

The discreet narrative of dissent: an analysis of Leila's Brothers movie

Alireza Azeri Matin

Faculty of Arts & Science, International University of Malaya-Wales
150 Tun Ismail Avenue, 50480, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: azeri_matin@yahoo.com, Phone: +603 2617 3000

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Abstract Saeed Roustayi's *Leila's Brothers* (2022) sparked significant controversy in Iran following its international success, culminating in criminal charges against the movie's director and producer. While public discourse largely focused on the film's portrayal of poverty and patriarchy, this study goes beyond it and argues that its narrative structure subtly encodes a critique of the authoritarian regime in Iran. Applying classical structuralist models- Todorov's three-act structure and Propp's character archetypes, this research analysed how the film's narrative mechanisms reflect dissent against entrenched authority. The study focused particularly on the portrayal of Esmail, the family's patriarch, whose obsession with power and status parallels the perceived characteristics of Iran's Supreme Leader. Through this allegorical construction, the narrative conveys a veiled political commentary that may explain the film's censorship. Leila, the central character, challenges familial and societal norms, positioning her as a catalyst for change within a rigid system. The film's closure, juxtaposing the quiet death of Esmail with a young girl's birthday celebration, symbolises generational transition and the fading legitimacy of traditional power structures. While this analysis draws on classical structuralist models, it contextualises them within Iran's contemporary sociopolitical environment. In particular, the film's portrayal of gender, authority, and resistance reflects the ethos of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement. This study demonstrates how narrative structures, though seemingly neutral, can encode political dissent in contexts of censorship, offering new insights into resistance media in authoritarian settings.

Keywords: Iranian cinema; narrative structure; political dissent; structuralism

INTRODUCTION

With four wins and four nominations in international film festivals, *Leila's Brothers* was praised by film critics for providing a unique perspective on the intricate world of traditions and family bonds in Iran. Written and directed by Saeed Roustayi, a 34-year-old Iranian filmmaker, *Leila's Brothers* recounts the economic struggles of a family in Tehran. Leila, played by Taraneh Alidousti, is a woman in her 40s who has dedicated herself to taking care of her parents and four brothers. Her father, driven by a desire to achieve social status, spends all his savings in pursuit of an illusory position of honour, despite the family's dire financial situation and the unemployment of his sons. This ambition becomes increasingly absurd against the backdrop of modern Iran's economic hardships.

Despite its international success, *Leila's Brothers* faced severe legal repercussions in Iran, with authorities prosecuting key figures involved with the film. Just days after its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, the pirated version began circulating online, prompting Iranian officials to ban the film from cinemas. Their vague justification referenced the lack of permission to attend international festivals and accusations of immoral behaviour by the film's cast during Cannes. In

a statement to ISNA, producer Javad Noruzbegi expressed his astonishment at being prosecuted under charges of contributing to 'oppositional propaganda against the Islamic system' (Asriran, 2024).

Although Iranian filmmakers have faced government scrutiny since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the rapid and harsh reaction to *Leila's Brothers* sparked widespread speculation. Some viewers cited its provocative factory riot opening as a call for proletarian revolt. Others pointed to its challenge to patriarchal traditions or its bleak depiction of economic hardship as damaging to the regime's image. While these views highlight surface-level representational features that might provoke censorship, this study proposes that the deeper cause lies in the film's narrative structure itself, which subtly encodes meanings aligned with contemporary social resistance in Iran.

Indeed, narrative forms play a vital role not only in audience engagement but also in embedding social and political meanings (Ryan & Lenos, 2020). As critics argue, mainstream narratives often reinforce dominant ideologies, while independent films may use narrative structure to resist prevailing values (Perry, 2020). Scholars like Naficy (2020), Taheri (2024), Chaudhuri (2024), and Matin (2025) have argued that in countries with repressive regimes, filmmakers often rely on symbolic and subversive narratives to address gender issues, using metaphors and allegories to communicate their critique while avoiding censorship. The narrative structures in these films often present a dual layer of meaning, where a superficial storyline conceals a deeper critique of the gendered power dynamics within society. In Iran, filmmakers navigate strict oversight from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, which prohibits criticism of the regime (Aqababae & Razaghi, 2022). As a result, many resort to oblique or allegorical forms of storytelling (Naji, 2025). *Leila's Brothers*, produced by the independent IRIS FILMS company, exemplifies this potential for subversion through form. This study explores how the film's narrative (its structure, character dynamics, and closure) functions as a discreet yet powerful vehicle of dissent.

An important way to understand narrative is to look at from the 'quest structure' point of view. This approach was introduced by Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist and one of the most influential narratologists, who after reading up a large number of Russian popular fairy tales tried to find a reliable method of organising and categorising them. Propp observed certain structural similarities in folk tales and argued that they were all created using the same formula. He identified eight (sometimes reduced to seven) main character roles namely, the hero, the villain, the false hero, the princess, her father, the donor, the dispatcher and the helper, and about 31 functions (from initial situation and the hero's journey quest to reward, marriage, or the coronation of the hero) that advanced the plot.

