

Critique

Subha Das Mollick

## A Movie and A Song



*Sreemoyee Singh with Jafar Panahi*

### **Review of *And, Towards Happy Alleys* (Dur: 75 min; Dir: Sreemoyee Singh)**

Some ten years ago, a bunch of students in the Film Studies department of Jadavpur University were watching Abbas Kiarostami's 1999 film *The Wind Will Carry Us*. In the film, while a village woman milks the cow, someone reads Forough Farrokhzad's poem to her and explains the meaning of 'rendezvous'. Sreemoyee Singh, who was then all of 21 and a postgraduate student of Film Studies, was struck by these lines. She began to find out more about the poet who had penned these lines. In the course of time, her burgeoning interest in Forough

Farrokhzad grew into a magnificent obsession. In Farrokhzad's poetry, she discovers her own womanhood. It was a liberating experience. Snapping out of her traditional upbringing, Sreemoyee found words, images and imagery to celebrate her womanhood.

Forough Farrokhzad happens to be an abiding influence on the Iranian New Wave. Directors like Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi and others have consistently drawn inspiration from her poetry and have created visually lyrical

cinematic expressions of the triumph of the human spirit. Through allegorical allusions and poetic hyperboles, Iranian cinema of the 80s and 90s could circumvent the censorial axe of an ultra-conservative Islamic regime. Farrokhzad's 1963 documentary film *The House is Black* is considered to be a precursor to the Iranian New Wave. It is an unflinching depiction of life in a leper colony, paired with artistically composed shots and her own poetry.



*A snapshot of women of Iran captured by Sreemoyee's camera*

Sreemoyee Singh, like many other students in her class, was deeply influenced by the masterpieces of the Iranian New Wave. She could easily connect to the characters whose stories were told in these films - much more easily than she could connect to the cinema of Hollywood or Europe. The unpretentious, honest and unselfconscious approach of the filmmakers touched her deeply. After completing her postgraduate studies, she registered for a PhD in Iranian cinema and enrolled in a Farsi language learning course. She saved the non-Net PhD fellowship stipend of 8000/- per month, for her next ambitious step forward.

Soon, armed with a 650D Canon camera, a couple of good lenses, a Zoom

sound recorder and a spattering knowledge of Farsi, Sreemoyee set out for Tehran, in search of Iranian cinema. She also hoped to strike a chord of friendship with the women of Iran. She was at last going to Farough Farrokhzad's land. In Tehran, she started making friends, going around with her camera clandestinely and interviewing filmmakers, many of whom continue to make 'underground films' without getting formal permission from the government. To avoid attracting the attention of the government, they would sometimes film in obscure locations with minimal shooting gear.

After her initial sojourn, Sreemoyee made several trips to Iran, geared with better equipment and greater fluency in Farsi. After seven years of determined efforts, she completed her film titled *And Towards Happy Alleys (Be Kucheye Khoshbakht)* and her PhD thesis titled "The Exiled Filmmaker in Post Revolution Iran"

*Towards Happy Alleys* made its debut at Berlinale in 2023 and has travelled to several festivals all across the world. In Sreemoyee's hometown Kolkata, the film premiered at the Kolkata International Film Festival held in December 2023.

The film begins with lines from Farrokhzad's poem

*I speak out of the depth of night  
Out of the depth of darkness, I speak*

*If you come to my house, friend  
Bring me a lamp and a window through which  
I can look at the crowd in the happy alleys*

The lines are followed by a beautiful shot of a woman in a fancy gown, presumably her

wedding dress, walking barefeet by the seaside. The scene is reminiscent of Saraghina in Fellini's *8 and a half*. Then, we see women putting flowers on Farrokhzad's grave and reciting her poetry. The camera lingers on a solitary candle in the wind as plaintive words penned by Farrokhzad float in the air. The scene ends with a tight close-up of a pair of eyes - presumably the reciter's eyes. A voice from behind the camera says, 'You have beautiful eyes'. A smile comes in the eyes and they close. The title of the film in Farsi and English appears against a black background.

This simple, lyrical, yet unpretentious establishing sequence sets the film's tone and establishes the theme. *Towards Happy Alleys is a film about the women of Iran—their resilience, their assertion of womanhood, and their finding their feet in a patriarchal regime as seen by an intimate observer who is an outsider yet not an outsider.*

In this film, one encounters women of Iran in different moods and different settings. Sometimes, they are jubilant, sometimes contemplative, occasionally angry and sometimes flippant. Jinous Nazokkar recites the poetry of Farrokhzad, while Maede speaks about nose jobs. Armed with her camera, Sreemoyee engages with most of them in intimate conversation, while some have been captured from a distance in their acts of defiance or protest. One mother cries for her lost son from the top of a bridge. Her plaintive cry reverberates from the walls bearing pictures of so many lost sons of so many mothers. Another young girl in tight jeans stands up on a pedestal under the very nose of the police on Revolutionary Street. The police kick her down.

Enveloping the presence of all the women, including Sreemoyee, is the ethereal presence of Forough Farrokhzad.

