Introduction

The prime purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the adverse impact of the economic sanctions on the lives of Iranian citizens through a specific cinematic representation, *All Alone* by Ehsan Abdipour. *All Alone* stands out for its depiction of young pre-adolescents in Boushehr who become directly involved with the challenges of nuclear negotiations and sanctions. Boushehr plays a key role in creating the events of the narrative since it is the remote province where a major nuclear power plant is located, on the southern shores of Iran at the border of the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea. After providing a context to the film, I will focus on the effects created by child-centered cinema in Iran, which will lead into an analysis of the film's structure. That in turn will tie the film to the theoretical notions of child representation in cinema, specifically Iranian cinema. Additionally, some discussions will be included to also reflect on how the child's

¹ All translations from the original Farsi in *All Alone* are my own.

perspective can penetrate into apparently hidden spaces and thus offer a glimpse into events behind the scenes of the first round of nuclear talks.

What sparked the present piece, was the international screening of Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* which coincided with the release of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* in July 2023, and their close competition at the box office suggested that a strong interest in the narrativization of scientific and political history is on a par with ongoing interest in the politics of gender. Yet, reflecting on an Iranian film, with close relations to the nuclear program against a back-drop of a cinematic representation of J. Robert Oppenheimer might seem controversial. In fact, given the general suspicions around Iran's nuclear program, the parallel might even suggest that Iran's Nuclear Deal was nothing more than an agreement between the negotiating countries to permit Iran to begin developing a nuclear bomb.

The connection between two remotely similar subjects on the surface thus needs to be clarified at the outset, though obviously Oppenheimer's mission in inventing the most notorious means of mass destruction is distinctively different from the attempts of Iran's nuclear negotiating teams,² which included both scientists and political representatives, to define the limits of Iran's nuclear program. Yet, one aspect the two cases have in common was the illusion of having control over their research, or else, safeguarding the outcome of negotiations, which is a slippery slope when it comes to political interests. To explain further, in the aftermath of the atomic bombardment of Japan, Oppenheimer, experiencing a crisis of conscience, attempted to warn American politicians against the further development of nuclear armament, yet he faced hostility from his rivals who, like Lewis Stauss, supported nuclear retaliation, and this is best described in the Pulitzer prize-winning biography, *American Prometheus: The triumph and Tragedy of J Robert Oppenheimer* (2005): "Oppenheimer gave us atomic fire. But then, when he tried to control it, when he sought to make us aware of its terrible dangers, the powers that-be, like Zeus, rose up in anger to punish him" (Bird and Sherwin 15). On the other hand, Iran's second negotiating team, headed by the former foreign minister, made a successful endeavor to break the international consensus against Iran by pledging a transparent nuclear program in return for revoking the threat of UN resolutions and the lifting of sanctions. However, though similar in reception, the negotiation teams' endeavor, better known as the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), faced two serious obstacles, one being the presidency of Donald Trump, who ignored almost every other international agreement between the U.S and the world—JCPOA being one of them—while the second obstacle came from hardliners in Iran who scorned the team's apparent naivety in believing what they saw as the US's false promises, and urged the Iranian state to also withdraw from the deal as an act of retaliation, which did not, however, happen. In this regard thus, the rise and fall of Oppenheimer as an expert in a specialized field of theoretical physics, and in being called upon in time of crisis could vaguely resemble the fate of the Iranian representatives involved in the nuclear talks to break the impasse of negotiations, in that both Oppenheimer and the Iranian team were subjected to false accusations despite achieving what they were required to do. A more detailed account of discussions around Iran's nuclear program will follow later in terms of being the backstory to the events dealt with in *All Alone*.

Geography Creating Narrative

To return to the context of the film, in general terms 'imposed sanctions' often foreground economic limitations in favor of political purposes, yet it is notable that using the lens of children reveals how other aspects of human life are impacted.

All Alone (2013) narrates a short period of Ranjero's life, a boy between 11-13, who is humorous, bright, and highly imaginative. He bonds with a younger Russian boy, Oleg, the son of an engineer working in the Boushehr power plant, but their friendship is tested by the challenges arising from negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, which makes it difficult for Ranjero to befriend a foreign boy in the public eye, especially that of his scornful uncle who calls him a "communist" (apparently unaware that the communist Soviet bloc

² the first from 2010-2013, and the second from 2013-2015

collapsed in the early nineties). Eventually, Oleg and his father leave Boushehr as a result of the suspension of nuclear activities there, and Ranjero escapes by hiding away in a ship bound for Italy in hopes to reach out to the UN headquarter in Geneva and seek the end of the suspension for the sake of his friendship with Oleg.

