

# Atheism Propaganda in Azerbaijan Cinema at the Beginning of the Soviet Era: A Study on 'Bismillah' Movie

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**Abstract – Each country's history of cinema and the subject of films differ, but the events that have left a great mark in the world history, events that changed the world history have affected all the cinemas of almost all countries in different ways. For example, the First and Second World Wars, the Iranian Revolution, the Great October Revolution, the Cold War and finally the Arab Spring added to the richness of the world cinema and left it under its influence. Not only these events, but many civil movements have brought a lot of issues in world cinema. Feminist movements, Anti-Fascist movements have changed world intellectual history and created its ideological infrastructure in cinema. Cinema has often been transformed into the ideological propaganda tool of many groups by influencing human consciousness. The study will focus on Azerbaijan's history of cinema in the soviet era, the historical development process of cinema in the country and the influence of governments on cinema. The study will focus on the concept of propaganda and atheism, both of which had a great impact on the history of world opinion. The study will also analyse, the process the occupation of the country by the Russian forces. Lastly propaganda of atheism and its effect on cinema and society will be examined with a special study on the movie Bismillah.**

**Key Words: Azerbaijan Cinema, Propaganda, Atheism, Soviet Union.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Cinema is one of the greatest inventions of the 19th century. 'Moving photos' stimulated great interest from the audience in the early days. The history of cinema began on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1895. The basement of the Grand Cafe in Paris is regarded as the starting point of world cinema. Born in the basement of a café, cinema has become a sector that makes billions of dollars today. It can be said for sure that all countries in the world have their own cinema industry. Each country's history of cinema, cinema traditions have evolved differently. The main reason for this is the effect of historical processes in which the country is going through or has gone through. The effect of regimes, ideologies on cinema both positively and negatively influenced cinema. There are also changes in the films regarding the divisions of political ideologies. Each country's history of cinema and the subject of films differ, but the events that have left a great mark in the world history, events that changed the world history have affected all the cinemas of almost all countries in different ways. For example, the First and Second

World Wars, the Iranian Revolution, the Great October Revolution, the Cold War, and finally the Arab Spring added to the richness of the world cinema and left it under its influence. Not only these events, but many civil movements have brought a wealth of issues in World Cinema. Feminism movements, Anti-Fascist movements have changed World Intellectual History and created its ideological infrastructure in cinema. Cinema has often been transformed into the ideological propaganda tool of many groups by influencing human consciousness.

## THE HISTORY OF PROPAGANDA

Changing the ideas and opinions of other people and giving them direction is older than the written history. From the early days of communication, the first people who had communication skills had struggled to change the ideas of the individual. The effort of convincing people to their ideas without relying upon the physical power had become systematic and had brought forth the concept of propaganda. Ancient hieroglyphics and writings

belonging to ancient civilizations revealed today that their rulers were strong and sacred. Especially in the writings of Egyptian civilization, ancient hieroglyphs, which symbolize that the Pharaohs were the ruler of the world and that they were the sons of God or the shadows of God, were revealed (Pratkanis and Aronson, 2008:13). The concept of 'son of God' was a propaganda tool used to praise the ruler in most of the ancient civilizations. This phenomenon, which is believed to be not only in the old myths but also in our daily life, is the oldest and most widespread propaganda tool in order to impress the masses. The example of Jesus, Son of Mary, is the basis of Christianity. Propaganda tools came up with various examples until 500 BC. There are differences between propaganda tools used in the past and the tools used today. The biggest factor in this difference was the emergence of new communication tools and the spread of ideas around the world. The most important civilizations of ancient civilization have built gigantic structures, monumental tombs, underground and surface temples to show their power and prove the power of the state. The old writings and mythological stories in these temples are examples of propaganda. With the emergence of ancient Greek civilization, each of the Greek city States had created its own culture. Every city had its own beliefs, gods, cultural codes that separated it from other cities. These differences had caused these states to experience long lasting wars among themselves. As a result of these wars, a new kind of propaganda emerged. The characteristic of this propaganda genre, called iconography, is that states and or emperors built great palaces, huge statues, and temples to show their power to other states (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012:53).

In the past, leaders have resorted to propaganda not only to undermine society, but also to fear the hostile society. One of the most vicious leaders in history, Mongol emperor Genghis Khan sent agents to communities in advance to scare the societies he would fight and made them tell how ruthless Mongol warriors were (Çetin, 2014: 247). In Medieval Europe, the war between religious groups began when the parties engaged in advertising leaflets, music and dance shows with humiliating ideas to disgrace each other. In particular, the invention of the printing press had added new propaganda methods. Brochures and other information papers were commonly used for propaganda purposes (Davison 1971: 2).

