

# Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Tree*: A Postmodern Analysis

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**Abstract**—In the age of technology, films have become the most popular form to convey the message of art. With this issue in mind, the present study has examined Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Tree* (1994) from a postmodern perspective. The postmodern techniques used for this research are similar to those applied in literary studies. Through this investigation, it has been suggested that Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Tree* has some common features with a postmodern novel. In this respect, both focus on the instability of meaning and the inadequacy of language to thoroughly exhibit the truth. Accordingly, Kiarostami has more focused on the process of filmmaking to convey his message. In conclusion, he has emphasized the significance of audiences' involvement in a film by using postmodern techniques.

**Index Terms**—postmodernism, film, feminism, fall of grand narrative, historical metafiction

## I. INTRODUCTION

Every era has a particular art form for conveying its desirable meaning to the audience. In the ancient time, there was the epic poem, theatrical presentation and songs. Generally, the majority of audiences enjoyed what could be transmitted orally. However, by the gradual increase of the reading public in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the novel became the prominent art form of its era. And as we reached the twentieth century, radio, film, and television have been brought to the fore. Among these, film is the most versatile one. This new form is almost distinct from all the previous arts from. It is almost as if we are living in a visual culture. During the last decades, films have evolved into a complex form of artistic representation and communication and their huge influences are barely comprehensible for the common people. They have so infiltrated and permeated our everyday life which popular may be an understatement for its description.

These films shape the way we consider the world around us and our place in that world. Therefore, a close analysis of any particular movie can provide us a great deal about the society and the people living in it. Certainly any art form with such considerable influence and insight is worth exploring on the deepest possible level. As a result, the present study is an attempt to analyze the film, *Through the Olive Tree*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami on the deepest level. In fact, instead of exploring a specific critical theory on a work of fiction by a famous author, there has been an attempt to investigate the film, *Through the Olive Tree*, by Abbas Kiarostami. Moreover, the basis of this analysis is the postmodern theories used in the literary studies so as to situate this film in the place of a postmodern novel with all its features.

## II. POSTMODERNISM

"Postmodernism" is often ascribed to a wide range of aesthetic, cultural, historical, literary, and philosophical subjects. Mostly researchers assume that there is a considerable difference between the modern era and the postmodern era. Therefore, it is believed that the modern era began in the late 17th century and ended almost in the 1960s while the postmodern is the last 30 years or so. Glass (1995) emphasized such definition of postmodernism by stating that: "Postmodernism is a philosophy that has reacted strongly against several assumptions of modernity: those concerning progress, history, causality, system, absolutes, meanings, the unitary self, technological judgment, and conformity" (p. 1).

The matter of unity, wholeness, and totality is considered to be the main difference between the two eras. In the modern age people were in search of totality, a unified perception of the world, a unified set of values and a unified culture and lifestyle. Many people of the modern era persistently searched for such totality, whereas others no longer intended to find such unity. Though they didn't really look for it, they still missed its loss and regretted it. As a result, modern people had a sense of nostalgia for pre-modern times when unity was possible. Nonetheless, the postmodern does not support these notions. In their view, there is no such thing as unity and totality at all. In other word, "where modernists hoped to unearth universals or the fundamentals of art, postmodernism aims to unseat them, to embrace diversity and contradiction". (Hoover; 1994. p. 24)

In fact, the term postmodernism shows drastic deviation of man's thought line. This could be implied that the significance of postmodernism lies in riveting our attention "to the changes, the major transformations, taking place in contemporary society and culture" (Sarup, 1993, p. 34). Moreover, it is an attempt to break the fossilized shackles of the established norms and notions, which have expanded into economic and political institutions. These fixed beliefs are the key resources of the power-maniac figures, who used them so as to justify and legitimize their brutality and unjust justice. Thus many postmodernist intellectuals consider themselves as the brave dissident to save humanity. This view declared the beginning of a pluralist age in which the arguments of scientists and historians are deemed no more than quasi narratives which compete with all the others for acceptance. From postmodern perspective, these arguments have no unique or reliable touch to the world. They are just another form of fiction.