The nature of the children's relationship in this specific narrative and its connections to the politics around Iran's nuclear program are closely related to the setting of the events, which is a small village within close proximity of Boushehr's nuclear power plant. The plant was established before the 1979 revolution in Iran, though suspended due to the revolution and the Iraq-Iran war, but was then revived and rebuilt through a contract with Russian contractors in 1992 and was fully relaunched in 2007. The power plant created job opportunities for the youth and safeguarded the security of the province for the Russian contractors. However, the probing into Iran's nuclear program and the Security Council's resolutions between 2008 and 2011 raised huge tensions over probable military interventions if Iran failed to comply with international regulations concerning the transparency of its nuclear activities. It is no wonder that Ehsan Abdipour, as a local from that region, could successfully include these political complexities and specifically policies around nuclear activities, as enfolded in the lives of the people of Boushehr.

The Figure of the Child in Film and Iranian Cinema

Child-centered cinema has been a defining characteristic of early neorealist filmmaking from the outset. As Deborah Martin notes, these typical features include "a focus on the poor and working classes, a concern with social inequality, the use of natural actors and on-location shooting" (15).³ This aligns with *All Alone*, as Ranjero and his friends have to work even as children to supplement the family income (though he does so in an apparently cheerfully entrepreneurial spirit rather than being depicted as a victim of poverty). Shooting the film on location in Boushehr puts this remote area of Iran and the struggles faced by the marginalized communities living there in the spotlight. And while the actor playing Ranjero was not an 'untrained' natural, many of the other children in the film are, contributing to a sense of authenticity. Martin notes that, "where filmmakers wish to denounce injustice or wrong, the child's gaze is particularly useful, since cinema 'tends to project into the child a certain ideal of visual neutrality' (Dufays qtd. in Martin, 2011)" (15). What is interesting in the case of *All Alone*, as I will explain, is that the film interjects three scenes from an adult perspective at strategic points in the cinematic narrative to unsettle the "visual neutrality."

In the Iranian context, as Moradabbasi Fouladi points out, child-centered cinema has been explored extensively in the post-revolution era, mainly through the films by internationally recognized directors such as Bahram Beizayi, Amir Naderi, Abbas Kiarostami, Majid Majidi and Jafar Panahi; however, Ehsan Abdipour belongs to a generation of filmmakers who had been the audience members of the preceding directors. Abdipour, born in 1981 in Boushehr, is essentially a story-teller and writer, whose stories focus on the culture and specifically the accent of the locals from Boushehr. Abdipour places an important emphasis on life stories and their recitation in oral performance. In his view, fiction and narrative are the ultimate achievement of human civilization, without which all else comes down to nothing. In an interview, he said: "the results of chemistry, physics, philosophy, everything can boil down to a story, where you and I are standing in a queue at a bus station and I voluntarily choose to send you ahead of me to take the next bus. We need to capture and re-work life stories before they become too old and stale, before their actors die and take away their stories with them" (Instagram post, Garnet Talent 2023).

Child portrayal in imaginative works, such as written or screened narratives, is mainly drafted by adults and often shaped by expectations that children are innocent, immature, dependent and predictable, so that notions of childhood are devised by and in conformity with the social order of the adult world (see Owain Jones "I Was Born But..." and Angela Bushati "Children and Cinema..."). But the reality of children's identity stands largely outside these norms, in fact, as Jones claims, children are outlaws when it comes to movement

³ Martin draws on the films of Roberto Rossellini, Vittoria Da Sica and Francois Truffaut as examples.

and mobility or even the articulation and flow of their feelings (4). As will be discussed, Ranjerjo's "outlaw" status is suggested by the numerous tracking shots of him moving freely across the island either running or on his bicycle. Jones adds that, "compellingly, in having that natural agency, they become otherised in comparison to grownups in charge of them sometimes—yet in their very otherness, they become particularly sensitive ground in terms of ethics, politics, and power emanating from adulthood" (25). Similarly, drawing on Hamid Reza Sadr's (2002) comments about how depictions of children in the post-revolution cinema of Iran contribute to exposing lived social realities, Anne Patrick Major notes that, "children in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema function empathetically, and by relating to individuals in a way that bypasses national and social belongings, children become a device to produce intercultural meanings" (25). While this comment refers to the way the spectators empathize with the characters and are thus affectively drawn into the narrative, the "intercultural meaning" generated is also manifested by the way Oleg and Ranjero interact with one another despite language barriers. Patrick Major adds that "Sadr goes on to explain that children's 'personal troubles tend not to remain personal,' which implies their existence in the world anterior to a given film is more realistic" (25), and this is borne out by Ranjero's incarceration on the Italian ship. The perspectives outlined here by Sadr and Jones thus clarify how "children allow for humanistic empathy despite the presence of national or cultural signifiers that could produce political and ideological readings if inscribed upon an adult" (Patrick Major 25), which can then explain why the effects of nuclear sanctions in Iran are more compellingly presented via a child-centered narrative.