It is also possible that these classifiable character roles present a range of different actions, since they are not the kind of clear-cut roles shown in the cast list (Zhanysbekova et al., 2024). In a movie or a play, each character can take on several of his or her character roles or types of action. Nonetheless, although Propp's character roles scheme is occasionally applied to some running stories, they are most useful for understanding the mainstream texts/films such as Hollywood movies and blockbusters. In this view, the key characteristics of contemporary mainstream (e.g. Hollywood) storytelling or classical narrative is the one in which unified narratives are central and function through a series of cause-and-effect relationships (Thompson, 1999).

Decades later, Bulgarian narratologist Tzvetan Todorov developed another theory through which he argued that narrative operates as a system with its own internal logic or grammar. His theory is based on a tripartite system: a) the initial stage where everything appears to be normal and all forces are in balance, b) the disruption of the situation, and c) the arrival to a form of normality at the end of the narrative. In other words, a narrative includes 'a transition from one equilibrium, via a dis-equilibrium, to a new, revised equilibrium' (Gillespie, 2006, p. 97). This kind of sequential arrangement, however, is key to making sense of the entire narrative, even though such a typical structure may be further expanded. Examples, to: a) exposition, b) disruption, c) complication, d) climax, and e) resolution and closure. The crux of Todorov's theory, however, lay in the ideological significance arising from the ways in which the narratives are resolved. Nonetheless, the critiques of these formalist approaches highlight their insufficient textual specificity, which tends to emphasise similarities over differences among films and potentially overlooks the evolving cultural context.

Barthes suggested that the narrative's function is based on five codes through which the audience/readers make meaning. The most obvious is the use of enigma codes (or hermeneutic codes). These are rather minor mysteries that are set to be resolved by the audiences, giving them pleasure throughout the plot, before solving the main enigma code of the plot. Other narrative codes in Barthes' list are the proairetic code (the action), the semic code (the images), the referential code (the cultural influence), and the symbolic code (the subtext). Lévi-Strauss was less interested in the chronological plotting of a single story than in repeated elements and their systematic relationship, usually across many stories (Doja, 2020). He called these the 'paradigmatic' aspect of myths. Lévi-Strauss argued that not only narrative, but all meaning-making practices are based on binary opposition; a contrast between two opposite sides/qualities.

This study, however, rather than relying on ideological critique, draws from classical structuralist narratology to show how even neutral-seeming narrative forms can encode resistant meanings. Therefore, by applying Todorov's three-act narrative model and Propp's character typologies, the research aims to reveal how the film's formal composition reflects deeper critiques of power, authority, and generational conflict in the Iranian context. In doing so, it contributes to the understanding of how narrative structure can serve as a strategic mechanism for subtextual resistance in authoritarian societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied classical structuralist narrative theory to examine how *Leila's Brothers* constructs a veiled critique of authority through its storytelling. Specifically, it employs Todorov's three-act narrative model (equilibrium, disruption, and new equilibrium) and Vladimir Propp's character archetypes, drawn from his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), to analyse the film's structure and character functions. The rationale for selecting structuralist frameworks lies in their capacity to reveal how structural conventions organise meaning.

Scenes were selected purposively, based on their narrative centrality and symbolic weight (e.g., riot scene, wedding, birthday). No interviews or audience data were collected; the focus remained on close reading of the film text itself. The stages of analysis included: (1) identifying major narrative units (setup, disruption, resolution) per Todorov, (2) mapping character functions using Propp's archetypes, and (3) interpreting how these structural elements resonate with Iran's contemporary political context. Connections to Iran's political upheavals were contextualised through well-documented public events such as the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, state censorship practices, and official statements targeting the film. Markers within the film (such as motifs of repression, generational tension, economic despair, and silent rebellion) were interpreted alongside real-world triggers including inflation, youth protest, and gender-based activism. These references anchor the narrative's implications in a concrete sociopolitical reality.

While structuralist models such as Todorov and Propp are formally apolitical, their application in this study is deliberately situated within Iran's authoritarian media environment. Rather than aiming for universal myth analysis, this research explores how familiar narrative structures are strategically used to embed political critique, particularly in a society where direct expression is heavily censored. The method reveals how structural conventions can serve as conduits for dissent, especially when interpreted against the backdrop of movements like *Woman, Life, Freedom* and the broader socio-political discontent in Iran.

The limitations of structuralism (its tendency to overlook sociocultural specificity) are addressed by contextualising narrative patterns within Iran's authoritarian media landscape. Thus, this qualitative approach did not seek to validate universal myths but to explore how narrative form can be used strategically in censored environments. By foregrounding narrative mechanics over overt ideology, the method reveals how seemingly conventional storytelling can encode subversive meaning under authoritarian constraints.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three-act structure narrative

Although creative works make it hard to regard them as the product of the three-act formula, it is interesting to see how many films fit this pattern and how well this pattern facilitates the telling of a story (Bell & Johnson, 2023). Hence, besides being a way to build a narrative arc, the three-

act structure presents a unique way to look at *Leila's Brothers*, and when applied to this film, it plays out as follow:

First act

The first act is the set-up where expectations are raised gradually from an initial equilibrium. This act establishes the relationships among the principal characters and elaborates their prospects for the future. It is composed primarily of exposition that is the presentation of narrative information that provides context for the story and plot, including character development and the establishment of setting and/or location. Here, the presentation of narrative information provides context for the story and plot, including character development and the establishment of setting and/or location.