Thus a postmodern perspective to art opposes the discrepancy between low and high art forms. The postmodern creator feels free to instill any elements or styles in a work, even if they are trivial to the apparent function of the object. "Postmodern style is often characterized by eclecticism, digression, collage, pastiche, irony, the return of ornament and historical reference, and the appropriation of popular media" (Waugh; 1992. p. 43). Postmodernism dismisses strict genre boundaries and instead supports parody, irony and playfulness. Moreover, there has been a sudden shift in the subject matter as Lyotard asserts that "postmodern artists regard the mass media as a fundamental subject for art, and use forms, tropes, and materials such as banks of video monitors, found art, and depictions of media objects as focal points for their art (Lyotard; 1988. p. 55). As a result, the significance of cinema has been elevated in artistic discussions and it is placed on a peer level with the other fine arts due to the blurring of distinctions between "high" and "low" forms, and the recognition of the creation of simulacra in cinema. Post modernism in film can be applied to those films in which it is tried to destroy the audience's suspension of disbelief and to free the audience's adulation of the work, and the creator's means used to express it. The foundations of conventional narrative structure is changed and even upside down in order to generate a work whose internal logic forms is its means of expression. Even though such movement in theatre started with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, post-modernist film didn't came into appearance until the advent of the French New Wave in the 1950s and 60's, with such films as Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle*. Likewise, Kiarostami is not portraying the socio-political issues, but presenting a medium, its concepts and whole apparatus put in the service of these which seems to be a heritage of the French and National New Waves.

### III. KIAROSTAMI'S CINEMA

Kiarostami's perspective toward cinema is almost lined up with Lumière-brothers. He has abandoned the rules of transparency and fiction. Kiarostami has broken the distinction between reality and fiction in his films. His cinema is centered on the progressive role of audience's participation in the process of achieving the final purpose of a film. In this respect, he has tried to project the lives of common people and rather than focusing on the superstars with their bigger-than-life personalities and he has used nonprofessional actors whose faces are compelling.

Kiarostami's fame outside of Iran began by *Where is the Friend's Home?* This film is the first of the series which continued through the next decade by *And Life Goes on* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). This series is called 'Koker Trilogy' in the West. For the reason that all the three films take the village of Koker which is located in north of Iran as their setting. Since then, a worldwide study of Kiarostami's artworks is established. Comparing to the other intercontinental filmmakers such as Eric Rohmer, Jacques Tati and Satyajit Ray, he has often applied the techniques of his own invention which is known as Kiarostami's style. Moreover, his position in the world cinema can be understood when, the Guardian's panel of critics ranked him as the best non- American film director in 2006.

### IV. KIAROSTAMI'S *THROUGH THE OLIVE TREE*

*Through the Olive Trees* is the last film of "Koker Trilogy" directed by the famous Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami in 1994. The films are related to each other by the use of the same actors, characters and location. The latter two resolve around the 1990 earthquake that stroke in the area which killed close to 50,000 people. *Through the Olive Trees* starts when an actor addresses the camera and states his name. He tells the audience that he is an actor who plays the role of a director in this film. The film provides us with a glance into the inner workings of Kiarostami's filmmaking process. Like the time when the director decides to choose from the girls who are the non-actor students and they are in the middle of taking their exams at school. Even though only one or two girl will be selected for the final shooting in the film, the process of selection is covered on camera. The film falls into a romantic turn when the director gets to know Hussein better. Hussein is a young man who is desperately in love with Tahereh, one of the actors selected to play in the movie. Hussein's real life preferences are brought forward to the movie. It seems that Hussein was originally a mason who is told to carry a bag of plaster up a flight of stairs. However, due to his denial and unwillingness to handle the material, the director revises Hussein's character so as to make him and Tahereh a couple.

### V. FALL OF THE GRAND NARRATIVE

Modernism stresses over a central point which is the ultimate truth. This concept of ultimate truth is placed primarily upon the optimism of both the Enlightenment (faith in science and reason) and upon the Hegel's idea of the Unity of all Knowledge (man's evolutionary process of growth of the mind from ignorance into total being).