In this respect, the acclaimed Iranian film historian, Hamid Naficy, notes that children in Iranian cinema are represented "as social agents and meaning-makers who attempt to solve their problems on their own" while remaining open to notions such as "reconciliation, decency, compassion, optimism and hope" (qtd. in Moradabasi 26). In the case of Ranjero, this is illustrated in his determined efforts to take matters into his own hands after the power plant has been shut down, as well as his relentless search for explanations and demands for accountability from those who seem to be complicit in separating him from Oleg when the Russians are forced to leave Boushehr. Furthermore, Amir Ali and Amir Hadi Nojournian's analysis of Kiarostami's depiction of children in their "Towards a Poetics of Childhood in Abbas Kiarostami's Cinema" reveals an "understanding of ethics [...] that is not universal and does not offer an arrangement of moral principles, but a contextual and dialogical system in permanent endeavor to redefine itself" (197). In other words, these children, through their own specific paradigms, eventually arrive at new questions which can challenge standard ethics (as suggested by the questions Ranjero poses to his teacher in the second epigraph), or else propose creative resolutions resulting from their own lived perspective. Their chapter draws on Emmanuel Levinas' ideas on ethics presented in his *Totality and Infinity* (1979), wherein he questions the traditional Greek or European notions of ethics based on "ego as the self-conscious knowing subject." (Levinas qtd. in Nojournian and Nojournian 200). Instead, Levinas offers a perspective of an ethical system that puts under question the subject's own ego and as a result is essentially characterized by the other: "one is in a face-to-face relationship with the other, with infinite responsibility" (qtd. in Nojournian and Nojournian 200). Accordingly, the traditional notions of 'self,' which ultimately nurture an egotistical subject, are replaced by a concept in which the self is not only defined and dependent, but also responsible for the other in their very recognition or being. Attempting to further clarify this responsibility, Amir Ali and Amir Hadi Nojournian explain that children do not feel responsible towards the other out of reciprocity but essentially as "self's obligation" (200), which thus puts the other within one's self, and this will be extended to the relationship between the two boys who do not speak each other's language.

On the other hand, Fanon in his discussion of the interdependence of self and other quotes Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*: "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized" (216). It could be said that the very presence of children being involved in a narrative about a nuclear program, a topic entirely dominated by adults, marks them as the 'other' in the film, and the friendship between Oleg as an outsider and Ranjero as a local could also be reviewed from a postcolonial perspective since one of these

children, Oleg, is twice othered for being a child and a foreigner. The moral self-obligation of the 'other' and exploring one's self through the 'other' are thus two notions which are interwoven throughout the narrative structure of *All Alone*.

Structuring *All Alone*

All Alone is structured by shifts between the apparently free-flowing childhood experiences of Ranjero in Boushehr, and three scenes which take place in the confined space of the Captain's cabin on the ship docked in Italy where Ranjero is being kept in custody as a stowaway. Splitting the interview between Olga, the Ukrainian engineer working in Boushehr power plant, and the ship's Captain into three scenes that are placed at the beginning, middle and end of the film, provides the narrative structure to the film, in that each scene offers a frame and an (adult) context to the sequences that follow. At the same time, Olga serves as an intermediary between Ranjero's world and the institutional world of adults. On the one hand, she finds herself mediating between Ranjero and Oleg as she is able to translate for them both and becomes a reluctant confidante, and on the other hand, she tries to intercede on Ranjero's behalf when she travels to Italy in order to explain Ranjero's case and secure his release.

While the opening sequence of the film plunges us directly into the exuberant playfulness of Ranjero's world, the camera then cuts abruptly away to the first interview in the Captain's cabin. The juxtaposition between what we later realize is a dream encounter characterized by children's voices, color and action to the stasis of the monochrome formality of the Captain's office where Olga and the Captain face each other across his desk, establishes the contrast between seeing 'through' the lens of childhood, interspliced with adult interpretations of events. At the same time, it emerges that Ranjero's experiences are in fact the back story to the interview in the Captain's office. In the first of these sequences, she asks the Captain to exempt Ranjero from prosecution, because he is just a child. In the cut to the second sequence, half way through the film, Olga admits to deep involvement in Ranjero and Oleg's friendship. The last cut to their meeting at the end of the film works as a resolution or a denouement offered by the Captain, who argues that it is in Ranjero's own best interest to be delivered to the local police, as his temporary incarceration will make news headlines, both locally and internationally, and in this way Ranjero's voice will be heard, and his cause made public. At the same time this course of action would be in compliance with the Captain's own legal obligation to follow international regulations by handing over a stowaway.

