

FROM THE TOP OF THE HILL

Ravishing and story-driven, 'Gabbeh' is banned in its native Iran. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, its director, talks about movies and stories to Hadani Ditmars



Stories and dreams: Shaghayegh Djodat as Gabbeh, the weaver who struggles to control her own life, right; the old woman under the yoke of men, above

● The story of *Gabbeh*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's new film, draws its inspiration from the brightly coloured carpets of the same name that are woven by the nomadic tribes of South-Eastern Iran. An elderly couple own such a *gabbeh*, on which is depicted a young man and a woman riding off on a horse. The old man and woman are arguing over which of them will wash it when a vision appears to them: a young woman, the original weaver of their carpet (and herself named Gabbeh) who proceeds to explain the story behind its illustration.

Gabbeh is from a tribe of nomads, and is being pursued at a distance by her lover from another tribe. However her father refuses to allow her to marry this man, each time using a different excuse to delay matters. Her elderly uncle, a teacher in the city, must be married first, for example – or else she should wait for her mother to give birth. Eventually Gabbeh is forced to act for herself, but in the meantime her narrative takes in magical interludes, in which the natural colours are drawn from the landscape into the carpet. The old man to whom she tells the story also falls in love with her (and she may even be the younger self of his old wife).

This may seem an odd choice of subject for someone such as Makhmalbaf, who grew up in a poor district of Tehran in the early 60s, was a politically active revolutionary during the Shah's regime, and was imprisoned as a teenager for several years for an attack on a police station. Some of his films (such as 1989's *Marriage of the Blessed*, the story of a reporter and photographer who cannot settle back into society after the Iran/Iraq war) also declare their political engagement. But whatever the intents and ambitions of *Gabbeh*, it has been viewed as a 'subversive' film in Iran and banned by the authorities, thus joining Makhmalbaf's other blacklisted films: including the recent *A Moment of Innocence* (1996), as well as *Time of Love* and *Nights of Zayandeh-roud*, which were both criticised when they were made (in the early 90s) for being too out of touch with the director's earlier religious beliefs. He is disheartened by all of this, but not discouraged: he can rely on his extraordinary popular reputation in Iran. He hopes to make his next film in India, far from the Byzantine intrigues of the Iranian censors. Although he can be surprisingly direct (about censorship issues for instance), one feels aware of underlying metaphor, and despite his insistence on the straightforwardness of *Gabbeh*'s content, there is a real sense of "poetic code" in it, which carries through into this interview.



Hadani Ditmars: Officially 'Gabbeh' started as a documentary. How did it make the transformation to a more traditional narrative, in fact to a love story?
Mohsen Makhmalbaf: It was not really a documentary. The reason we called it that was that in Iran, you don't need so much government approval to make a documentary. I just said it was a documentary so I wouldn't have to get involved with the regime. I never intended it to be an actual documentary. However, as in *Salam Cinéma*, I did want the film to have some sort of documentary feel to it. Originally, there were two different screenplays, two different shooting schedules and four different edits. I was actually trying to make this film something between documentary and fiction, between dream and reality.

Did this evolve gradually as you filmed, or was the finished product fairly close to the original screenplay?
No, I was changing the script as I went along.
There is very much a sense of the poetry of everyday life in 'Gabbeh', and of following the rhythms of this poetry. One scene in particular struck me with its beauty – where a carpet is being woven and a lamb is being born – and the sounds come together, the sound of the birth and the weaving. How has your narrative vision shifted from the harsh cynicism and examination of power in 'Salam Cinéma' to this kind of poetic, lyrical approach? Is this just something that emerged through the shooting of 'Gabbeh', or does it mark a real change in your vision of things?

When I started making films, my focus was political. But now I understand that life is larger than politics. I'm more interested in the human side of things, rather than the mere political. When I was young and involved in politics, I was very pessimistic and wanted to change things, to tear things down, to save the world. But now I think that the best approach to save humanity is through going back to the beauty and the poetry of everyday life.

The sense of storytelling is central to 'Gabbeh', more so than 'Salam Cinéma' [in which a wide variety of Iranians, while auditioning before the director himself, were required to demonstrate their love of movies]. To what extent is 'Gabbeh' an extension of traditional Iranian narrative? Do you think it's possible to convey the original, oral storytelling through film?

Yes, I wanted to get closer to this Iranian storytelling tradition in *Gabbeh*, to fuse this with film.

What about the nomadic tradition of weaving? Isn't that a kind of narrative expression?