These ideas are described to be the grand narratives which molded our secular culture throughout most of the 20th Century. Certainly, modernism proved itself to be quite limited and inadequate to solve humanity's problems, rendering it to be just another useless means of man in searching for his salvation. However, noticing the postmodern theorist like Lyotard, the Enlightenment felled sharply and science also showed its unstable base which was once believed to have universal stability. As a result the modern man was never led to total truth and the grand narratives proved to be limited and ineffectual, therefore, Lyotard and the other postmodernists neglected the objective truth in favor of a new strategy. This new approach expresses disbelief in the truth of grand narratives by restoring to the subjective use of language and media to prop up subjective ideas about meaning and truth.

Lyotard's postmodernism supports little narratives which asserts to avoid totalization and heterogeneity. Lyotard's challenges the conceptualization of history as events in a linear sequence so as to show that postmodernism can never be defined in language or in history. Postmodernism for Lyotard is neither formed in a specific style nor in an historical period. Instead, postmodernism is an undefinable deferral of conceptualization and totality. It should be noted that postmodernists emphasize on anti-foundationism and epistemological uncertainty. One may reach this conclusion that postmodernism is not easily comprehensible and it is illustrated by using and meddling with the process which puts diverse contexts together and employs its various exponents.

The reflection of the fall of grand narrative can be seen in postmodern novels which lack any kind of unified narrative. By reading these types of novels, one is encountered by different narratives which are developed side by side. In such cases, one narrative can never overcome the other. As a result, even the narrator cannot convince us that his narrative can unify the whole text together while in pre-modern novel, the narrator is the omniscient one who has controlling power over the whole text. Subsequently, the reader of the postmodern novels is faced with a couple parallel narratives and it is as if the reader has to find his way in a labyrinth of narratives.

Similarly, in the common modernist movie, the events begin in a specific time and develop through a definable timeline. It mostly has a linear development along the timeline. Even if the lateral thinking of the character deviates from the linear development of the timeline, it is still developing through the timeline and forming a unified narrative, however, *Through the Olive Trees* which seems to be influenced by postmodern novels resist any kind of unification of narrative. By proposing different narrative simultaneously, it confounds the reader and pushes him to a postmodern space.

Mostly, in each movie, the first narrator is the camera which tells the story. Its narration consists of different elements it captures thorough filming. However, in *Through the Olive Trees*, we have some other narratives developing in a parallel way. The film begins when an actor is introducing himself as the director: "I am Mohammad Ali Keshavarz; the actor who plays the director" (1994, scene 1). From the beginning, we are introduced to two narratives; one is the camera and the real recruit of filmmaking and the other one is the so-called director who plays the role of the director and aims to produce a film. As this point, the audience is put in an ambivalent situation and will be hesitant to find the most suitable and stable narrative. This kind of beginning can fully show the absence of a grand narrative. Nonetheless, as the film goes on, another narrative is added to the previous ones. The audience is introduced to a character named Hussein who is supposed to play in the film in which our director talked about in the first scene. However, Hussein himself becomes another narrator who tells us his love story. Therefore, just in the middle of watching the film, the audience is encountered with several different narrative which makes him unable to determine the superior one. As a result, there isn't any grand narrative at all and instead the story is narrated through different narratives which unable the audience to follow a unified plot. And he should be content to see a collage of different narratives at the same time. And as Elena (2005) says such a situation engages the reader in "an uncomfortable but productive state of uncertainty" (p.87-88).

## VI. REALITY VS. FICTION

Since ancient time the artist had to hide his fictitiousness of his work so as to make it seem real to the audience. For example, a painter was supposed to draw his painting in a way so close to the real things in the external world. Similarly a novelist could become famous as long as he writes in close imitation of the events of the society and makes his novel as real as possible. All these effort was done to abide by a main principle: "Ars est selare artem" which is a Latin phrase signifying that the true art hides its means of expression. Therefore, there shouldn't be any reference to the means of expression of the art. However, postmodernism aims to highlight the fictitiousness of art and renounce the existence of any absolute reality. In most of the postmodern novels the, the narrator himself cut the story and mentions some information about the plot, character or the setting.