As mentioned above, the film starts with one of Ranjero's dreams, where a group of boys are happily splashing about on the sea shore until unexpectedly, they see a strange flying object in the sky which they first mistake for an UFO, but later transforms into a fighter jet. Ranjero, as one of several teenagers in the water, heroically jumps up to the raised platform where a Shorad (Short Range Air Defense) is mounted, and eventually shoots down the jet fighter. The sequence of scenes, from the surreal dreams of Ranjero to his interactions with friends, co-workers, Oleg and adults, can be seen to exemplify children's capacity to appropriate adults' "ordered or controlled" (Jones 8) spaces through their own liberty of movement. As noted, this freedom of mobility is also evident in Ranjero's daily routine as the camera alternates between medium and long-shot to follow him running to school, running to the dockside to collect the fish his father has caught, and cycling to the Russian sector to sell the fish. However, throughout the film this apparently perpetual movement is interrupted by moments which involve the camera tracking a passage through doorways, or focusing on doors being opened or closed which is often used to mark the shift between scenes. These doors signify the entry into another world and also mark the thresholds that Ranjero crosses to engage with new levels of awareness, which is in keeping with his liminal situation as pre-adolescent.

As described by Michael Carlin, the term "liminality," in relation to child portrayal, can refer to "circumstances and experiences of children that are profoundly life changing" (qtd. in Han and Singer 6), while also illustrating children's agency in "forging new positions and relationships within their community and not in isolation" (Han and Singer 6). For instance, Ranjero and Oleg first encounter one another in front of Oleg's house in the Russian sector, and when Oleg delays in returning Ranjero's fish-weighing contraption,

Ranjero cautiously goes through the door which is ajar and enters their house uninvited, while the camera follows his gaze as he discovers a telescope and the mounted photos of astronauts (we discover later that Oleg's uncle is an astronaut). Ranjero is amazed that the houses he always passes by on his bike to sell fish contain some of his unattainable dreams. In this case the door of Oleg's house ushers an entry for Ranjero into a new world of possibilities.

Ranjero, in a second meeting with Oleg, talks about his waking dream encounter with aliens, which to him is not a dream but a reality that only he was lucky enough to witness; however, when he returns to the same spot where the encounter happened the previous day, all he finds is a sea turtle. Oleg's inability to understand Farsi, which is what Ranjero mainly speaks, sends them both to Olga. She, like the other engineers of the nuclear plant, lives in the same block, albeit behind locked doors and drawn curtains, which in her case, however, are indicative of her voluntarily seclusion within the neighborhood. Olga opens reluctantly to Ranjero, whom she knows as the fish seller, but in opening up her door to the two children, she is exposed to their spectacular world of dreams and desires, which eventually turns her into one of the pivotal characters in the film. With Olga's help, Ranjero succeeds in communicating his dream to Oleg, only to find out that he has heard similar stories and strongly urges Ranjero to look after the 'alien' turtle since its fellow aliens will certainly return to fetch it, and in return for Ranjero's service they will reward him by fulfilling one of his wishes.

At first sight, the friendship between Oleg and Ranjero seems odd since, apart from the language barrier, Oleg is considerably younger than Ranjero, and of a different class and nationality, but it becomes clear that they can communicate in a language beyond the spoken one. Ranjero, whose behavior can be impulsive, is adventurous and yet determined and has a lot to offer to Oleg, who is lonely and isolated, and due to his age and unfamiliarity with his new environment, much more vulnerable. In order to have their wishes granted by imaginary aliens, they create a house on the rocky shores for the alien turtle to stay in hopes that it will communicate with the aliens on their behalf. Owain Jones' comments about alternative spaces created by children are relevant here:

What is undeniable is that they have to negotiate their spatial becoming-other within what is generally adult orientated space. The home, the neighborhood, the school, the city are obvious examples [...] Children's geographies have to trace through them as best they can, through mixings of subterfuge, subversion, or contestation [...]. Children live out their otherness, their 'other geography,' by appropriating spaces in a range of ways [...] under the noses (so to speak) of adults. (8)