The wars between religious groups in Europe until the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century are still not over. The establishment of new sects was considered a great danger for Catholic Christianity. The papacy had to go to new regulations to oppose this and to prevent division in religion. It is now impossible to end religious wars and reunite Christian Europe with the power of arms. That is why in 1622 the 15<sup>th</sup> Pope Gregory had established a new institution to spread the ideas in a more peaceful environment. *Sacro*

*Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, this institution was the official organization of the Roman Catholic Church. This organization aimed to create the new belief system by serving the purpose of the church and also aimed to restore the old power of the church (Brown, 1992: 11).

After the papacy established the self-proclaimed propaganda organization, religious officials working in all Catholic churches stopped working individually. Now all ideas and missionary works were controlled from the centre. Missionary is a kind of propaganda that conveys its own ideological ideas based on religion for Christianity in particular. The missionary school Collegium Urbanum, founded by 7<sup>th</sup> Pope Urban, was established in 1627 in order to carry out its missionary work (Brown, 1992:11).

The whole world was literally acquainted with propaganda in and after World War I And II. Wartime States had to hide the great military losses from the people. For this reason, newspapers, advertising brochures and films were used to hide information from the public. After the war, propaganda began to make sense of despotism and non-democratic regimes. For this reason, the word propaganda has acquired an equivalent meaning with the word 'totalitarianism'. The Soviet Russia and the Hitler regime did not stop using this word and used it in their programs (Clark, 1997: 12). Although the concept of propaganda is not used as often today, in various ways, political regimes still use propaganda methods to spread their views in different ways.

## PROPAGANDA OF ATHEISM

Many ideas have been put forward from the past to define the concept of atheism. Atheism has been mixed with deism many times and has been the subject of different philosophical debates. One of the main reasons for mixing these two concepts is that atheism is perceived in a different way than it is and that deism is exposed to unrealistic interpretations. In order to understand the concept of atheism and to comprehend it, it is necessary to understand deism by first examining the concept of deism. Atheism has emerged as a result of a shift towards deism in human thought (Topaloğlu, 2001:13). The fact that atheism has found its place in the history of the idea of mankind has not differed from the concept of deism.

Although atheism emerged as a reaction against deism in the world's history of ideas, it was not generally accepted by people. The concept of deism has also been perceived in different ways. Each society has its own way of thinking. The main reason for the different convergence of deities is that the religions they perceive differently from the idea of god. Christianity, Judaism and Islam religions adopt a different structure of thought. Christianity believes in the son of God and the

presence of the Holy Spirit is accepted by all. Islam on the other hand strictly rejects the idea of Jesus being the son of God. Judaism has a more chauvinistic understanding of God. They argue that God glorified the Jewish community as a sacred society and made other peoples around the world their servants. Although the common aspects of religions, rituals and prohibitions, the concept of God differs in each.

In addition to the differences of religions, each of them is divided into different branches. Christianity is divided into two main branches. Catholics and Protestants each accepted different ways of understanding God. The Islamic religion is divided into different sects and branches. When examined in this respect, it is observed that there is a confusion between the theistic and the atheism. In order to understand the concept of atheism, understanding concepts that have an important place in the history of ideas such as deism, agnosticism and pantheism to other schools did not emerge independently with atheism. Even though atheism does not find its place in the history of humanity as much as the theistic thought, atheism has an important place in the development of the history of ideas. Theism is a philosophical thought that believes in the existence of a god that protects the world and everything that exists. Atheism on the other hand claims to be the opposite of this idea, arguing that God does not exist and that all creation emerged as a result of chance (Topaloğlu, 2001:14).

## **AZERBAIJAN CINEMA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SOVIET ERA**

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the Russian army, called the Red Army, invaded Baku and ended the existence of the people's Republic of Azerbaijan. Since then, for 70 years Azerbaijan remained under the sovereignty of Soviet Russia, and the only decision-making power in the country had become the Communist Party. The establishment of the Socialist Republic in the country had caused innovation and change in many areas. This change and development had also taken place in theatre and cinema. Lenin understood the importance of theatre and cinema in explaining communism to the wider community, raising uneducated people in a communist consciousness. Immediately after the October Revolution, one of the first acts of Lenin was that he signed the order for the congregation of theatre and cinema under the state monopoly and for the Communist Party to be a means of propaganda for spreading and promoting communism. In Azerbaijan, one of the first acts of the Communist government was to gather theatre and cinema under the state monopoly. The Public Education Committee, which was established in 1921, was a government agency that gathered theatre, cinema and other art branches under the state monopoly (Kommunist, 17 Ocak 1928). The president of the Azerbaijan Communist Party and Neriman Nerimanov, had devoted the greatest

