

ISLAMIC WOMEN IN FILMS: TURNING THE VOYEURS INTO SPECTATORS

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Abstract: *Women are usually stereotyped by media. In advertising, television programs, newspaper, magazines, comic books, popular music videos, even in films and video games, women and girls are more likely to be shown performing domestic chores or as sexual objects or as victims who are the natural recipients of harassment and assault. We also use to witness typecast mediatic images of Muslim women. However, a number of post-2000 films on Islamic societies made by Islamic and non-Islamic filmmakers, are pivoting around strong Muslim female characters. These films have opened up new dimensions for academic inquiry regarding the depiction of women in media. My Tehran for Sale (2009) by Granaz Moussavi, Lemon Tree (2008) by Eran Riklis and Bol (2011) by Shoaib Mansoor are some of the films which need to be discussed at length in this particular context.*

Keywords: *women, Muslim, film, Iran, Australia, Pakistan, Palestine, Israel, underground, theatre, actress, immigration, Government's intervention, threat, betweenness, war-mongering, machismo, eco-feminism, religion-led fanaticism, voyeurs, spectators*

Introduction

Today, any discourse on Islamic world, be it from the standpoint of the victor or the vanquished, is mediated by certain graphic spectacle of media both online and other older forms like TV and Films. Visual media other than films mainly provide objective information. On the other hand, meaningful films apart from just 'providing' objective data, may 'connote', 'imply' or 'signify' various facets of politico-democratic events specific to a particular region. Besides, they are different from other visual media because of the 'human factor' associated with them. The films, which will be discussed here, are made by internationally acclaimed filmmakers and based on humanitarian themes. Moreover, these films have opened up new dimensions for academic inquiry regarding the depiction of Muslim women in films. The films are- *My Tehran for Sale* (2009) by Granaz Moussavi, *Lemon Tree* (2008) by Eran Riklis and *Bol* (2011) by Shoaib Mansoor. This piece of writing will try to decode the nuances of the trifocal ontology of women, cinema and Islam.

A theatre woman in panopticon: the aesthetics and pathos of a theatre called life-

Marzieh (Marzieh Vafamehr) of Granaz Moussavi directed *My Tehran for Sale* (2009) is a young female theatre actress and fashion designer living in Tehran. She has absorbed herself in Tehran's underground arts scene, where she and her associates live under the constant threat of Iranian government's intervention and punishment. Marzieh meets Saman (Amir Chegini), an Iranian-born Australian citizen at an illegal after-hours disco. Saman offers to bring Marzieh to Australia with him and she accepts. However, Saman leaves her the moment the information of her severe illness reaches them. Still, she does make it to Australia but enjoys even less freedom there than she did in Tehran. We find her incarcerated in an Australian prison cell.

My Tehran for Sale is a non-linear narrative told through a queer mélange of flashback and flash-forward. This alternative movie has diluted the norms of Iranian mainstream cinema to depict a reality of urban, artistic young people prohibited from expression. Shot guerrilla-style (by cinematographer Bonnie Elliott) entirely in Tehran, Iranian writer-director Granaz Moussavi's (who immigrated to Australia with her parents in 1997) *My Tehran for Sale* is a tale of Marzieh's struggle for artistic and personal freedom while also dealing with the abject immigration policies of Western nations. It shows how asylum seekers may be driven to desperation by the propinquity of freedom and its refutation. Cultural perceptions of AIDS are also discussed (<http://www.globalfilm.org>). Above all, it is a story of feisty Marzieh. Portrayed with uninhibited naturalism, Marzieh radiates a militant zeal for a free life. Vafamehr delivers a stark realism and seething passion. In an extremely complex role, Marzieh Vafamehr is outstanding as a performance artist struggling with more than her fair share of adversity. She shows a strange ability for dominating the screen without a bit of jazzy grabs at easy emotion. Marzieh is a searing, troubling and beautiful portrait of a strong yet vulnerable female. It is a carefully non-judgmental depiction of a young woman seeking artistic and sexual freedom under Iran's contemporary oppressive political climate. The character of this terminally ill actress has never been tried to be martyred. Vafamehr's real-life struggle to survive as an actress in Iran under circumstances that threaten her morals, principals, and viewpoints as an artist and as a woman, is no less deplorable. Controversy encircled the film when unauthorized copies of the film hit the black market in Tehran. In July 2011, Iranian authorities arrested Vafamehr for acting in the film without proper Islamic *hijab* and with a shaved head. She was sentenced to one year imprisonment and 90 lashes, but an appeals court later reduced her sentence to three months imprisonment (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs>). She was released in October 2011. On the other hand, the director, Moussavi opted for a digital format for the film which allowed for the producers to keep the raw stock hidden from Iranian authorities. Everyday the footage was downloaded into Final Cut Pro and two sets of backups were saved onto hard drives, stored in different locations in case one set was discovered by the authorities. At the end of the production, the footage was taken to Australia on three hard drives packed away in backpacks worn by the producers.