In the first act, *Leila's Brothers* (Figure 1) establishes a fragile equilibrium within the family, characterised by financial struggles, unemployment, and a pervasive sense of frustration, particularly for Leila. Despite these hardships, the family maintains a semblance of normalcy, though their aspirations remain unfulfilled. The film highlights Leila's growing dissatisfaction with their stagnant situation, setting the stage for the disruption that follows. In the exposition, however, we learn that amidst the economic uncertainty of contemporary Tehran, Leila is increasingly driven to secure a stable future for herself and her four quarrelsome yet caring brothers. With limited options, she is compelled to urge them to pool their resources and open a shop in an up-and-coming neighbourhood mall. The sense of *equilibrium* is fragile and marked by underlying conflicts, particularly Leila's growing dissatisfaction with their stagnant situation and her desire to take action to change their fate.



Figure 1. Heroic Leila as the indomitable vanguard standing in front of her despairing brothers
Source: Author Documentation (2025)

Second act

In the second act of *Leila's Brothers*, the narrative intensifies as the story's central conflict unfolds, leading to heightened tensions and confounded expectations. This act is marked by the escalation of complications as the family's already fragile dynamics are thrown into turmoil by the actions of the narcissistic father, Esmail (played by Saeed Poursamimi). Desperate to achieve the long-coveted status of the head of the extended family, Esmail's burning desire for respect, fuelled by a lifetime of humiliation, drives him to pursue the title of paterfamilias, the highest honour in Iranian tradition. However, this title requires a substantial monetary gift, putting his children's business plans in jeopardy.

The plot centres on Esmail's obsession with rising through the ranks of the ad hoc hierarchy, a goal that blinds him to the pressing needs of his immediate family. His fixation on this title becomes even more problematic when he is selected to assume this role following the death of a cousin. While Esmail sees this as an opportunity for redemption, his daughter Leila views the tradition as absurd and an unnecessary burden. The discovery that Esmail has been

secretly hoarding a family heirloom (40 gold coins intended as his offering to secure the title) brings chaos to the family's already strained relationships. As Esmail's health deteriorates, the actions of each family member propel the narrative toward an inevitable implosion.

The disruption to the narrative's equilibrium reaches its peak when Leila decides to take control of their destiny. Her plan to invest in a business, using money borrowed from relatives, catalyses a significant shift in family dynamics. Leila's decision represents a break from the family's passive acceptance of their dire situation, igniting a series of events that challenge their unity and traditional values. As Leila pushes her brothers to support her plan, internal conflicts intensify, exacerbated by the external pressures of the broader societal and economic context in Iran, which further hinder their ability to succeed.

This act of the narrative delves into the struggles and conflicts that arise as the family members grapple with their roles, responsibilities, and the repercussions of Leila's actions. The disruption exposes deep-seated issues within the family and highlights the harsh realities of their world, increasing the tension and setting the stage for the final act.

A scene from the second act (Figure 2) depicts the wedding where Esmail dances with one of his sons. This moment is significant as it represents a moment of pride and unity for the family but also foreshadows the impending conflicts and the eventual downfall that ensues due to Esmail's decision to spend the family's savings on the wedding and dowry, which jeopardises Leila's business plans.

This scene marks a significant point in the narrative where the disruption fully takes hold. The father's decision to use the family's funds for the wedding and dowry disrupts the plans the family, particularly Leila, had for improving their financial situation. This leads to rising tensions and conflicts within the family. This scene, with its appearance of celebration, paradoxically highlights the underlying tensions that will lead to the family's eventual downfall. It fits into the disruption phase of Todorov's narrative structure, where the seeds of the ensuing conflict are fully sown.



Figure 2. Esmail dancing euphorically as he dreams of becoming the head of the clan
Source: Author Documentation (2025)

Third act

The final act in movies is usually the denouement, where everything that is unravelled comes together in the end and expectations are resolved, ideally in a mildly surprising fashion. In this way, the final resolution of the various narrative threads and the various questions or problems posed by the story's conflicts can be neat or untidy; closure can be the consequence of a logical progression of events or the result of some magical, fateful occurrence. In *Leila's Brothers*, however, the final act is composed of a scene showing the Iranian economy crashing in real time by the U.S. sanctions. Here, act 3 is cued succinctly over the course of a single montage where the market volatility results in gold prices to soar by tenfold, exacerbating the troubles of the family. Had the siblings retained their father's gold coins, the circumstances would be different.

But right from the beginning, they have been engaged in a persistent cycle of doubt and mutual sabotage.

In the film's conclusion, Leila's family faces a devastating blow when their plans to improve their financial situation fall apart. The brothers, who had hoped to start a business together, lose their investment after being betrayed by their father. The father, who is deeply influenced by traditional values and his desire for social status, uses the money to buy a prestigious family title instead of supporting the business.

This decision leads to a profound sense of betrayal and despair within the family. Leila, who has been the driving force behind the family's ambitions, is left disillusioned and emotionally devastated. The film ends on a sombre note, highlighting the enduring conflicts between tradition and modernity, individual desires and family obligations. The story leaves the characters trapped in their circumstances, with little hope for escape or resolution.

