

The Hidden Half

Images of Women in Middle Eastern Cinema
by Cathleen Rountree

What are women's lives like in other parts of the world? This question can be answered in three primary ways: through travel and personal experience, through the news media, and through literature and cinema. At Toronto (2006), Sundance, and the San Francisco International Film Festival this year, a spate of excellent Middle Eastern documentary and narrative films shed light on the subject; and all but one of them was directed by a woman. Bay Area audiences have additional opportunities to catch Middle Eastern films about women at the upcoming Arab Film Festival (October 18–November 4, aff.org), the Global Lens film series (November t.b.a., globalfilm.org), and the United Nations Association Film Festival (October 24–28, unaff.org).

Rise up, spiral down

In *Offside*, Jafar Panahi, the director of well-known Iranian films such as *The Mirror*, *The Circle*, and *The White Balloon* (all of which tell stories about women and girls), follows a group of young women as they wrestle, deceive, and otherwise attempt to finagle their way into a soccer finals match in Tehran. Iranian law bars women from attending sporting events. During my interview with Mr. Panahi in Toronto, he mentioned that the inspiration for the film arose out of his own 15-year-old daughter's attempt to sneak into a match wearing a male friend's robe (she was caught and tossed out). When I asked if he thought the law might change, he replied, "In Islam, women are forbidden to look at men's bare legs. There is nothing we can do about the religious laws because they are etched in stone, so we can forget about changing the laws."

Women's Prison, directed by Manijeh Hekmat unfolds in a setting more sinister than a sporting arena. Banned in Iran, the film traces the story of women in Iranian society since the Islamic Revolution, through the ordeal of women behind bars. This fascinating drama offered by Global Lens, hinges on the struggle between an independent reform-driven prisoner and a determined warden, compelled by her Islamic beliefs.

Mainline, by Iranian director Rakhsan Bani-Etemad (co-directed by Mohsen Abdol-



vahab), dramatizes a young middle-class woman's downward spiral into heroin addiction. According to the directors, young people under the age of 30 comprise 70 percent of Iran's population, and drug addiction among this demographic is rising to alarming heights. The filmmakers effectively use a cinema vérité approach to capture the grit and desolation of drug life and the desperate challenges of rehabilitation.

These Girls, directed by Tahani Rached, plunges deep into Egyptian street life. The documentary follows a group of adolescents who live, suffer, rejoice, and sometimes die, on the streets of Cairo as they sniff glue, prostitute themselves, and band together to create some semblance of security and family. Rached's empathic connection to "these girls" creates a compassionate film that leaves a lasting impression on the viewer.

Dark though these films are, they signal a new era in the complexity of representations of women in Middle Eastern cinema, and at the forefront of the group is a new work by filmmaker Niki Karimi.

Mapping the new interior

A Few Days Later..., directed by and starring the well-known Iranian actress and director

Karimi (*One Night, Two Women, The Hidden Half*), is a minimalist portrait of an educated, professional woman dealing with pressures in all aspects of her life. Shahrzad, a graphic designer, artist, and university professor living in Tehran, is besieged by a demanding boss, a disapproving mother and friends, an obnoxious neighbor, and an indecisive lover.

When I interviewed Karimi at Toronto, I noted that her film—with its melancholic atmosphere, gorgeous landscapes, and a main character who drives (sometimes aimlessly) as she pursues an existential questioning of life—approximates a feminist version of Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997). "Really!" she laughed, pleased at the comparison. Karimi has, in fact, worked as Kiarostami's assistant, and he produced her first directing effort *To Have Or Not to Have* (2001). I asked what her impetus was for making her latest film and she suggested, "The film is about things that are happening in society to women my age. I felt that there were few films about the experiences of women. I call this 'personal cinema,' not cinema from the commercial film industry. I wanted to show a woman trying to earn money, be on her own, and how many problems can surround her. I wanted to show the distance that she has from society. Because of that, she's living out of the city. And each day she travels on the road and looks at the city and asks herself, 'What is this place I'm going to?'"

I mention that Shahrzad appears to lead a very privileged life in comparison to other representations of Iranian women that I have seen on film. While the character may be privileged, Karimi points out, "She is not 'upper class.' I mean, she is middle-class: she is working, she is an artist, she is also a professor at a university. She is not very rich, but she is taking care of herself. She is typical



of Iranian women. We have so many women lawyers, artists, professors, especially in the last 20 years, we have so many women who have graduated from university. They work, have houses, marry, and divorce, like women in the West."