attention to the development of art in the country. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the first State Theatre was established in the country, and in 1918, the building, which was burned by the Armenians in Baku and which bears the title of the first theatre building of Azerbaijan, was restored, and the main building of the theatre also was restored to its audience during this time (Azerbaycan Tarihi 6`cı Cilt, 2008:342).

In 1922, the State Theatre of Azerbaijan, which still maintains the feature of the biggest theatre in Azerbaijan, made its debut. This theatre carried the title of being a school for Azerbaijan cinema. After that, the most important faces of the directors and the cast of the Azerbaijani cinema graduated from this theatre. Abbas Mirze Şerifzade, M. Senani, S.Ruhulla, M. Davudova, Rza Tehmasib are the prominent names of Azerbaijani actors and directors in the history of Azerbaijan cinema who belonged to this theatre. Undoubtedly, in the great popularity of the theatre and the fact that it was not only a theatre but also a school, Tuqanov, the famous Russian director, who was the director of the theatre in 1924, made the biggest contribution (Azerbaycan Tarihi 6`cı Cilt, 2008:216). In 1923 the Azerbaijan Labour Theatre was created. Usually they brought the works of world classics to the stage of Azerbaijan. In 1926, for the first time, the famous Hamlet of Shakespeare was staged. The role of Hamlet was later played by Abbas Mirze Serifzadeh, who was known as Hamlet of Azerbaijan. One of the biggest innovations of that period was in 1923. For the first time in the Muslim East, a professional acting school was opened (Azerbaycan Tarihi 6`cı Cilt, 2008:216).

Like other branches of art, cinema had become one of the most important propaganda tools of the state. The first step in this path was the transition of the state to the state monopoly. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the cinema became a state monopoly (SU Azerbaydjana, 1920:51-53). In 1921, the cinema was under the supervision of the newly founded Public Education Committee. In the same year, Azerbaijan photo Kino administration (AFKI) was established. Even though this institution changed its name many times, it has always served the same purpose and it has not been able to record or shoot a single movie without permission from the Moscow. One of the first acts of this institution was to monopolize all the photo-cinema rights in separate persons. At that time, dozens of private cinema halls in Baku were transferred under state ownership by taking over from their owners (Lunaçerskiy, 1939:41). It was one of Lenin's greatest goals that the cinema was monopolized by the state, it was controlled from the centre, and the community served its political aims and ensured that the society was united around the same goal. Cinema began to be part of the education in the society of Azerbaijan.

## ATHEISM PROPAGANDA IN BISMILAH MOVIE

In the preparation of the new generation proletariat class of the Soviet Union, one of the biggest obstacles to the knowledgeable working class was thought to be religion. For this reason, every Post Soviet-Union country is struggling against religion, and in the works written, it has been shown that the clergy is fabricator, they clearly shows the lack of education. Atheism faculties were established in universities and the idea of absence of God was injected into students' consciousness. Lenin said that it was the first duty of the Communist Party not to show the truth to people and to communicate to them in a way to disseminate atheism in the letter sent by the educational institutions and the art community, to eradicate the fact of the God that has been committed in the hearts of people (6<sup>th</sup> volume of Azerbaijan History, 2008: 65). As a result, the direction of Azerbaijan cinema changed, the centre ordered in the direction of religion as a disease, religious men as liars and hypocritical. The first film that propagated against religion was recorded in 1925 under the name Bismillah. The film was directed by Abbas Mirze Şerifzade and Blyaxin wrote the screenplay. This film was the first film of the Azerbaijani filmmaker.

The film is not only aimed at the clergy, but also sheds light on class struggle. In this film, the owners, the lords who exploit the peasant's education for their own purposes, who protect the clergy, are portrayed as one of the greatest enemies of the society. The story takes place in one of the poor Azerbaijani villages before the October revolution. In the first scene of the film, it is mentioned that everyone in the family of poor villager Gulu is happy. However, the lack of a child's in the family makes Gulu think. In the next scene, Gulu and his wife Zeyneb want to take this matter to the village clergyman, who is known as *Mullah*. There is a long, crowded human que in front of *Mullah's* house. All the people of the village have come up in many numbers at the *Mullah's* house to find solutions to their problems. Gulu's sister is a maid of the *Mullah*, so she takes Gulu and his wife to the *Mullah* without waiting in line. A scene is being showed where *Mullah* the holy man is drinking wine. For the first time, the audience encounters *Mullah* with this scene. Seeing the door open, *Mullah* hides the wine. So this scene clearly shows the hypocrisy and double standards of religious clerics.