These days the nomads are less nomadic, they live in villages. They get the wool from their sheep and they make the dye from plants and flowers around them. They weave patterns spontaneously, without planning. They are inspired by reality around them. If they pass through a green valley, they weave a green background into their carpet. If a woman is pregnant, she might weave the image of her baby into the carpet. And they also weave their dreams into the carpet. If there were a shortage of food, they would dream about fat cows and sheep and they would then weave those images into the carpet. No two carpets are alike. Each is a unique reflection of the weaver's life.

Do you see a parallel here with the film-making process?
Most definitely. I think that Iranian cinema is like a *gabbeh* because it's close to, and inspired by, reality. We filmed in the countryside outside of four different cities: Tehran, Shiraz, Ahvaz and Boy-ah-mad. Of course I had an idea of what I would film before I began, but I was also very

much inspired by the beauty of the nature and the environment in which I was filming.
What was the most difficult part of the shoot?
The scenes we did on the mountain. It was so cold that the sheep and goats kept dying and falling into the snow. But I really wanted to film in the snow because of the starkness of the contrast between the white snow and the bright colours worn by the nomads. An example of this is the scene when Gabbeh leaves a brightly coloured scarf behind in the snow, so her lover will know where to find her.

What is the situation now for nomads in Iran?
Because of their economic problems and the political situation they have lost their freedom of movement. They are very controlled.

Do you see a parallel between the plight of the nomads and the film-makers in Iran?

It's true that both have difficulties. But my approach to this movie was absolutely in terms of appreciation of the beauty of nomadic life. There was no political metaphor. But ironically, the regime in Iran has banned this film because they thought that there was some hidden political meaning. I've made four feature films that have been banned in Iran: *Time of Love*, *Gabbeh*, *A Moment of Innocence* and *Nights of Zayandeh-roud*.

So there's no symbolism in the plight of 'Gabbeh'?
No, it's a simple straightforward film about love and beauty. For instance, when the father pretends to shoot Gabbeh and her lover, he does this only to discourage the other sisters from running away. That's it, there's no symbolism.

Your films have always been controversial in Iran. Do you see yourself as the 'sister that ran away' in terms of Iranian cinema and the status quo?

No, actually, I identify more with the boy who makes the wolf-cry from the top of the hill (Gabbeh's lover). But the Iranian censors are wasting their time trying to read political meaning into the film. There is none. It is a straightforward film. As several of my films are already banned, I always stay up front about the content issue, so that I don't waste a year of my life making something that isn't going to be approved.

So 'Gabbeh' was banned, but you had permission to shoot it based on the original screenplay. How did you get it?

Well, it's not so simple. There are five levels of censorship in Iran. The first is for the screenplay or the script, then you must get permission for shooting, then for a screening at the government festival *Fajr* in Tehran, then permission to release the film in Iran and then again to show the film to foreign festivals. Sometimes you can only get to the third level, but not past the fourth and fifth. For example *Gabbeh* and *A Moment of Innocence* made it to the screening at the Iranian festival, but afterwards they were banned. There are five separate committees involved in the censorship process. There are so many problems with censorship, I'm thinking of shooting my next film in India. I don't think I could do it in Iran. There are just too many hassles.

But how could you get approval for the script and then have the film banned?

Well, sometimes we change the script as we go along. And they (the authorities) know me, they know what I do. We are always in a kind of war with the censorship people. That's why there are five different levels of censorship, because they know that the script can be changed, so they try and control the process in other ways. The

director forbade us to use close-ups of women in the film, even women wearing headscarves. Well, in *Gabbeh* the main character is a woman. How can you make a film and not have any close-ups of the main character? This is ridiculous.

Obviously you didn't comply. [There are many beautifully framed close-ups of Gabbeh.] Who are these people on the committees? Artists, bureaucrats, mullahs?
Well, they are a mixture of all those.

'Gabbeh' was assisted by the French Ministry of Culture. It is an Iranian/French co-production – in fact the first one, post-revolution, I believe. Isn't it ironic that you are making a film about traditional Iranian nomads, but it is only being shown in the West?

Well, when I began I didn't know that it would be banned. Whenever I start a film, I'm thinking about my people, about my culture, I'm not consciously thinking, "Oh, this will be for a Western audience." It's difficult, there are so many problems for film-makers in Iran, but I love my people, my culture, I love the Iranian audience. They understand my films. But at the same time there are many problems. Last year a million people came to see *Salam Cinéma*. During one of the screenings, some people came and protested, throwing stones at the screen. So originally it was supposed to be shown at many different theatres, but after that it was only shown at a few.