But the sweet course of their friendship is disrupted soon by the result of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports, raising skepticism over the transparency of Iranian nuclear activities and the Russian contractors call all activities at Bushehr's nuclear plant to a halt. This causes a storm of anger amongst the locals and one of the first targets becomes Ranjero and Oleg's relationship. Once more, with Olga's help, Ranjero explains everything to Oleg, but at the same time speaks on behalf of his local community: "It is not fair to sign the contract and not fulfill your commitments when other dogs [other dogs being the opponent countries] start barking" (41:29-39). Ranjero's own commitment to his friendship is seen in his message to Oleg explaining why he must pretend to ignore him for a few days in the public eye, yet his comment about the interrupted contract is induced by the rage of the locals, which is one of the several examples that put Ranjero in an 'in-between' or liminal role shifting between child and adult worlds. On the one hand, Ranjero's message for Oleg aligns with Sadr's comment that children's problems tend not to remain personal, as we see how his relationship is over-shadowed by circumstances in the adult world and more importantly how Ranjero as a young pre-adolescent links his anger at being potentially separated from Oleg to the nuclear talks and sanctions. On the other hand, on this occasion, we are exposed to Oleg's otherization, both as a child, on a par with Ranjero, and doubly as a foreign child in a new geographic and cultural environment. Oleg, as a younger boy with barely any friends other than Ranjero, is shocked by the

circumstances of having to stay away from his friend, and further having to bear the disdainful looks of the locals, the source of which he can hardly understand. This is perhaps why that same night he briefly shows up at his father's bedroom door and says: "Dad? Could you please be nicer to Ranjero and the people of the village?" which, as reflected in the expression on his father's face, is received by a flood of mixed feelings, as the father is puzzled by how Oleg knows about the sanctions, and why he is standing up for the hostile locals. Oleg's short but intense communication with his father is just another example that children's apparently 'small world' issues can very well extend to and complicate adult world dynamics.

A few days later, Oleg approaches the boys working at the harbor with a newspaper in hand, and after Ranjero reads the headlines, he starts scolding the ignorance of his fellow workers: "It has nothing to do with Russia, it is the Atomic Energy Agency, I bet you have never heard of an Atom owning an Agency" (45:15-21), and safely resumes his relationship with Oleg. Reunited at Olga's house, the friends mutually affirm their bond. But for the first time Ranjero asks what Oleg's wish would be once the aliens return, and Olga and Ranjero then learn about the predicament of Oleg's mother, who has been institutionalized in a mental health facility, and all Oleg wishes is for his mother to recover and return home. In the second meeting sequence between Olga and the Captain, Olga reflects on how deeply she soon became entangled in the boys' friendship. Not only is she exposed to the disclosure of some of their deepest secrets, but her mediating role in the communication between them also extends to her, as it were, transmitting their deepest desires to the audience. In addition, one could argue that she serves as a witness to the children's otherness since, as noted by Owain Jones in his "'I Was Born But...': Children as Other / Nonrepresentational Subjects in Emotional and Affective Registers as Depicted in Film": "There is a triangulation between the child subject, the camera and the viewer. The camera shows the child from the outside, not getting in the head completely (like a first-person narrative) but offering careful, imaginative, empathetic, witnessing of the child in space and in narrative" (8-9).⁴ One could thus say that the role of the viewer can at times extend to Olga as well since Olga as a mature adult, is also to some extent an outsider (like the spectators) to the events that she both experiences and witnesses. In her role as interpreting the events of Ranjero's life to the Captain, we too are being informed, yet as mentioned earlier by Sadr, because of the affective identification with the child protagonist in child-centered cinema, the viewer responds empathetically (like, or via Olga) to the "intercultural meanings" (qtd. in Patrick-Major 25) of the worldview of Ranjero and Oleg.

The reunion of friends is short-lived, as the tensions around Iran's nuclear program escalate to the UN, and the nuclear power plant of Boushehr has to shut down, the sad result of which is that Oleg and his father leave Iran for an indefinite period. Ranjero follows the news with a mixture of fear and vehement distress. For instance, meeting his literature teacher, Mr. Najafpour, he has questions to ask about the unfamiliar terms he has encountered in media reports about the nuclear talks, such as, "moral scandal, unilateral sanctions, political lobby, Iranian proposal, high-ranking official, missile defense system" (1:03:05-13), the raising of which surprises his teacher, and signifies the level of Ranjero's engagement with the terminology of foreign policy and international relations. The film does not engage with Mr. Najafpour's reply to these questions, implying that the intricacies of the events happening behind the scenes were also difficult for him as an adult to explain. However, these very questions preoccupied the minds of many Iranians whose prospect of a normal life, like Ranjero's friendship, was bound by the results of the nuclear talks at the time. A brief review of the measures taken by the first negotiating team seems pertinent here as it can address the complexity of the situation, which Najafpour, or the film, apparently keep silent about. The first