However, towards the end of the film Esmail dies unexpectedly after achieving his long-held dream of purchasing a family title. His death occurs shortly after this accomplishment, and it leaves the family in a state of emotional turmoil. The title, which was meant to bring honour and prestige to the family, ultimately brings nothing but further disappointment and tragedy.

The resolution in Todorov's structure involves a new equilibrium, often at a cost. In *Leila's Brothers*, towards the end, the family's situation worsens, leading to a tragic conclusion where individuals make harmful choices. However, an optimistic new equilibrium seems to await the family, and this is hinted in the last scene of the film: Esmail's dies quietly during his granddaughter's birthday party while his death goes unnoticed by everyone but Alireza and Leila who silently grieve while impressions of a brighter future emerge on their mournful faces.

Character

A character pursuing a goal is essential to every film narrative. This pursuit depends on the character's background, position, personality, attitudes, and beliefs, which shape their reactions, decisions, actions, and responses to consequences. Characters are key to our emotional and intellectual investment in the story, prompting us to follow events with keen interest due to our identification with them (Smith, 2022). In analysing the narrative roles of movie characters, we must recognise fundamental character types and understand how dialogue and narration reveal their traits, motivations, and perspectives. Nevertheless, to apply Vladimir Propp's Seven Archetypes to the *Leila's Brothers*, we need to identify the key roles within the story. Propp's archetypes are: the Hero, the Villain, the Donor, the Helper, the Princess (or prize), the Dispatcher, and the False Hero.

Leila as a hero

The protagonist of the film is Leila, a young woman at the heart of the story, dealing with the pressures and expectations from her family and society. Leila is the central character who drives the plot forward by striving to improve her family's situation despite numerous challenges. She embodies the qualities of perseverance and determination, typical of Propp's Hero. She faces internal conflicts as she grapples with her desires and dreams versus the traditional roles and responsibilities imposed on her. Leila symbolises the modern Iranian woman, seeking autonomy and identity amidst traditional patriarchal norms.

In the film's most controversial scene, Leila slaps her father in order to bring him to his senses, after telling him off in front of her mother and brothers, about how his fiendish plan led to their misery and impecuniousness (Figure 3). Although Leila's pent-up anger and the underlying reasons for it were revealed many times during the film, this scene marks an epoch-making moment as she becomes involved in extreme rebellion against her father who deliberately chose his absurd prejudices. This particular act criticises the effectiveness of whacking children/wife, common in patriarchy culture, and sarcastically questions the fairness of a child's slap on an irrational father to make him think and behave reasonably. Here, Leila slapping the father does not necessarily mean rejecting the concept of respect but signifies an unrest against bigoted and hurtful beliefs of an orthodox generation.



Figure 3. Leila slapping Esmail symbolises generational conflict and resistance against patriarchal norms
Source: Author Documentation (2025)

Moreover, Propp defined two types of hero: the 'seeker' who is suffered by another character and goes on a quest to defeat the evil, and the 'victim' who directly suffers from the action of the villain at the start of the story and finally finds a magical agent to help resolve the misfortune. In this view, Leila seems to be both the seeker and victim type of hero: As a seeker hero, the life's difficulties (e.g. economic hardship, waywardness of her brothers, cruelty of the father, etc.) force her into a journey to bring back prosperity to the family and reprimand the father. And as a victim hero, from the beginning, she is directly afflicted by the father's cruel prejudices and foolishness, but eventually brings down his long-lasting and seemingly unshakable traditional beliefs and values.

The father as villain

Esmail, the 80-year-old father, embodies the struggle for respect within a society deeply rooted in traditional values. His obsession with gaining the title of paterfamilias, despite the detrimental impact on his family, symbolises his need to assert authority and social status at all costs. This fixation blinds him to the pressing needs of his children, ultimately leading to the family's downfall. Esmail's character serves as a critique of the rigid patriarchal values that prioritise social honour over familial well-being. Throughout the film, Esmail's internal conflicts, his relations with other family members and the critical reflection of family values and societal expectations come to the forefront. The film illustrates, through the figure of the father, how our primitive and unsatisfied instincts (titles, fame, status, etc.) combined with a distorted consciousness can lead a person to behave irrationally.

The character of the father is a pivotal figure whose portrayal delves into complex themes of family dynamics, authority, and traditional values in Iranian society, and therefore requires a more detailed examination. Perhaps the most obvious of these thematic elements is the patriarchal authority, where the father typically embodies patriarchal authority within the family structure. He is portrayed as the head of the household, responsible for making decisions that affect the family's dynamics and relationships. His decisions often dictate the course of action for other family members, especially his children.

The second most noticeable trait of the father character is based on the 'traditional values vs. modern realities' notion. Although Iranian films often explore the clash between traditional values and modern realities (Naficy, 2020), the father in *Leila's Brothers* embodies a somewhat extreme instance of such an impression, a man who is depicted as someone deeply rooted in traditional values, which may include expectations regarding marriage, family honour, and gender roles. His worldview may conflict with the aspirations or choices of his children, particularly the younger generation exposed to more liberal or modern ideas. He represents an older perspective that is challenged or transformed by the experiences and perspectives of his children, highlighting broader social changes within Iranian society.