As an example, in the famous postmodern novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the narrator moves from his main discussion and says: "This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind". By telling this, the narrator is actually reminding the reader that the characters are fictitious and they are far away from the real people of our world. And their interaction could never be occurred in the real world, therefore, there never could be any of such interaction in the real world and it is just a work of fiction. Or as the narrator of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* says directly at the beginning of the novel:

"You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell

the others right away, “No, I don’t want to watch TV!” Raise your voice-they won’t hear you otherwise- “I’m reading! I don’t want to be disturbed! “May be they haven’t heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: “I’m beginning to read Italo Calvino’s new novel!” Or if you prefer, don’t say anything; just hope they’ll leave you alone.”

The narrator distinguishes between the real world and the world of fiction by such references. And the reader will be reminded persistently that an author has written the work. Similarly, at the beginning of *Through the Olive Trees* the actor, who tells us of his role as a director, explains to us the process of producing a film as he says:

I am Mohammad Ali Keshavarz; the actor who plays the director. The other actors are recruited on the site. We are in Koger approximately 400, no 350 kilometers to the north of Tehran where last year an earthquake destroyed everything. We are in a rebuilt school to choose a young actress (Abbas Kiarostami, scene 1).

As it is clear, *Through the Olive Trees* highlights its features of fictitiousness above reality. As Elena (2005) mentions:

In reality, from the moment of the first sequence—the presentation to camera made by the actor who says he is the film’s director—*Through the Olive Trees* is deliberately situated in ‘undecided territory’ halfway between fiction and documentary, what is ‘real’ and what is ‘filmed.’

Upon further consideration, one can see that the postmodern film like the postmodern novel focuses on the means of writing or producing the work rather than on what it is specifically about. Furthermore, it has been really hard to distinguish between the reality and fiction through the various techniques used by the director such as the flashback to the cemetery, the plenty of point-of-view shots (from inside vehicles, basically) and the persistent use of off-camera (the whole conversation taking place between the teacher and Mrs. Shiva).

## VII. HISTORICAL METAFICTION

As we are taking a postmodernism stand, we should cope with the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation and the present/ the past. “And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both” (Hutcheon, 1996, p.73). As it is clear, this age of technology has caused the development of mass media like television. And by the advent of mass media the existence of different cultures and histories previously invisible due to geographical distance was highlighted. As a result, a destabilization of grand narratives is experienced which provokes “the very grounds of social and cultural periodization have seemed to dissolve. [...] History has been radically “relativized,” fissuring into a multiplicity of contingent, ‘local’ narratives or ‘micro-histories,’ discontinuous and incommensurable ‘times,’ whose interrelations are –in the absence of universals–uninterpretable” (David Bennett, 1990, p. 262).

Writing about the past has always been highlighted as a controversial issue. Because any representation of the history is substantially dependent upon the perspective of individual. Consequently, the historiography can never provide us with an exact and true representation of the past time but rather a replica of the past. The term “historical metafiction” was first coined by Linda Hutcheon) in her essay “Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Interest of History”. As Hucheon argues that the postmodern fiction is not to “deny the existence of the past [but to] question whether we can ever know that past other than through its textualized remains” (1988, p. 19-20). In other word, by gaining this new perspective, the author is throwing some light on the past events and is interpreting them in a new way. And it is mostly done to pose the serious problems of the past which may have been neglected by the reader or audience. In this case, the narrator plays an ironical role to declare his intention that “history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems” (Carr, 1983, p.21).

*Through the Olive Trees* (1994), Kiarostami has intentionally represented a historical event which has also been shot in his previous movie. As mentioned earlier, his so-called ‘Koker trilogy’ consists of *Where is the Friend’s House?* (1987), *Life and Nothing More* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). After his first film, *Where is the Friend’s House?* (1987), Kiarostami decided to search for his main character who has been living where the earthquake had occurred, therefore, his second film *Life and Nothing More* (1992) is about the journey of the director back to the place where the first one was shot. And the third one of this trilogy, *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), is about the process of making the second one.