For women living in contemporary Iran, the political is personal. The most intimate life choices of women have been directly shaped by political as well as social and cultural factors (Mourazzi, 2008). The public discussion of women's lives is unusually coded. In a number of films from Iran, we find an enigmatic enshrinement of those codes. Strangely, *My Tehran for Sale* has tried to avert this enigma to unfasten the reality. Still, cultural relativism or cultural imperialism (Afzal-Khan, 1997), the depiction has never rested on either of the two. However, Modern Tehran lives in a dyadic time zone. The present, experienced secretively, hidden not in shame but in fear and the primitive past of a religion-led fanaticism that wants to impose itself on all, especially on women. Perhaps a cinematic protest against it was reverberated in a

riveting sequence of *My Tehran for Sale*, high on a hill overlooking the city where Marzieh sits with her friend and delivers heartfelt wails into the twilight.

Trees and women in conflict zone: harmonizing the agony-

Lemon Tree is a 2008 Israeli movie directed by Eran Riklis. This apparently apolitical film shows the legal efforts of a Palestinian widow to stop the Israeli Defense Minister, her neighbor, from destroying the lemon trees in her family farm. At the same time, she develops a bond with the minister's neglected wife Mira (Rona Lipaz-Michael), who considers the order to chop down the trees arbitrary and unnecessary. The Israeli Defense Minister, pointedly called Israel Navon (Doron Tavory), moves to a house on the border between Israel and the West Bank, with the building sitting on the Israeli side just next to the dividing line. The Israeli Secret Service views the neighboring lemon grove of Salma Zidane (Hiam Abbas), a Palestinian widow whose family has cared for the area for generations, as a threat to the Minister and his wife. The security forces soon set up a guard post and a barbed wire fence around the grove. They then obtain an order to uproot the lemon trees. Salma decides to work with the young lawyer Ziad Daud (Ali Suliman) and take their case all the way to the Court. The court case receives notable media attention. A final camera shot reveals the lemon trees to have been cut down (<http://www.washingtonpost.com>). A hypothetical representation of the Israeli-West bank separation wall punctuates the segments of the film. Hiam Abbas acts with impeccably calculated minimalism. Salma has suffered a lot. She lost her husband, her kids are far away, and she lives all alone. Besides, director Eran Riklis subtly suggests, the double jeopardy of being a Palestinian among Israelis, and a Woman among Palestinians. Browbeaten Salma argues in vain with the legal and military power of a society that treats her as an enemy. On the other hand, the defense minister, and even his sympathetic wife, claim to be powerless as well, unable to change an intricate situation. Salma doesn't say much at all yet every emotion is clear. Her dignity is impressive but it makes her defeat much harder.

The relationship between Salma and Mira is portrayed with sheer subtlety. The two do not meet exclusively. Salma never says anything to Mira and Mira just about makes one general statement when she apologizes to Salma for taking lemons from her grove without permission. But Mira can't stop thinking about Salma. Mira can't even keep herself from attending the final hearing despite warning from friends and family. When the court decision comes, Mira decides to leave Israel Navon. The connection between the two women becomes clearer with this move at the end - a defeat not just for Salma, for Israel too, because his wife leaves him and he is walled-in. The hope-defeat dyad created by these two women is astounding. Since Salma has lost her trees, she decides to let go of practically everything else as well. She burns the clothes in her house and also Ziad's picture in the newspaper. This time there are no tears and once again, the poise is astonishing.