The next theme deals with the idea of 'honour' that is also a recurring theme in Iranian cinema, and fathers are often depicted as guardians of family honour (Moghimi, 2020; Karimi, 2024). In *Leila's Brothers*, the father is portrayed as fiercely protective of his own reputation and

honour, which could lead to conflicts when family members' actions or decisions are perceived as jeopardising this honour.

Another theme in this regard is the father's conflict with children's independence; a central tension often explored is Esmail's struggle with his children's desire for independence and autonomy. In the film, the father may face challenges as his children navigate their own paths, potentially diverging from his expectations or traditional norms. This conflict can lead to emotional and moral dilemmas for both the father and the children.



Figure 4. Esmail, the symbol of selfishness, greed and dogmatism
Source: Author Documentation (2025)

One of the rather exceptional themes, however, was the psychological depth and complexity of the father character. Iranian avant-garde cinema is known for its nuanced characterisations (Grigorieva, 2018), and Esmail is likely depicted with psychological depth, as he often seemed to struggle to deal with internal conflicts and doubts about his decisions, or regrets about past actions, adding layers to his character beyond mere authority figures. Alternatively, despite his authoritative role, the father's character (Figure 4) also exhibits vulnerability, tenderness, or moments of emotional revelation. These moments humanise his character and offer insight into his inner life, motivations, and the complexities of familial relationships.

The brothers as donor/helper

In *Leila's Brothers*, the siblings, despite their personal flaws and conflicts, play crucial roles as 'helpers' in Leila's journey. They assist her through family struggles and contribute to the broader goal of overcoming their difficulties (Figure 5). Alireza (played by Navid Mohammadzadeh), a moral anchor, loses his job due to a factory closure caused by the boss's embezzlement, highlighting the economic challenges faced by the proletariat.

The other brothers include Manouchehr (Payman Maadi), who is both scheming and vulnerable; Farhad (Mohammad Ali Mohammadi), a bodybuilding cab driver; and Parviz (Farhad Aslani), an overweight janitor and family man. Their father, Esmail, besides seeking obedience from his family, is desperate to gain the respect and recognition from their clan, particularly after the death of an older patriarch cousin, which positions him as a potential successor.

Alireza's sudden unemployment is pushing him to advocate for a better future for his family. Parviz cleans toilets in a high-end Tehran mall, Farhad focuses on his car and American sports, and Manouchehr struggles with debt. Their varied paths and future anxieties symbolise the broader challenges faced by ordinary Iranians, reflecting the tension between societal expectations and personal desires.

The brothers embody aspects of traditional masculinity and familial duty, each struggling with their roles within the family and the constraints imposed by societal norms. Their interactions with Leila reveal tensions between love and control, illustrating the complexities of sibling relationships in a traditional family setting.

For most of the folk tales in Propp's study, the hero needs some sort of agent to defeat the villain and complete their quest. This object is provided by the 'donor' who usually demands something in turn from the hero. Once the donor's demand is satisfied, the hero is rewarded with the needed agent to restore order in their world. In *Leila's Brothers*, the 'courage' to face the harsh reality is the most crucial agent to bring about justice in a world dominated by cruelty and inequality, and in a household ruled by an unjust, delusional father. In a way, such a needed agent was gradually acquired by Leila; her relentless dedication for the family's well-being throughout the years created an emotional bond between the siblings, whose occasional emotional support led to a growing sense of courage in Leila, who felt she had nothing to lose, equipping her for the final battle against the villain. By the same token, as 'helpers', the brothers, despite their weaknesses, used their limited power and shrewdness to help Leila (hero) to acquire the object needed to remove the misfortune from their lives, which was the 40 gold coins held by Esmail.



Figure 5. The brothers of Leila, the symbol of uncertainty, rashness and misery
Source: Author Documentation (2025)

Narrative Analysis and Discussion

Narratives are composed in order to reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the perceiver's search for coherence. Stories have long been a means of translating shared anxieties, hopes, and mysteries into a medium that can be communally experienced. Narrative cinema offers stories not as something we hear or something we read but as something we witness (Buckland, 2021). Epic stories like *Leila's Brothers* are usually concerned with important themes, in heroic proportions, and Leila as the protagonist is an ideal representative of Iran's contemporary culture of resistance against those traditionalist views that tend to subdue women and undermine their rights.

Leila's defiance of her father's control parallels the themes of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, particularly in her challenge to patriarchal authority and her pursuit of economic independence. Her decision to slap her father, both literal and symbolic, resonates with the broader call for accountability and reform. The film also depicts the emotional labour and organisational role that Leila shoulders, echoing real-world narratives of Iranian women leading social mobilisations.

Given Iran's strict censorship apparatus, *Leila's Brothers* makes use of several techniques to communicate dissent covertly. These include allegorical character construction (e.g., Esmail as a stand-in for political authority), symbolic juxtaposition (e.g., a birthday party occurring alongside the patriarch's unnoticed death), and emotionally loaded actions (e.g., Leila's slap). Rather than overt political statements, the film embeds critique within character decisions, unresolved conflict, and the absence of moral resolution, strategies that can evade surface-level censorship while resonating with politically aware audiences.