The political is personal

Many of the films I saw this year are suffused in political upheaval, whether it is an undercurrent or the main issue. Malalai Joya, subject of Danish filmmaker Eva Mulvad's documentary *Enemies of Happiness*, is dedicated to improving the lives of her countrywomen. The film follows Joya, a 28-year-old delegate in the Afghanistan parliament, as she campaigns for election, receives threats on her life (there have been four), and subsequently leads a political life where she must remain in hiding or be protected by armed guards in public. *Enemies of Happiness* provides a unique insight into today's Afghanistan, a society destroyed by war and still ruled by tradition. Joya is a controversial leader for a people who have been promised peace and prosperity, but who continue to be ravaged by war. She successfully negotiates with clan leaders and opium kings, and on behalf of despairing adolescent girls, promised in marriage to men old enough to be their grandfathers. This radical freedom fighter for women displays courage and fosters the belief that one person *does* make a difference.

The Arab Film Festival recently screened two documentaries about Iraqi women and life in Baghdad during the U.S. occupation. In *The Tenth Planet: A Single Life in Baghdad*, by Melis

Birder, a young Baghdadi woman describes herself thus: "There are nine planets in the universe and I am the tenth one." Her name means "planet" in Arabic and she is indeed a world unto herself, unafraid to speak her mind about sex, love and politics. *Baghdad Days* is by and about Heba Bassem, a young student from Kirkuk, who returns to Baghdad after the war to finish her film studies at the Art Academy. For her final project, Heba captures her struggles to complete her studies in the semi-destroyed city of Baghdad, where nothing remains the same.

One film, from Global Lens, offers a stunning look at two women's experiences in Algeria. *Enough!*, by Djamilia Sahraoui, takes place in the 1990s, and follows a nurse and a doctor; the husband of the latter has been abducted by rebel forces unhappy with his reportage. The women, anachronisms in Islamist Algeria, reflect on earlier times as they confront contemporary religious limitations imposed on females.

Kiss Me Not on the Eyes, by Lebanese writ-



er-director Jocelyne Saab reveals the conflicts for women in Egyptian culture by juxtaposing female sensuality with female circumcision; love of poetry with religious repression; emancipated dance with physical restraint. Amid the lavish color, intoxicating music, and historical architecture of contemporary Cairo, Dunia, a free-spirited, belly dancer, studies Arabic love poetry at the university as she maneuvers her way through a repressive society. But once she marries her ardent long-term boyfriend Mandouh, he constricts Dunia's independent nature. Instead she finds philosophical nourishment in her relationship with her professor. *Kiss Me Not* explores cross-cultural concerns about ownership of women's bod-

ies and, by extension, the inherent pleasure within them.

In August 2003, Palestinian-Australian documentary filmmaker Sherine Salama, awakened convinced that Yasser Arafat was going to die, and soon. She recognized the importance of following her prescient dream and *The Last Days of Yasser Arafat* resulted. During our interview in San Francisco, Salama told me she is not, by nature, a very political person, but she felt "a kind of duty to make a film about Arafat before he died." In *Last Days* Salama accomplishes the daunting task of humanizing the typically demonized president. Much of the documentary's action revolves around her attempt to break through the inner sanctum of aids, bodyguards, and press secretaries surrounding Arafat's compound at Ramallah to get an interview with him. It takes more than a year, but she finally ingratiates herself and her interview is granted. When the documentarian meets the despot their conversation is amiable and Arafat is engaged. Within a month, after Arafat's death, Salama realizes that hers is the

ultimate interview. By following her instincts she provided the world with a final glimpse of one of the most controversial leaders of the 20th century. I urge you to check out this film and the others featured in this article for an unforgettable look at women's lives in the Middle East.

Cathleen Rountree, Ph.D., is a film journalist and author of nine books, including The Movie Lovers' Club. Her six-week course, Faces of Women in Middle Eastern Cinema, begins this September at UC Santa Cruz, Extension in Cupertino. Read her Women in World Cinema blog at womenin-worldcinema.org.