

Images of Women in the Cinema of Uzbekistan

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Introduction

Uzbek cinematography was born during the active development of a new urban culture in Turkestan (Russian and Soviet Central Asia) at the beginning of the 20th century. Within only twenty years this young art began with making its first attempts at silent movies and produced great screen masterpieces such as “Tahir and Zuhra” (Тахир и Зухра), “Alisher Navoiy” (Алишер Навои), and “Adventures of Nasriddin” (Похождения Насреддина). During these years, a whole generation of women cinematographers were born and developed their craft from scratch, an achievement that can only be called legendary. Lolakhon Saifullina (Лолахон Сайфуллина), Valentina Sobberay (Валентина Собберей), Shahida Magzumova (Шахида Магзумова), Nazira Alieva (Назира Алиева), Yulduz Rizaeva (Юлдуз Ризаева), Lyutfihanum Sarymsakova (Лютфиханум Сарымсакова), Mariyam Yakubova (Марьям Якубова)—these are the representative names of a legendary generation, which are entered in the history of Uzbek visual culture of the 20th century in gold letters.

The formation of cinema in Uzbekistan coincided with many social and political reforms of the Soviet state, including land and water reform, the fight against illiteracy, and the campaign for the liberation of women, or “Hujum” (which in Arabic means “attack”). Images of women of the new world were created during the Soviet era of silent cinema. In the mid-1930s, photographs of happy women

constituted 70 percent of the visual information in illustrated magazines and cinema journals for the mass audience, with almost no reports on political processes. The plots of all the “silent films” of the 1920s and 30s—including “A Death Minaret” (Минарет смерти, 1925), “A Second Wife” (Вторая жена, 1927), “Lerer” (Прокажённая, 1928), “Chador” (Чадра, 1930), and “Daughter of the Saint” (Дочь святого, 1932)—were built around the fate of a central female character.

Background

One hundred years ago, women in Uzbekistan wore a *paranja*, an Islamic garment. The “classical” Central Asian *paranja* is a long robe with false sleeves that covers the whole body, leaving only the face open. The face, as a rule, is covered with a *chachwan*, a dense net made of horsehair that can be opened and closed. Women practically did not appear in public places without these two garments. It was only in the 1920s, after the establishment of Soviet power over the territory of today’s Uzbekistan, that a campaign known as “Hujum” began throughout Central Asia, which banned the *paranja* ostensibly as part of efforts to change the position of women in society.

Although the Communist Party and state bodies focused on eliminating religion among Muslim women in Central Asia, female religiosity had very strong foundations. From time immemorial, women’s lives had been regulated by Islamic norms and traditions and therefore wiping out the influence of religion among women overnight was quite unrealistic.

Immediately after the Russian October Revolution, a number of measures were taken in Turkestan aimed at establishing the equal rights of women and

abolishing marriage of underage girls. Members of the Communist Party were at the forefront of the Hujum movement. First of all, they were obliged to remove the *paranja* from their wives, sisters, and mothers. So, husbands brought their wives to public squares, where the *paranja* was taken away and burned, but then on the next day husbands forced the women to put the garment on again. In order to suppress such phenomena, in October 1927 the Fourteenth Plenum of the Central Asian Bureau (Средазбюро) adopted a resolution to punish such actions, up to and including expulsion from the party. However, Hujum campaign works were conducted exclusively among women; the need to campaign among men went unnoticed.

The psychological and religious pressure of Hujum on women also left a bloody mark. During the years of the campaign (1927-1928), more than 2,500 women were killed in Uzbekistan alone, in most cases by their own husbands, fathers, and brothers, because of unveiling. Among those killed were activists of the Women's Department (женотдел) of the Communist Party and heads of Women's Clubs and libraries.

The struggle for the liberation of women was characterized not by "class," but rather by a "world view" or a particular "sense of values." Mosques were targeted for campaigning, and mullahs were forced to promise in writing to liberate their wives. Such violent measures damaged the women's movement, which was generally focused on education. The mistakes of the Party and Soviet activists have subsequently been recognized and the administrative methods of the Hujum movement strongly condemned.

Uzbek Women Enter the Cinema

During 1926-1928, renowned Tashkent-based writers, playwrights, and screenwriters Lolakhon Seyfullina and Valentina Sobberoy created several screenplays for silent films. During this period a series of poems and stories on important issues for women in society were also published. Lolakhon Seyfullina wrote screenplays for the first Uzbek silent movies—"A Second Wife," "Leper," and "Covered Wagon" (Крытый фургон) (all produced in 1928). All three movies explored the difficult fate of an Uzbek woman under the pressure of the *paranja*. It is interesting to note that the role of the heroine in the movies "A Second Wife" and "Leper" was played by the actress Rakhil Messerer (Рахил Мессерер), the mother of Maiya Plisetskaya, who later became one of the most famous Russian-Soviet ballerinas of the twentieth century.