Building on the narrative analysis, this section interprets how the film's structural choices (its character construction, symbolic closure, and thematic emphasis) function as veiled political commentary. While earlier sections detailed how the narrative conforms to structuralist models, the discussion here focuses on how those same narrative elements reflect, critique, and

challenge Iran's patriarchal and authoritarian order. In this reading, the film's censorship becomes more understandable: it is not merely a response to representational themes, but to deeper allegorical mechanisms that resonate with ongoing calls for political transformation.

Esmail as allegorical authority: a reflection of Iran's supreme leader

The character of Esmail operates as an allegorical figure that reflects the characteristics of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While the film does not name Khamenei explicitly, Esmail's obsession with patriarchal power, symbolic status, and self-legitimation mirrors broader patterns of governance in Iran. His role as a father who prioritises public image over family well-being functions as a microcosm of a political system accused of valuing ideological control over citizens' material conditions.

This allegorical portrayal suggests that *Leila's Brothers* is not merely a family drama but a subtle critique of the authoritarian regime, drawing parallels between the patriarchal authority in the household and the political leadership of the nation. On a surface level, it can be argued that the film's depiction of the struggles faced by the family is a reflection of the broader societal and economic conditions in Iran, for which the leadership bears responsibility. That is to say, the film's critical perspective may be viewed as an indirect commentary on the impact of the policies and governance style of the Supreme Leader and the ruling establishment on the lives of ordinary citizens.

On a more interpretive level, Esmail's characterisation (his inflexible values, generational disconnect, and symbolic death) can be read as a deliberate metaphor for Khamenei. The film invites this reading through exaggerated traditional rituals and a narrative arc that casts Esmail not as a fully human character, but as a symbol of entrenched, obsolete authority. While this allegorical mapping cannot be confirmed authorially, it resonates strongly with audiences attuned to Iran's political context. This interpretation gains weight when considering the film's selective depiction of rituals and values that are arguably outdated, suggesting their symbolic use rather than sociological accuracy.

In this regard, some film critics have argued that without its sophisticated political metaphors, *Leila's Brothers* would turn out mediocre, since it is really rare to find a case in Iran where the personal reputation and status really take precedence over one's own children. Sicinski (2023) criticised the film's excessive length and poor execution, where characters engage in extreme pontification and lack the qualities of believable human beings, and the narrative is presented with an unwarranted gravitas reminiscent of a Greek tragedy. Similarly, some consider the traditional norms and rituals seen in the movie as an unrealistic image that is hard to find even in today's rural communities of Iran; the primitive and hateful customs that belong to the past century or so, which at best ended more than three decades ago (e.g. Kamygray, 2023). Some of these critics aptly explain that if there is a dominant tendency in contemporary Iran, it is likely to be the tendency of matriarchy and filial piety. Iranian filmmakers are aware of the feminist movements' significance in cultural and political circles where they can get the most fame, money and influence; hence, they misleadingly include these attention-grabbing themes in their films to do well and win awards at international festivals.

In this view, several remarkable resemblances between the two are worthwhile to look into, especially the ones that are most identifiable by the discerning Iranian audiences who have come to be aware of Khamenei's authoritarian leadership and his publicly known background.

Hunger for power

The character of the 80-year-old father, Esmail, reflects the effort to gain the respect he cannot find from his surroundings as the head of his family within a society that has turned its traditions into a way of life. Throughout the film, Esmail's internal conflicts, his relations with other family members and the critical reflection of family values and societal expectations come to the forefront. The film illustrates, through the figure of the father, how our primitive and unsatisfied instincts, titles, fame, status, etc., combined with a distorted consciousness, can lead a person to behave irrationally.

As such, Esmail's character is reminiscent of Khamenei, who has maintained his grip on power since 1989 through a combination of strategic alliances, institutional control, and ideological influence. His leadership is deeply rooted in his ideological commitment to the principles of the Islamic Revolution, which emphasise the establishment and preservation of an

Islamic governance model. Khamenei's authority, shaped by the historical context of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), underscores the importance of a centralised power structure to maintain stability. Khamenei has consolidated control over key institutions, including the military, judiciary, and media, to neutralise potential threats to his authority, which he views as essential for the survival of the Islamic Republic amid external and internal challenges. His personal conviction as the guardian of the Islamic Republic further drives his determination to retain power, a position bolstered by the effective sidelining of opposition, leaving him largely unchallenged within the regime.

Neglecting his own people

The father character acts with a desire to appear strong outside by disregarding the needs of the children at home. At the same time, he wants to spend the 40 gold coins he has secretly saved from his children in order to appear respectable as a tribal leader. This situation, along with his refusal to support his four unemployed sons despite their need for capital to open a shop, and his persistent demanding attitude and imposition of pressure on his children, leads to the impression in the film that he metaphorically represents the state they live in.

By the same token, the character of Esmail signifies Khamenei, precisely since he has significant influence over the country's finances and resources, which he keeps away from the people in Iran and instead spends them on a personal quest to export the Islamic Revolution. Iran's Supreme Leader wields significant control over the country's finances through a network of religious foundations and economic conglomerates, which are largely unaccountable, have amassed vast wealth used to consolidate the regime's power rather than addressing the population's needs (Filin et al. 2022). As the longest-serving head of state in the Middle East, Khamenei prioritises funding for regional proxy groups, military and nuclear programs, despite economic challenges and sanctions, exacerbating poverty and economic hardship within Iran.