Thus through filming *Through the Olive Trees*(1994), Kiarostami has represented some scenes from his previous movies through new perspective. Even it could be said the whole film is historical metafiction as it is exploring the events of previous films through a new light. The second scene of *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), shows Ms. Shiva driving a car through the road which is situated from the both sides to wreckage left from the 1990 Manjil-Rudbar Earthquake. Such a documentary-scene is so close to the one which Kiarostami has shown in his second film, *Life and Nothing More* (1992). Similarly, in the second scene of that film, Mr. Kheradmand is driving a car through the wreckages left by the 1990 Manjil-Rudbar Earthquake. However, there is a big difference between these two scenes. In the one from the *Life and Nothing More* (1992), we see many people especially from government (these people are distinguishable from the same uniform which they have worn) coming to help and search for the victims in the wreckages.

Nonetheless, in the scene from the *Through the Olive Trees*, we see nobody there to help these people anymore and all the wreckage are left desolate. Interestingly this scene begins while the car radio is on and it is playing a program

named "Calendar". This program is about the historical events which have happened through the history at that particular day. Therefore the broadcaster starts by saying that:

"Today is Sunday, the ninth of the month of Khordad of the year of 1372 of the solar hejira or the eighth of month of Zihadjeh of the year 1413 lunar hejira or again the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 1993. There are 1353 years in a similar day..." (Abbas Kiarostami, car-driving scene).

We hear the broadcaster till this moment and after that his voice is not audible anymore. In any case, the audience remembers the time of earthquake. As he watches the wreckage and listens to the broadcaster saying that "in a similar day", the audience well remembers the time of earthquake. Actually, Kiarostami is re-filming the history for us by juxtaposing these two scenes which are both taken from a historical event. In fact, the scene from *Life and Nothing More* (1992) is shown to us again in *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) but it is shown from a different perspective so as to throw some light to a serious problem whom the people may have forgotten. It is the desperate and unpleasant situation of the people who are still suffering from the 1990 Manjil-Rudbar Earthquake. Kiarostami also mentions how these people and their problems have been forgotten and they have become part of the history. Though Kiarostami has denied to be a socio-political filmmaker, he has dealt with social problems of his time in the best possible level. He has tried to make people aware of the difficulties of the people of this area.

#### VIII. INSUFFERABLE FEMINISM

As it is discussed above, postmodernism rejected the existence of the grand narratives or any kind of universal and teleological philosophy. In this respect, treating women as inferior and not considering their rights and values were common and relatively emphasized in 19<sup>th</sup> century. This kind of attitude shapes a patriarchal society which considers women as servicing creatures. Consequently, this perspective on women became a grand narrative which dominated most of the works written in 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, by the advent of 20<sup>th</sup>, an opposition force took shape against this kind of attitude which was called feminism. The term feminism is ascribed to set of movements towards achieving equivalent economic, social, cultural and political rights in the society for women as well as men. Flax considers his definition of feminism in this way, "Feminist theories call for a trans-valuation of values—a rethinking of our ideas about what is just, humanly excellent, worthy of praise, moral, and so forth". (1991, p. 21). In fact, there have been many relentless endeavors by women toward shackling the obstacles during the past century. And it is hoped that a path for creating a more balanced and equitable conditions for both genders will be paved.

In a rather short scene of *Life and Nothing More* (1992), Kiarostami has filmed a newly married couple. Based on their conversation, one can understand that the man dose have the superior power over the women. He is always ordering the women in an unpleasant and disrespectful way. For example in a scene when the man comes home; the women says: "Welcome home" (Abbas Kiarostami, coming-home scene) but the man instead of answering the women says: "you give me a little water" (Abbas Kiarostami, coming-home scene). Moreover, during this short time, we just see the ordering of man and the women's servicing.