Forough Farrokhzad is a recurring motif in the film. Her presence is felt through poetry readings, music, and, most unexpectedly, a legal document in Farsi declaring that Forough had rented a room in Farhad Kheradmand's house, where Sreemoyee, too, had been invited to stay. The rent document dates to eighteen years before the revolution.



*Jafar Panahi*

'All this was not planned,' narrates Sreemoyee in the film. 'The feeling hadn't sunk in yet.' Farrokhzad is not only a recurring motif but also the guiding spirit of Sreemoyee's film.

In her quest to get to the heart of Iranian cinema, Sreemoyee meets filmmakers and engages them in discussions on the current situation in Iran. Most of these interviews served as field notes for her PhD thesis, while some interesting encounters found a place in her film. In his first meeting with Sreemoyee, Mohammad Shirvani sits down for his interview at the threshold of his home. The shrill noise of a drill from the neighbour's house drowns his words as if censoring his

thoughts and words on the depiction of sexuality in his films. In desperation, he says, ‘we keep censoring ourselves all the time - sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly’. Indeed, self-censorship has become a survival tactic in Iran. While shooting his film at a desolate seashore in south Iran, Shirvani says self-censorship stunts a child’s growth. ‘You come out of the confinement’, he says, ‘and the vast sea is waiting for you’.



*Jafar Panahi with his child actor (now grown up) of White Balloon*

Jafar Panahi drives Sreemoyee around Tehran and tells her about the travails and troubles in his life caused by the present government. There was still a ban on him to leave Iran or to make films. The frustration drove him to suicide, but he came back from the edge of the precipice, much like his 2013 film *Closed Curtain*. Panahi introduced Sreemoyee to the young women who had appeared as child actors in his films many years back. The chemistry between these young ladies and Panahi is still alive, but alas! He has a ban on making films.

The filmmaker that Sreemoyee could not meet, in spite of her burning desire to meet him, was Abbas Kiarostami. She went to his

doorstep and mustered enough courage to slip a note from beneath the door. Kiarostami did not have time to respond to the note. He breathed his last a week later.

Early in the film Panahi takes Sreemoyee to a spectacles shop and asks her to sing. While taking the shot, Sreemoyee bursts into a beautiful song from behind the camera:

*The heart says it wants to leave*

*The heart also says it wants to stay*

*The heart cannot do without you*

*It does not know what to do without you*

Sreemoyee’s song comes as a pleasant surprise to the viewer. Soon, we realize that singing is an important motif in the film and a means of resistance. Iranian women are not allowed to sing in public, but Sreemoyee enjoys the freedom to strum her guitar and sing because she is a foreigner. People around her join in every time she sings, and the forbidden space of human expression opens up. People steal a moment of freedom despite the ban.

During her repeated visits to Iran within a span of seven years, Sreemoyee has captured facets of Iranian life, perhaps unknown to the outside world. During a World Cup football match between Iran and Spain, a jubilant, exuberant crowd of men and women throng the mall, the bazaar and the street, cheering their players as the game is broadcast live on TV. A dried-up river carries the memory of its erstwhile full form. Suddenly, it starts snowing, and a cedar tree bends under the weight of the snow. The snowman smiles at the camera because he knows that ‘he will live just for a day’. A musician tries to play his lute at the grave of

Forough, but he feels disturbed by the incessant banter around him. Weeks before her arrest, human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh speaks angrily about the compulsory use of the ‘chador’ in the women’s prisons of Iran. Life goes on under the glare of the lawkeepers of the nation.

*The heart cannot do without you  
It does not know what to do without you*

The girls join in unison, even though their teacher had told them not to sing. The chorus reaches a high decibel. The camera records this apparently innocent act of defiance for posterity. Girl power is asserted effortlessly through song.

*Towards Happy Alleys has toured the world but has not been and cannot be publicly shown in Iran. Inspired by the Iranian New Wave, the film is a valuable addition to the rich repertoire of Iranian cinema. It was made by a woman who went to Iran in search of cinema and struck a deep chord with the women there.*

*And Towards Happy Alleys has been Sreemoyee’s solo effort for much of her journey. She is the producer, director, DOP, location sound recordist, and narrator of the film. She is grateful to the Film Studies Department of Jadavpur University for consistently lending her support and encouragement. She is also grateful to her small team of editors: Joydip Das and Prady for being longstanding collaborators and Jabeen Merchant for stepping in as a consultant editor and for giving the film a final shape and finish.*

*And, Towards Happy Alleys is like a simple yet beautiful song that lingers in your mind and gently draws you into the spirit of Resistance.*



*Sreemoyee Singh at DMZ International Documentary Film Festival*

*And, Towards Happy Alleys is a cinema of resistance. It is peopled with women finding their identity in their own ways and spaces. Some, like Nasrin, come out of their comfort zone while some, like Jinous and Meade, seek their fulfilment in the comfort of their home and hearts. In the film's concluding scene, Sreemoyee chooses her own path to become a part of the Resistance of her Iranian sisters. She walks into a classroom full of girls clad in hijab and begins to sing*

*The heart says it wants to leave  
The heart also says it wants to stay*



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