His administration has been criticised for economic mismanagement, corruption, and prioritising the interests of the elite, leading to widespread social inequality and resentment. Additionally, Khamenei has allocated substantial resources to censorship, repression, and maintaining a security apparatus to suppress dissent, further straining the population, who face high inflation, unemployment, and limited access to basic needs. These spending priorities have led to a situation where Iran, despite its rich natural resources, particularly oil, has significant segments of its population living in poverty, while resources are directed towards maintaining the regime's power and regional influence.

Reactionary patriarch

The character of Esmail embodies traditional patriarchal values, which significantly influence the dynamics of the family and the unfolding narrative. He insists on maintaining unquestioned male authority, often at the expense of the well-being and autonomy of female family members, particularly Leila. His resistance to Leila's independence and leadership, especially in financial matters, reflects an anti-feminist stance, as he struggles to accept her challenge to traditional gender roles. Esmail prioritises male honour and social status over practical needs, reinforcing outdated norms that marginalise women's voices and contributions. His inability to adapt to the evolving roles of women perpetuates a patriarchal structure that limits their agency.

Accordingly, Khamenei's beliefs reflect anti-feminist and patriarchal views through his strict adherence to traditional gender roles, where he emphasises the primary role of women as mothers and caregivers, subordinate to male authority. He advocates for modesty and the segregation of genders, often framing women's rights and freedoms within the context of Islamic values that prioritise family over individual autonomy. Khamenei also opposes Western feminism, which he perceives as undermining traditional family structures and moral values, thus reinforcing a system that restricts women's roles to domestic spheres and limits their participation in public and political life. In Khamenei's view, the main role of women is to raise children and support the patriarchal family rather than to engage in the public sphere or claim equality with men (Khosrokhavar, 2019).

Addiction to opium

In *Leila's Brothers*, Esmail's opium addiction is a crucial element of his character, symbolising the decline of patriarchal authority and the broader decay of traditional values. His addiction represents his physical and moral weakness, undermines his authority, and strains family

relationships, as he avoids responsibility and leaves the burden on others, particularly Leila. This escapism deepens the generational and ideological rift within the family, while also adding complexity to his character, evoking both frustration and pity, and highlighting the personal and societal costs of clinging to outdated values in a changing world.

Esmail's addiction to *Leila's Brothers* draws a parallel to Khamenei, though this connection is largely based on rumours and unverified claims, often circulated by opposition groups aiming to undermine his legitimacy. This idea is further fuelled by Iran's historical association with opium, which is somehow socially accepted among older generations (Figg-Franzoi, 2011), widespread distrust in the government (Sohrabi, 2021; Matin, 2023), and the emergence and online circulation of various photos of Khamenei (Figure 6) smoking a cigarette and a pipe (Reynolds, 2011).

One important factor in this regard is the influence of political opposition figures like Parviz Sabeti, the former director of the Bureau for Intelligence and Security. In an interview documented in a book by Qaneei Fard (2012), Sabeti explicitly mentions Khamenei's long-standing opium addiction, revealing specific details from the time he was in custody for being involved in anarchist activities against the Shah. There was even a documentary about Sabeti in five episodes, which was aired in November 2023 by Manoto, a popular satellite TV channel among Iranians (ceased satellite broadcasting on 31 January 2024). In an episode of this miniseries, he famously said that Khamenei was opium addicted, and he was exiled to the city of Iranshahr, where his special supplier Shahpour brought him opium. After the revolution Shahpour was appointed as the General Director of the Foundation of the Oppressed and Disabled, the second-largest commercial enterprise in Iran (Vahabi, 2023).



Figure 6. One of many photos available online showing Khamenei smoking a cigarette or a pipe
Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14362281> (2021)

The closure: celebrating the dictator's downfall

As demonstrated in the analysis section, after establishing equilibrium and experiencing a climax (disequilibrium), the narrative of *Leila's Brothers* progresses to its final act, culminating in a revised equilibrium. In the concluding sequence, Esmail's death occurs quietly as his granddaughter's birthday party commences in the same room (Figure 7). Initially unnoticed by the attendees, Esmail's demise is eventually realised by his son, Alireza, who mourns silently before his father's dead body. Leila is the next to notice Esmail's death; her expression is distant and detached, reflecting the weight of unresolved tensions and broken dreams. However, in a poignant shift, she gazes off into space with a smile that hints at a glimmer of hope.



Figure 7. Esmail's death and the young girls' celebration in the same frame
Source: Author Documentation (2025)

The closing scene underscores key themes of the film, each explored in the subsequent subsections:

Tension between generations

The birthday party scene symbolises the emergence of a new generation in Iran, eager to embrace progress and break free from the constraints of the past. Esmail's lifeless body represents the fading influence of the old guard, highlighting the generational conflict between tradition and modernity. This conflict is further accentuated by the focus on the young girl's celebration, which resonates with the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, primarily driven by young women advocating for social and political change. Just as the girl's birthday signifies renewal and hope amid the family's turmoil, the movement represents a new era in Iran, where young women challenge the oppressive patriarchal norms embodied by characters like Esmail. This tension reflects broader societal shifts, where younger Iranians increasingly push for social, political, and economic reforms, creating a widening gap between their aspirations and the expectations of the older generation (Matin, 2022a). The birthday party is more than a simple family event; it embodies the growing empowerment of women, especially the younger generation, who are at the forefront of protests demanding fundamental rights and freedoms. The juxtaposition of the girl's celebration with Esmail's quiet death symbolises the inevitable decline of the old order, making space for the voices of young women leading the fight for freedom in Iran.