What about video? Are illegal copies of your banned films shown this way in Iran?

Yes, this actually happens quite a bit.
But have you had a sense of how the Iranian audience has reacted to 'Gabbeh'?
Not yet.

Do you think that the ban on 'Gabbeh' will be lifted?
I'm hoping so. It will definitely be lifted before the ban on *A Moment of Innocence* is. That film has caused me a lot of problems. The authorities have called it an anti-revolutionary film. It's a personal film about my life, about an incident that happened to me when I was younger. But they said no, this is a film that is critical of the Iranian revolution. I was just trying to criticise the violence of the revolution, but they said that I was criticising the regime.

So are you in trouble now with the regime?
The mission of a film-maker is to make films. When he can't he's in trouble.

In the West, the nomads and gypsies are often romanticised. Is this the case in Iran?
In Iran their freedom, their passion for life, their spirituality are qualities that are celebrated.

Do you see yourself as a kind of nomad?
I'm becoming like one. But I suppose that the difference is that they are staying one place more and more, and I am always travelling.

What inspired you to change narrative landscapes so drastically from the urban milieu of 'Salam Cinéma', where people are influenced by Western culture – that is, all the references to Hollywood film stars (Burt Lancaster, Marilyn Monroe and so on) – to the nomads of South-eastern Iran, whose narratives are purer, less adulterated by outside influences?

I wanted to convey the beauty of the rural life – the rivers, the mountains, outside the city, that urbanites are deprived of. In *Salam Cinéma*, I wanted to make a critical commentary on the abuses of power, and to show how the greed for power leads to fascism. But my intent in *Gabbeh* was to celebrate the beauty of life. One was a critical approach, the other was appreciative.
But there is still a strong element of power in 'Gabbeh': those are still issues – with a patriarchal father figure



Caught within a culture: Gabbeh (Shaghayegh Djodat) is from one nomadic tribe, her lover from another

trying to control his daughter. But since they are not killed at the end, I suppose it's less ominous.

I'm just trying to show reality, not paradise. Chauvinism and control are part of nomadic life, there's no denying that. But in *Salam Cinéma*, I was dealing more with the concept of absolute fascism. In *Gabbeh*, there is still some hope.

How much is the story-telling tradition still alive in Iran?

It's still a big part of life. A major difference between Iranian and Western cinema is that in the West, the evolution of cinema began with paintings, then photography, and then to film – it was a progression through *image*. In the West, there is more of a tradition of visual arts. But in the East, our tradition of the Persian miniature did not really affect our cinema. At the beginning of the Islamic era, paintings and drawings were discouraged. So our tradition of *image* is not as old as our tradition of poetry. There is a well known story of a famous Iranian painter in the classical tradition, Kamaalolmolk, who went to France at the time when Impressionism was at its height. But he couldn't grasp the new style as it was too far away from what he knew of the classical tradition. He couldn't understand it. In Iran we don't have an important tradition in terms of painting. If we had this tradition, maybe we would have been more advanced in the domain of cinema. We would have had a longer history in terms of visual arts. But on the other hand, maybe this newness, this freshness of approach – the simple, direct and powerful images – is what gives Iranian cinema its charm. So we went straight from *narrative* to cinema. And our story-telling tradition is very poetic. That's what I wanted to show in *Gabbeh*. Human expression takes different forms. The nomads express things through weaving and storytelling. Our poetic storytelling tradition is linked to our philosophy. You can see this in the great poets like Saadi and Hafez.

The story of the lovers in 'Gabbeh' reminded me of many stories, such as 'Leila and Majnun', where two lovers must overcome many obstacles in order to be together. In the Middle East, there is often a tradition of telling these stories with new and different endings so that the story can be retold again and again.

Yes, that's true. But the ending of *Gabbeh* isn't exactly the traditional happy one because even though the father didn't kill the lovers, he killed the hopes of the other sisters who might want to escape, and put them in a kind of prison.

So, it's not really a romantic ending, is it?

No, it's somewhere in between romance and

reality, that's what I wanted to show.

But when he beats the carpet, it's like beating the woman.

Yes, "Gabbeh" is the name of both the carpet and a woman.

So would you say that in 'Gabbeh', the departure from the traditional narrative style, as in 'Leila and Majnun', is that the focus is much more on the woman than on the man?