So, the question is- how long women in conflict zones can live in a state of 'betweenness'- locked between public and private, reason and unreason, home and exile, freedom and the lack of it (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009). The irony of *Lemon Tree* is that what it achieves as film only adds, in the end, to the sense that nothing can unravel the cruel chaos. Nonetheless, *Lemon Tree* is a richly layered feminist parable. We never miss the exquisite eco-feminist subtext within the film. The arboreal affinity between Salma and the lemon trees and Mira's empathy towards them, a silent bonding of the trio- Salma, the trees and Mira, their agony caused by the culture of hatred and war-mongering machismo clearly indicate the connotation of eco-feminism.

To say or not to say: woman on the bridge between silence and death-

Having already hit international headlines with his masterpiece *Khuda Kay Liye*, director Shoaib Mansoor from Pakistan shifts focus from the issue of terrorism to discussing domestic concerns of Pakistan in *Bol* (2011). The entire story unveils in the flashback mode as Zainab (Humaima Malik) narrates her life history to the media, minutes before being sentenced to death. Born in a conservative Muslim family, Zainab is the eldest amongst half a dozen daughters of Hakim saab (Manzar Zehbai). The highpoint of the film is the conflict between the eldest daughter (Humaima Malik) and her retrograde father (Manzar Sehbai) who has fathered fourteen children, in the quest for a male successor. Troubles compound when the last-born happens to be a hermaphrodite and the father condemns him to a life of captivity (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>). Director Shoaib Mansoor uses this family as a paradigm to address almost every concern correlated with the community. The film highlights the regressive attitude of a male-dominated society that offers no liberty to woman in choosing life-partner, refusing reproduction, gaining education or working independently. And the concerns are very much contemporary with the film set in modern-day Lahore.

Almost all the issues are brought to light by the conformist characterization of the father figure. The director attributes his extremism to his orthodox upbringing and bigoted beliefs. At several instances, the narrative underscores the irony of life. While we have often witnessed woman getting into the flesh trade for survival, here the male species falls prey of the situation. The fact that all his children were only girls, which had always been his biggest weakness, turns Hakim's strength when he gets money to impregnate a courtesan (Iman Ali) with a girl child. Later the Hakim wanted to kill this girl child. The Hakim killed his own child Saifee, after the boy got sexually abused. The question arises, how can a person deprive another human being of his or her right to life, in the name of God, in the name of fake honour? Humaima Malik is magnificent as the rebellious daughter, who dares to question her father and even take drastic measures to ensure that justice triumphs amidst all the inequity. *Bol* is an inspiring and strikingly bold movie that takes you through sensitive gender issues and troubles, regarding family planning in the society. The director strongly depicts the blemishes but not without showing a ray of light at the end. In 2 hours 40 minutes, *Bol* justifies women emancipation.

During the last two decades, women of this country have show that they will not submit themselves to any attempts to remove them from the public sphere and diminish their legal rights. Interestingly, rabid opposition to women activists came also from *Daughters of Islam* who espouses religion based positions supported by right wing groups (Chenoy, 2002). The issue of women oppressing other women is significant in that it focuses our attention on the class-based nature of gender oppression in Muslim societies. Nevertheless, militaristic culture enhances machismo and reinforces the concept of men's superiority. The historical importance of women's movement is that it has established that violence begins at home and continues into the society and state. Mansoor's *Bol* is pointer to this very fact. He presents a social remark which is emotionally compelling and forthright. He blatantly highlights the still prevalent gender issues in his country, which till today are backed by religious morals.

Cinewomen beyond Scopophilia-

Granaz Moussavi, Eran Riklis and Shoaib Mansoor present a triadic vision of women translated in cinema. Marzieh, Salma and Zainab surrender to us in their true self. The directors celebrate the courage, honesty, warmth and spirit of womanhood. There are a number of other startling movies on Islamic societies, people and individuals, which have been released in the last decade by filmmakers like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf, Annemarie Jakir, Marjane Satrapi, Siddiq Barmak etc. Some of the important films are, *Kandahar*(2001), *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), *The Salt of this Sea* (2007), *Persepolis* (2008) and

Osama(2003). The outside worlds usually watch the women of Islamic societies through a virtual socio-political *hijab*. However, the pivotal female characters of these films, including the three discussed here, have turned those voyeurs into spectators. Besides, they have also been able to engage the spectators in a silent but continuous dialogue with them. They left the viewers shaken. They stirred the spectators' deepest emotions. They energized them with the most radical energy- the zeal to defy. They have not been portrayed in the films; they themselves have portrayed the films.

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