After this stage, the film illustrates Baku oil mines. Gulu's brother Jafar works in these mines. In these scenes, there is a spirit of revolution among workers, workers want to defend their rights by revolutionizing. Jafar is renowned for leading the workers in the spirit of revolution, leading the strikes and other workers protests. Jafar goes to the village where he was born by train. Thus, the spirit of revolution moves from workers to peasants. Jafar resembles a revolutionary

hero with the angle of the camera. The great hero of communism, the pride of the proletarian class. Jafar who grew up in villages began to organize all the villagers. He talks to them about workers' rights, the struggle of the workers in the city to win their rights and freedoms. So it can be said that this scene clearly propagates communism.

The majority of the Azerbaijani society consists of Muslims who believe in the Shiite sect. Therefore, the month of Muharram is holy month for Azerbaijani society. In the month of Muharram which is named as *ashura* day, the people tell themselves that they are in the morning by harnessing them with a dagger and chain. This tradition is very well described in the film. People try to hurt themselves with chains and knives. Gulu also cuts his own body to thank God. In the film, *ashura* scenes were shot by the director in a very artistic and realistic way. Azerbaijani folk artist M. Merdanov writes about the film's shooting, on the day of Ashura, we became involved with the people but shooting was completed successfully. Later, some of the people there approached us and tried to usurp our cameras. We later knew that the camera was saved by making them believe that they were not photographed (Merdanov, 1949: 74).

Gulu opens his hands in a solitary and desperate state and prays to God. This prayer is different from the others. He tries to pray by wrapping his hand in other hand and raging fiercely in air. In this scene, the director successfully transferred the protagonist against the dilemma. In the other scene, Gülzar, in the small, narrow street of Baku, sees the protesters coming from afar. She soon sees her brother, Jafar, in front of the demonstrators. Jafar recognizes his sister and puts her among the demonstrators. Demonstrators walk through a narrow and dark alley into a wide and lighted street. With this scene, the director gave the message that the revolution carried the people from darkness to light and to a bright future.

In the film, the problem of women's freedom has also found its place. Especially Gülzar confronted abuse, fear of being excluded by society, the sexual abuse and she also suffered from the fear of telling anyone. Forced marriage of women is the embodiment of injustice suffered by the centuries. Because of the undisclosed rules of the patriarchal order, the Azerbaijani woman did not dare to rebel against order. Gülzar's escape from her husband's house represents the rebellion of all Azerbaijani women in the patriarchal order.

Bismillah was Şerifzade's first film, although it was a great success. Particularly, the film was withdrawn for propaganda against religion and it was important for Muslims to display in the month of muharrem. The value of Abbas Mirze Şerifzade increased in the eyes of central administration. Abbas Mirze Şerifzadez, who became a member of

the history of Azerbaijan as an enemy of Stalin in 1937 despite the fact that he was so loved, was removed from all the posters of the film (Sadikov, 1970: 142).

## CONCLUSION

The Azerbaijani cinema was influenced by the historical processes of the country and the main ideology of cinema was shaped according to the conditions of the period. The Azerbaijani cinema, which began in 1898, did not show a significant improvement until the Soviet period. After the occupation of the country by the Soviet armies in 1920, there was a big change in the cinema. All members of the newly established association were ordered to conduct ideological propaganda in all branches of art as a result of directives from the centre. Cinema had to serve the regime. Some films could not be produced and were withdrawn by the regime. The main subject of cinema was the October Revolution and its new values. Movies had to praise the revolution and discredit the old order. Landlords, the owners, all the members of the capitalist groups were portrayed as the enemy of the people in the films. At the same time, the atheism propaganda was made by denigrating the religious beliefs of the society. The other aim of Soviet-era cinema in Azerbaijan was to disseminate atheism in the country and to remove people from religion. For this, the clerics were always shown as lechers, liars, hypocrites, and traitors. The film Bismillah which we examined in this study is a good example in this respect. Although the ideological films of the Soviet-Azerbaijani cinema were made for the first decade, this period contributed greatly to the development of Azerbaijani cinema.

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