⁴ Owain Jones draws on concepts raised by Vicky Lebeau in *Childhood and Cinema* (2008): "Lebeau goes on to suggest that if language has limits in representing the otherness of the child, film has some purchase, and can become 'closer to the child' because of its 'privileged access to the perceptual, its visual and aural richness" (7)

negotiating team,⁵ headed by then secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, approached the international talks about Iran's nuclear program from an ethical perspective and a position of power—in their own terms—in short, they admitted to Iran's high capacity for uranium enrichment, but they also emphasized Iran's commitment to the NPT (Non-proliferation Treaty) as an ethical deterrent against developing a nuclear bomb.⁶ However, given that Iran's capacity for uranium enrichment was a source of anxiety for the international community as a potential threat, they were ready to compromise on the issue of transparency and the new limits of nuclear activity in return for a range of issues at hand, from the revoking of the UN resolutions, the lifting of the American and EU sanctions, to allowing Iran to interfere or participate in regional conflicts in the interests of global peace.⁷ The implication of such steps, as Ali Fathollahi-Nejad (*The Islamic Republic...*) suggests, could be seen as follows: "Tehran feels, that if it can accumulate leverage by markedly stepping up its nuclear program, it can then enter into negotiations with Washington from a position of strength and not weakness" (56), which clarifies the highly idealistic objectives of the first negotiating team before reaching a deal.⁸

Ranjero's questions about nuclear talks can address a range of concepts in relation to the review of the events discussed above from a child's perspective, for instance, Be'la Ba'izas (2010) makes a connection between a child's point of view and "secret corners" (qtd. in Han and Singer 6) that are exposed so that the often unseen can become visible, or open to question by being seen through the eyes of a child. Geta Leseur (1995) describes the child's viewpoint in a most delicate, but poignant metaphor as a "forgotten camera in the corner" (qtd. in Flockemann 117), whose presence may not be felt but fulfills its function to observe and record and in the process, thereby, offering an 'unconscious' critique of the adult world (Flockemann 117). In fact, Najafpour's astonishment in the face of Ranjero's questions comes from having to acknowledge the existence of an inquisitive eye which demands answers. In a much broader sense, Negar Mottahedeh (*Iranian Studies*) draws on Sadr to offer readings of the child figure specifically in Iranian cinematography as an allegory of the restrictions faced by the film industry as follows: "The child can embody spatial positions and emotional states that other filmic characters cannot. The figure of the child, then, allegorically foregrounds the constraints of the film industry under state-guided dictates" (342). The silence of Najapour, or implicitly the film, reveals the difficulty of ever being able to make a public critique or question what was being negotiated during the first round of nuclear talks, yet the figure of a curious child may open the way to begin to question such 'unspoken' aspects.⁹

Ranjero learns about the failure of the first round of talks from the border guards. In despair, he goes back to the turtle and waits for the aliens to return, and through Olga he sends a message to Oleg: "if they [aliens] show up, I will only ask for your wish, nothing else" (1:10:37-42), which is a profound moment of 'self-obligation' and not reciprocity on the part of Ranjero as described earlier by Amir Ali and Amir Hadi

⁵ The brief insertion comes from an extensive Q & A session held in the Clubhouse (app) in August 2023, which was an oral account of the book *The Sealed Secret* (2021) by Javad Zarif, former foreign minister of Iran, explaining the ambiguities around the first and second round of talks on Iran's nuclear program.

⁶ A first powerful imperative for the Islamic Republic to ever attain any means of mass destruction, such as an atomic bomb, was definitely the Supreme Leader's religious fatwa against deviation of the nuclear program to develop a nuclear bomb.

⁷ In more clear terms, the former foreign minister, Javad Zarif, describes the efforts of the first negotiating team as idealistic, or aiming for high objectives in hopes to gain the least out of them, and the result was indeed an impasse since making any demands by Iran, in that round of talks, was unrealistic in the framework of international relations, in other words, the talks aimed at certain demands from Iran to be fulfilled.

⁸ Fathollahi-Nejad applies the same logic to the designation of Iran's foreign policy in the aftermath of the U.S unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018, but it arguably puts Iran in a different position, considering the aftermath of reaching a deal and Iran's mitigation of enrichment as intended by and in an international agreement.