The first Uzbek film actresses appeared in the movie "A Second Wife." These included Uktamkhon Mirzabaeva (Уктамхон Мирзаева), a popular folk singer, Zukhra Yuldashbaeva (Зухра Юлдашбаева), an activist, and Sh. Magzumova. Before "A Second Wife," female roles in Uzbek silent movies were performed by Russian and Tatar actresses. For Uzbek women, wearing the *paranja* and appearing with an open face in public places, especially on stages or screens, was equal to a death sentence. Indeed, two young theater actresses, Nurkhon and Tursunoy, were killed by their own relatives in the 1930s.

Archive materials show that in the 1920s cinema tickets in Tashkent were for free for Uzbek women. Thus, the authorities encouraged women to attend movie theaters. At shows and films, women were given the opportunity to sit in the front rows and watch movies with an open face.

Actors and models at that time were recruited through personal networks or newspaper advertisements. Many people, including women, came in hopes of finding any work. After a long persuasion, sometimes some women agreed to remove the face cover and show their face, but after knowing that they were to be filmed for a movie without a veil, they would simply flee from the set.

The Dichotomy of the New-Good-Soviet vs. the Old-Bad-Traditional in Early Soviet Uzbek Films

The dichotomy of the “New-Good-Soviet” and the “Old-Bad-Traditional” was observed in almost all movies during 1925-1935. With almost no exception, every new movie told a “Heaven and Hell” story of two women: one was a poor and unfortunate Uzbek woman, who was oppressed by traditions and her husband, and the other was a happy, emancipated Soviet woman. The “happy” Soviet women had access to education, could become financially independent by working for state organizations, and spent leisure time attending museums and clubs. Elements of clothing and headdresses practically reflected their newly formed Soviet identity.

In contrast, their “oppressed” Uzbek friends are subject to insults and humiliations from husbands and mothers-in-law, as we see happening to Adolyat, the main character of the film “A Second Wife.” Even if these women work like slaves, financially they are fully dependent on their husbands. When they are in need of medical assistance, “charlatan-mullahs” mistreat them, as we see in such films as “Sun of Happiness” (Солнце счастья, 1926) and “Daughter of the Saint.” Unlike their “liberated friends,” these women constantly suffer and cry.

The ending of these movies always depends on the choice of the main character. If she makes an “ideologically correct choice,” she finds a happy ending, as in films like “Muslima” (Мусульманка, 1925) and “The Jackals of Ravat” (Шакалы Равата, 1927). In these films, the oppressed women ask for help from their more fortunate “Soviet comrades” and thanks to them, are saved from their repressive husbands. However, in “A Second Wife,” Adolyat remains passive, and despite the attempts of her “Soviet comrades,” she dies at the end of the movie. Before her death, Adolyat cries out to her husband, Tadjibay, and his first-elder wife, Hadhicha, “You are to blame!” The Soviet propaganda message is very straightforward: “You will find your death by the hands of your own husband or his other wives if you do not choose your way correctly.”

Soviet authorities at the beginning of the revolution exerted significant efforts to “liberate” the women of the Soviet East. In the fields of education, production, and culture, new possibilities for self-development and professional activity for women in Uzbekistan were opened. This was especially significant in the culture of the stage and screen, as people came to meet women names and characters more and more frequently in the theater, the cinema, and in literature.

Episodes from the Field of Filmmaking

In the movie “Well of Death” (Колодец смерти, 1934), N. Alieva, who became a famous drama actress, played the role of a young student of GITIS (the State Institute of Theatre and Stage Arts, Leningrad) (ГИТИС: Государственный Институт театрального и сценического искусства). Her precious memoir tells us not only about the process of making a film, but also about how dangerous it was to be in the

movies for an Uzbek girl and the natural risks of film-making. She recalls, “Filming was conducted in Ashkhabad, as well as in Charjou, Tuya Muin and Repetek station near Ashkhabad. Knowing that it was still possible to encounter “Basmachis” [anti-Soviet bandits], our small squad was armed. The Basmachis observed us from across the shore of the Amudarya River. Once, their representative visited our camp. He conveyed the demand of the “kurbashi” [leader of a Basmachi band]—to hand over an Uzbek girl from our camp, which meant me. In return, they offered camels. We said that there was no such girl in our camp, but to no avail. He decided to inspect our camp tents. I was lying in one of them on a folding bed, dressed in men’s clothing. We understood that they would not leave us alone and left Tuya Muin. We were working under difficult conditions: the heat of the desert and thirst constantly chased us around. Food was not enough. Sometimes we had to work with our belts tightened up and without speaking about food.”¹

A curious incident also happened during the filming of “The Jackals of Ravat.” In an interview with the journal *Soviet Screen* (*Советский экран*), the director of the film K. Gertel (К. Гертель), recalls, “People of Birchmulla village were eager to take part in the filming process. Mass scenes were shot with the participation of the whole village. More than one hundred local women stood in front of the movie camera without their *paranja*....Afterwards, one woman rushed into the editing room of the studio asking us to return her “photo,” since her husband did not allow her to be filmed. To prevent any harm coming to her, we deleted all the scenes with her from the movie.”