Yes, that is the point. The chauvinist mentality is something very established in Iran. Even in our literature you can see that in the stories about lovers, the man is most often the real subject of the narrative, the whole story is based around him. When *Salam Cinéma* was shown in Iran, the audience was about 20 per cent female and 80 per cent male. In *Gabbeh*, where I tried to show a woman who was not just "being loved" or objectified, but one who was also loving and participating in the narrative, I think this ratio may be reversed [if the ban is lifted].

So in 'Gabbeh' you really subverted the traditional narrative where the man is the subject, the woman the object.

Absolutely. It's also important to note that it's mainly women who weave carpets and that this is the way they express their narrative, this is the story seen through their eyes.

So the women carry on the narrative tradition through weaving rather than speaking.

Yes, when they're not free to speak they find another way of expression. And I tried to express their story through this film, to speak for them through interweaving their language with the language of cinema.

What do you think the reaction will be to this film, if the ban is lifted, from the Iranian men?

Well, it's not just in Iran, this problem of chauvinism, it's universal. But with some Iranian men that have seen it, in Iran and abroad, what I notice is that they try and deny the female subject issue – they just want to see it as a simple love story. So far, I've noticed that women like this film better than men.

When the man is beating the rug at the end of the film, it would appear that it's not just the woman he's beating or denying, but the culture, tradition, narrative as well. Is this not some kind of comment on the situation in Iran today, where since the revolution, a lot of traditional culture – poetry and music for example – have been downplayed or even demonised?

True. There is an element of this at the end.

In terms of documentary style, does truth matter to you or is narrative more important, as in the traditional Iranian storytelling approach?

Well my approach to documentary is now what I call more "poetic realism". In *Salam Cinéma* for instance, I started with pure documentary style

– everyone was real, from the street – and then switched to a storytelling style. Whereas in *Gabbeh*, I started with a story and it became more like a documentary. With every incident I saw two points of view. For me, when I see a movie, it's very important to believe in it, for it to have a believable storyline. If a film is not close to reality I can't believe in it, or trust it, or be inspired by it. In *Gabbeh* at least three different styles were combined to try and reach a certain reality. The first one is that the actors should be normal people acting in a realistic manner. But the story itself is not so realistic – it is poetic, told in a kind of code. And then, in terms of colour, I wanted to approach the film from a fauvist perspective – to create life and vibrancy. I wanted to emphasise life and colour. I think that there is still a big difference between West and East in terms of their approaches to colour. In the West, colours often blend together harmoniously, to complement each other. But in the East, colours are more in contrast to each other – as in the clothing worn by nomads. Each colour stands out by itself, with a kind of purity and individualism. Almost a kind of pride.

Is life in Iran very colourful right now?

Not in the cities, because of the political situation. The cities are painted dark.

Do you think that cinema could be a vehicle to bring back some colour to Iranian life?

I'd like to think so. But I don't really know. Most of my films are screened abroad, not in Iran.

Won't the government's role in productions become less important as international co-production increases?

It's hard to say. Because the Iranian government likes the fact that Iranian cinema has become popular abroad, but they are also afraid of its power. You can say that Iranian cinema is caught between poetry and censorship. The beauty and poetry of our cinema is one side – censorship is the dark side of this.

Are Iranian people also going back now more to their traditional cultural roots, after the initial revolutionary, anti-traditional tendency?

Actually they are, in some ways. For instance, many urban dwellers don't actually visit villages anymore, but they like to see the village on screen, with all its colour. And they like to hear the traditional old stories and poems.

Besides the influence of traditional narrative and in terms of your own influences as a film-maker, were there any conscious references in 'Gabbeh' to specific films or film genres.

Iranian cinema is quite influenced by Italian neo-realism and French new wave. But *Gabbeh* is very original, it came from my own creation. Perhaps *Gabbeh* marks the beginning of a new genre, "Iranian poetic realism".

But despite the beauty and poetry in this film, there is still a lingering sense of sadness and regret. Are you optimistic about the situation in Iran?

There was perhaps a sense of regret in *Gabbeh*, but regret is just a part of reality. The whole movie is based on beauty and hope. It is a celebration of life. Conveying this sense of celebration is really one of the ultimate goals of a film-maker. When you approach film-making from a purely political point of view, the vision is darker, everything is more black and white. But when you approach it more from a sense of appreciation of the beauty of everyday life, there is room for much more colour.

'Gabbeh' opens on 22 November and is reviewed on page 47