⁹ As evident in the title of Javad Zarif's book, published over a decade after the first round of talks, namely *The Sealed Secret*.

Nojournian. Recognizing Oleg's source of distress in their reconciliation at Olga's, Ranjero now focuses on Oleg alone, in other words, he becomes one with him and discovers "the other in oneself" (Nojournian and Nojournian 200). Olga's return message from Oleg: "If they do not return in three weeks, they will not come to fetch their fellow" (1:17:56-1:18:09), is the last straw for Ranjero and prompts his outlandish secret plan to travel to the UN to intercede on Oleg's behalf with a letter in hand translated by Olga. In the final cut to the meeting between Olga and the Captain, she once again urges the Captain to overlook Ranjero's childish mistake and let him return with her, to which the Captain responds: "The best you and I could do for him is to turn him in to the police to be returned to his hometown in the custody of the Iranian Embassy's after ten days. But in those ten days he will make headlines about his trip, and many more reporters will write about a boy who travelled from Boushehr to speak for his people, it is the only way we can help his voice to be heard" (1:26:58-1:27:20).

While the Captain argues that this will ensure that Ranjero's cause thus receives public attention, it also means that the Captain remains within the law in reporting a stowaway.

Conclusion

While the prevalence of Ranjero's moving across thresholds into new worlds of experience and understanding was discussed earlier, in the last section of the film, it is characterized by scenes demonstrating Ranjero's situation as a liminal figure. In addition, the ethical potentialities of this situation as suggested in the portrayal of liminal spaces and liminality in broader terms are also demonstrated. We are introduced to his sense of apparently fearless commitment from the outset via Ranjero's first dream at the opening of the movie, yet, as a result of the tensions around the nuclear program in the second half of the film, culminating in the third cut with the conversation between Olga and the Captain, we observe Ranjero's distress as he finds himself caught between his friendship with Oleg which depends on the media reports about the nuclear talks on the one hand, and the needs of his own family and community on the other. This is cinematically represented in terms of the various thresholds he opts to pass through. The first phase is after Oleg's departure when Ranjero desperately follows the news in hopes of a sign of Oleg's return, but when the negotiations reach an impasse, a disheartened Ranjero tears the collection of newspapers he has been following into pieces, and retreats to his childish dream about the return of the aliens who will grant his wishes. But eventually with a helping hand offered from his friends, he decides to attempt his secret mission to the UN one last time.

These emotional shifts and the shuffling between phases and roles parallel the rhythm of Ranjero's life with that commonly associated with childhood as mentioned earlier: "Children are also, generally, more emotionally mobile. Fear, anger, tears, joy are states younger children move through often on hourly basis" (Jones 4). In deciding to secretly board the ship with his friends' help, he openly says farewell to his family. When his father asks: "But why the UN my son?" (1:23:56), we see a close-up of Ranjero's face talking to the camera: "there are secrets that I only carry in my heart" (1:23:57-40), and with that sentence he approaches the doorway around which his family have clustered anxiously and passes through them effortlessly, followed by a close-up of his father following him with his eyes in both bafflement and admiration. Ranjero's imprisonment on board after being discovered again suggests his liminal status because he is caught in-between a point of departure and a destination, which highlights, despite his determination, his liminal or in-between status.

The Captain's proposal to help Ranjero's voice be heard by the world referred to earlier needs to be considered in light of a crucial question posed by Kallio: "how can children's voice be heard without recruiting, banalising or homogenizing them?" (qtd. in Jones 6). This is cinematically captured in the voice-over in Ranjero's last letter to his Farsi Literature teacher: "In my recent dreams I cry out loud for Heylelah and its people, I remember how peaceful it once was. Dear Mr. Najafpour, is there a job in the world to turn one's nightmares into sweet dreams?" (1:27:43-52). Ranjero then describes his final future career choice.

Since having become disillusioned with his former dreams of the white coat of the physician, the pilot's uniform, or the engineer's Samsonite briefcase, he now sees himself running a coffee stand on the corner of the street where the UN is located. It is clear that making money is not his prime objective, as he offers all his drinks at a low price; instead, he opts for meeting and talking to the highest political officials of each country, to engage in discussions over their current policies. The letter ends in an impassioned, direct address to his own president:

If he [the president] runs bare foot like us in hot summer noon to bring ice from the Vaziri ice factory, if the president comes under the coffin, to carry with us, the bodies found of the soldiers who fought a war for this country some thirty years ago, then he will defuel all the jet fighters at night before going to bed... If the president listens to all I say carefully, it is impossible that he returns to the UN building when his Ranginak [a local drink] is finished. Instead, he will ask for a lighter, light a cigarette and will walk down the path that he came from. And I will fall asleep on the sidewalk of the very street that UN is located in, I will sleep so peacefully to make up for all the years that I have been denied of a good night's sleep. (1:29:46-1:31:10)

This direct address reveals the potential efficacy of the child's perspective to infiltrate the vaster domain of the hidden or forbidden questions of accountability, a move not possible to the adult, especially given the censorship laws in Iran, but the film demonstrates that it is perfectly possible for the apparently naïve (but differently ethical) child to refer to the 'unspoken.'