¹ Воспоминания Н. Алиевой. Архив библиотеки Института Искусствознания АН РУз. 1966. Memoirs of N. Aliyeva. Manuscript in the archives of the library of the Institute of Art Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Changing Images of Women in the Cinema

Despite various changes, female images maintained cultural meanings, performing important aesthetic and social functions. During the early stages of cinema in Uzbekistan, female images were a certain result of Soviet ideological mechanisms, under which people's ideal of wonderful life was assumed. Exploring the "female face of the Uzbek cinema," we can highlight three main types of the female image: the traditional, the heroic, and the poetic. These can be further broken down into subtypes such as the "humble woman," the "woman-mother," the "woman-muse," the "trophy woman," the "unfortunate lover," the "rival," and so on.

It is important to note that in the cinema of the Soviet period, female characters were compelled to be heroic, to be persistent and independent "liberated women of the East."

Such famous Uzbek actresses as Yu. Rizaeva, L. Sarymsakova, Mariyam Yakubova, Svetlana Narbaeva (Светлана Нарбаева), Diloram Kambarova (Дилорам Камбарова), Tamara Shakirova (Тамара Шакирова), Dilbar Ismailova (Дильбар Исмаилова), Diloram Igamberdieva (Дилорам Игамбердиева), Lola Eltoeva (Лола Элтоева), Rano Shadieva (Рано Шадиева), Dilnoza Kubaeva (Дильноза Кубаева), Zarina Nizamutdinova (Зарина Низамутдинова), Shakhzoda Matchanova (Шахзода Матчанова), and many others created unforgettable images of women in various genres, including historical films.

Touching upon the subject of the images of mother, in the 1960s, the cinema of Central Asia perfectly molded the image of Mother in the movie "You are not an Orphan" (Ты не сирота, 1962), directed by Shukhrat Abbasov. In the film, based on

historical facts that took place in 1940s, the heroine-mother adopts children of different nationalities during the Second World War.

The opposite image of the Uzbek mother was first shown on the screen in the comedy film “Whole Mahalla is Talking about It” (Об этом говорит вся махалля, 1960) by Shukhrat Abbasov. The heroine-mother, played by Lyutfi Sarimsakova (Лютфи Сарымсакова, 1896-1991), was recognizable, familiar, and easy to understand for millions of Uzbeks filmgoers because of the actress’s very accurate portrayal of an Uzbek woman’s outlook, clothes, and body movements. The expressions, emotions, and even physiognomy of the actress perfectly fit the image of a plain, usual, and clearly “non-heroic” mother.

During the transitional period of the 1980s-90s, images of women changed to include many forsaken, humiliated, and insulted women on the screen. After the independence of Uzbekistan, the screen mainly projected images of happy mothers and beloved women. However, as time marches on, depictions of women in Uzbek cinema are reaching a new stage, changing from emancipated, modern vamp-women to include today passive victims of domestic violence. In many cases, female images reflect “good” “national” values. In modern Uzbek films, we observe a tint of today’s assertion of national identity, with portrayals of women who are obedient and faithful to national traditions.

Gender Representation in Uzbek Cinema and Its Perspective

In the history of Uzbek cinema, on-screen gender representation carries both productive and artistic features. Productive features reflect the gender policy and ideological values that existed in each historical stage of the development of the

state. Aesthetic features reflect national characteristics (with an ethnic-specific aspect) and some sort of “Asian gender values.”

In the history of domestic film making, plenty of women have not only greatly contributed to Uzbek cinematography, but also achieved international successes. Women filmmakers began shooting documentary, animation, and feature films in the mid-1960s. One of the first prominent women-directors in Central Asia was Kamara Kamalova (1938-). During the course of her career, Kamalova made more than 10 feature films, 5 documentaries, and 12 animated movies. The filmography of the director features different formats and genres, including very touching children films such as “Bitter Berry” (Горькая ягода, 1975) and “Will You Come out Tomorrow?” (Завтра выйдешь?, 1980), poetic dramas about first love, such as “Everything around was Covered with Snow” (Вокруг все засыпало снегом, 1995) and “Road under the Heaven” (Дорога под небесами, 2006), which won the State Award of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

There are so many women in the cinema industry of Uzbekistan who stay behind the screen, but assert their presence in each film. These are screenwriters, such as Rozika Mergenbaeva, Mastura Iskhakova, and Shaira Giyasova, artists such as Zebo Nasirova, Elsevar Iskhakova, and Galina Ivanova, as well as editors, dubbing actresses, second directors, assistants, and so on, and so on.... They devote their ideas, skills, and souls to the cinema.