However, this rather short scene from *Life and Nothing More* (1992) takes up the whole time of *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). In *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), the process of production of this scene is displayed to the audience. Therefore, Kiarostami has enough time to focus on his character more. In this film, we get to know the incidents which have happened between the newly married couple, Hussein and Tahereh, of the previous film. Hussein tells us of the time that he has been working near Tahereh's house as a construction worker and how he first fell in love with Tahereh. Then he decided to go to her parents and proposed to her. But he had been rejected instantly and also fired from working there. Accidentally, that night the earthquake occurred and all of Tahereh's family were killed except herself and her old grandmother.

After that, we see Hussein persistently going to Tahereh's grandmother and proposing but each time he is rejected. However, during the filmmaking, there is a suitable opportunity for Hussein to talk to Tahereh in person when the filming has been stopped to check some technical filmmaking points. At this moment Hussein starts talking to Tahereh and says:

Tahereh, when I asked for my socks... Do not think that I am really myself, it is what the director wants. I am not someone that keeps asking: where are my socks? If I marry you, I will have enough tact to put away my socks, my clothes and my things? I want to marry to be happy, not to have you cook for me nor to have you take care of my clothes. I would want you to keep studying if you wanted while I work and ate in the bazaar, the only thing I want is your happiness. I want you to be happy. (Abbas Kiarostami, Hussein-speaking scene)

This is one of the most dazzling scene in which Kiarostami has tried to portray the difficulty of keeping an individual personality. In this case, Hussein by referring to the order of the director, is actually referring to the confines of a stereotyped social role which has been posed upon him. It is implied that the social and parental conventions is the true cause of unhappiness of a couple as they are never allowed to act to each other respectfully. Kiarostami tries to discover the basic human values especially for women as they are persistently oppressed by the society and its convention.

In another scene, when the filming is finished everybody is preparing to go home. At that moment, Tahereh decides not to go home by the crew's car and goes home on foot. As Hussein sees that Tahereh has decided to walk home alone, he himself decides to walk by her and talk to her. From this moment till the end of film, we see Tahereh walking silently while Hussein is accompanying him and asking her to give him an answer of whether she likes to marry him or

not. Even on the way, Hussein threatens Tahereh that she needs a husband in a case that her mother and father has died and she has nobody to take care of her. However, Tahereh is determined and not willing to answer Hussein. Finally, at the end of the road, it seems that Tahereh has given him the answer and Hussein becomes so happy.

By this scene Kiarostami aims to imply this concept that first the Iranian girls need to be freed from the conventions and the restraint of the society and while abandoning everything, they should search for a new identity and meaning in their life. Similarly, in this scene, Tahereh strives to become a self-motivated human being in a woman-denying man's world. Thus, by showing Tahereh going home alone, Kiarostami has tried to describe her struggle for acquiring an independent identity. This part of the film defines the exact concept of postmodernism that not only defines postmodernity in a magnificent way, but it also attacks the elements of modernism as well. Generally speaking, this part of the film is not about the concept of feminism or the unbearable domination of men in a modern society, but it indicates the exact right of each individual, no matter single or married, to escape from the myriad of restricting rules of the modern world to gain his or her right in the postmodern world in which every individual is considered as a respectful society by itself and to acquire the freedom which is summarized in choosing what you truly believe in.

#### IX. CONCLUSION

Kiarostami is considered as one of the post-modern directors. Certainly, to arrive at the post-modern cinema; one should consider the postmodernist view of the world first. Also it is worth mentioning that post-modernism is the act of destroying modernist viewpoints but it is certainly the vision of both present and future offered to us. Kiarostami's cinema seemingly differs greatly from his predecessors. For him, this postmodern world is a simulation in which there is no longer any difference between reality and surface. Kiarostami has chosen a new path by breaking the rules of narratives and has not got stuck in a definite framework. Though most of his works belong to the modern era, postmodern characteristics can be seen in his works. The above project has tried to approach the postmodernist features of Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) from the viewpoint of literary scholar and it has explored some postmodernist features such as the fall of the grand narrative, the subjugation of reality, the historical metafiction and the insufferable feminism. Thus, it is claimed that Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), though a cinematic masterpiece, has followed the postmodernist features of literature.

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