Ranjero's letter to the president loops back to the two epigraphs at the beginning of the article, in that one could say there is a Ranjero visible in Oppenheimer's description of his life as a young student in Europe in the first epigraph: "I was homesick, emotionally immature, troubled by the visions of a hidden universe" (*Oppenheimer*, 3:32-45). Like the young Oppenheimer, Ranjero is stuck on a ship, homesick, crying aloud in his sleep for Heleylah, his hometown. Ranjero, similar to Oppenheimer in his early youth, is emotionally immature and is troubled by the visions of a "hidden universe" he had thought he could understand. In other words, there is something troublesome for both Ranjero and Oppenheimer, and that is the angst of the manifestations of what is yet to become of the world, a pre-occupation with an adult world for Ranjero that constitutes "nightmares." Yet, in their more or less similar situations, one should keep in mind that Oppenheimer's description of his youth is self-reflective, only taking place in hindsight when he is well into adulthood, in other words, his adult self is well-placed to look back and understand the perplexities of his younger self. However, in the case of Ranjero, he is still a pre-adolescent child located in the doorway to adulthood, forced to pass through that threshold to become the adult that life requires him to be. As a result, while on the doorstep to becoming an adult, he still has questions as a child. As Angela Vacche puts it, "by returning to the ground zero of childhood through the nonjudgemental vision of the camera eye, the cinema can engender fresh emotions, while it can also open us up to existential discoveries, ranging from curiosity towards otherness to acceptance of difference" (5). At the end of the film we are left with an unanswered question, namely, will Ranjero find a way to negotiate between the nightmares he envisions for the future and the sweet dreams he hopes for? The open-ended conclusion is deliberately unsettling because of how Ranjero's question, posed as a child, offers a challenge to the viewer.

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Authors:

Elham HOSSEINI, is PhD candidate of Cultural Studies at the University of Western Cape (South Africa), Arts and Humanities Faculty, English Department since 2019. Her PhD thesis, work in progress, is comparing the transitional periods in South Africa and Iran through dramatic literature and cinematic features. The objective defined and devised for this dissertation is to provide further insight into the ongoing and future

transitional processes in both South Africa and Iran. Her research interests range from English Literature to World Literature, Film studies, and socio-political implications of cultural productions.

Contact: elhamhosseini2604@gmail.com , 3900113@myuwc.ac.za

Miki FLOCKEMANN is Extraordinary Professor in the Department of English at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Her most recent publications are: "**Performing/Mourning Marikana as Affective Critique of a Nation in Crisis.**" (*Theatre, Performance and Commemoration: Staging Crisis, Memory and Nationhood*, edited by Miriam Haughton, Alinne Fernandes and Pieter Verstraete. Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury Press, 2023, pp. 149-142); "**Antigone's Return: When a Once-told Story is Not Enough.**" (*English in Africa: Special Issue: Reading the Classics in South Africa*, Vol. 49, No. 3, November 2022, pp. 55-72); "**Affect, Performance and Language: Implications for an Embodied and Interventionist Pedagogy.**" (*Languages and Literacies in Higher Education: Reclaiming Voices from the South*, edited by Zannie Bock and Christopher Stroud, Bloomsbury Press, 2021, pp. 67-84); "**Connecting Mind to Pen, to Eyes, to Face, to Arms and Legs': Towards a Performative and Decolonial Teaching Practice.**" (*Special Issue: Literature, Pedagogy, Confronting Colonialism: Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Enquiry*, edited by Neil ten Kortenaar, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 286-296). She is currently working on a comparative study of the aesthetics of transition in South African theatre and fiction. Besides the works above mentioned, her research interests and publications include comparative studies of diasporic writings from South Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean with an emphasis on migrant experiences. She has also published extensively on contemporary South African theatre trends with a recent emphasis on the transformative potentiality of affective performance aesthetics.

Contact: mflockemann@uwc.ac.za , robmiki@mweb.co.za

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