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, unaf.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 Balloons (all of which tell stories about women and girls), follows a group of young women as they wrestle, deceive, and struggle to arrange 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 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 Manjeli Hekmat unfurls in a setting more sinister than a sporting arena. Ramin Bahrani’s film traces the story of women in Iranian society since the Islamic Revolution, through the ordeal of women behind bars. The film’s climactic drama offered by Global Lens, hinges on the struggle between an independent reform-driven prison and a determined warden, compelled by political will and a personal mission. The White Balloon, Jafar Panahi, the director of well-known Iranian films such as The Mirror, The Circle, and The White Balloons (all of which tell stories about women and girls), follows a group of young women as they wrestle, deceive, and struggle to arrange 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 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.”

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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. Shahrazad, 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 Shahrizad appears to lead a very personal 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, 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. Malakal Jeya, a 28-year-old delegate in the Afghan 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. Jeya is a controversial political 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, forced to live as a political woman, and still ruled by tradition. Jeya is a controver-

Full Story...

Cathleen Rountree, Ph.D., is a film journalist and author of nine books, including The Movie Lover’s Club. Her six-week course, Faces of Women in Middle Eastern Cinema, began this September at UC Santa Cruz, Extension in Cupertino. Read her Women in Middle East blog at www.globalcinema.org.