Rebirth amidst decay

Contrasting the birthday celebration is Esmail's physical decline, symbolising the fall of the old order. This juxtaposition suggests that Iran's future lies with its youth, who are driving ongoing social unrest and demanding change that the old regime can no longer suppress. Equipped with education, technology, and a global perspective, the younger generation challenges the status quo with resilience and creativity, positioning themselves as the architects of a potential new political reality despite the lingering influence of the old guard.

Critique of the existing regime

The concluding scene implicitly critiques Iran's Supreme Leader and the existing regime, highlighting their obsolescence and disconnect from the younger generation's aspirations. The birthday party signifies a readiness for change, even as remnants of the old regime persist. Young Iranians, influenced by the internet and satellite TV, seek freedoms incompatible with a system that enforces an Islamic lifestyle. Their desire for the liberties observed on social media clashes with a resilient regime prepared to suppress any form of discontent (Bozorgmehr, 2022).

Desensitisation to authority

The nonchalant continuation of the birthday party beside Esmail's corpse reflects a growing societal indifference towards the old regime. This shift indicates that the new generation no longer holds the same reverence or fear of authority, a result of prolonged economic hardship,

social repression, and exposure to government brutality. Experiencing severe economic sanctions, high inflation, and limited opportunities, the youth have developed a persistent disconnect from the government's promises, fostering deep-seated frustration and disillusionment. Their resistance to a regime perceived as corrupt and out of touch manifests in fearless defiance and challenges to authority.

Hope amidst oppression

Despite the oppressive presence of Esmail's body, the birthday party symbolises a quiet, yet resilient celebration of hope and life. Leila's meaningful smile, though framed by sorrow, reflects a glimmer of optimism amidst the despair surrounding her. Her smile captures the essence of hope despite overwhelming oppression, as it mirrors the resolve of the younger generation to assert their identity and aspirations under authoritarian rule.

This resilience is evident in acts of defiance, such as the rejection of repressive norms, public protests, and the use of social media to amplify their voices and expose government abuses. The youth, like Leila, refuse to succumb to the suffocating weight of the past, instead advocating for personal freedoms, gender equality, and political rights (Matin, 2022b). In Leila's smile, we see the determination of a new generation that envisions a future aligned with their values and aspirations, challenging the regime's attempts to control and silence them. The juxtaposition of her quiet smile amidst sorrow highlights the enduring spirit of hope even in the face of oppression.

Inevitable transition

The simultaneous presence of life (the birthday party) and death (Esmail's body) represents the inevitable transition of power and societal change in Iran. This coexistence highlights the tension between the old and the new, suggesting the fading influence of the old order as the younger generation rises. The Islamic regime faces significant challenges to its integrity and legitimacy, driven by widespread public dissent, particularly among the youth. Nationwide protests following the death of Mahsa Amini illustrate the young Iranians' demands for justice and political rights. Despite severe government repression, including media bans, executions, and mass imprisonment, the youth persist in their opposition, leveraging technology and social media more effectively than previous movements like the Green Movement of 2009. These protests not only advocate for civil rights but also represent a fundamental rejection of the clerical regime, driven by a loss of hope in the current system (Groeling, 2023). While the Iranian government is not yet on the brink of collapse, the ongoing unrest signals a potential for an inevitable transition.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how *Leila's Brothers* uses classical structuralist narrative models (namely Todorov's three-part equilibrium model and Propp's character archetypes) to construct a veiled critique of patriarchal and authoritarian regimes in contemporary Iran. While these frameworks are often used to analyse myth and mainstream storytelling, their application here reveals how structural conventions can be co-opted to encode dissent in censored environments.

By positioning Esmail as a symbolic stand-in for entrenched political power and Leila as both a seeker and victim-hero, the film constructs a narrative that resonates with broader societal frustrations, particularly those expressed during the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement. The allegorical death of the father during a child's birthday celebration underscores the thematic transition from repression to renewal, reflecting a generational desire for transformation.

The research also illustrates that narrative structure itself, when paired with culturally specific symbols, can function as a subversive tool. The formal design of the film enables political expression without explicit confrontation, making it legible to audiences familiar with Iran's sociopolitical landscape while potentially eluding censorship. In this way, structuralism is not divorced from politics but rather offers a strategic grammar for encoding dissent in environments of surveillance and suppression.

Theoretically, this study extends structuralist narrative analysis beyond its traditional literary applications, demonstrating its relevance in politically restrictive media ecologies. Practically, it offers a model for understanding how filmmakers in authoritarian contexts can

embed political critique in form rather than in content. Future research might explore how different audiences interpret such encoded narratives or compare *Leila's Brothers* with other films that have faced censorship for subtextual resistance. Such comparative approaches could further illuminate how formal storytelling strategies operate as discreet acts of political defiance.

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