

20th Fajr International Film Festival

By Gönül Dönmez-Colin

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Attending Tehran's Fajr Film Festival for the first time, particularly if this is a first visit to Iran is a source of excitement (and anxiety) even for a seasoned festival-goer and foreign traveller. Excited to know more about the film industry of a country that is on the map of every festival, anxious about the visa and the *hejab*, the head scarf which is obligatory for all women including foreigners, I arrived after midnight at the Tehran airport to a most warm welcome. This friendly but at the same time very professional atmosphere would continue throughout my stay.

The festival celebrated its twentieth anniversary (February 1-11, 2002) with sections such as the International Competition (*The Son's Room, Brother, Beijing Bicycle, No Man's Land, Slogans, The Pledge* to name a few films); Festival of Festivals (*Traffic, The Skulls, Donnie Brasco*); Special screenings (*Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures, Apocalypse Now, Polish Gems*); Panorama of Scandinavian Cinema; Cinema in Afghanistan (*The Cyclist, Djomeh, Baran, Kandahar, etc.*); Art Directors; Parallel Mirrors: Claude Chabrol, Kianush Ayyari, Elia Kazan; For All Seasons: Sidney Poitier, Alain Delon, Golchehreh Sajjadiye and Parviz Parastuie, In Pursuit of Peace: *Germany, Year Zero, Stalag 17, Grand Illusion, Saving Private Ryan, etc.*), Cinema Hour for the young audience and The Cinema of the Future involving short films.

While all these were screened in theatres around the city for the benefit of the local public, the foreign guests followed a separate program of four new Iranian films each day at the *cineclub* of the Museum of Contemporary Arts. Organized by the Farabi Cinema Foundation, these screenings ran parallel to the 5th Iranian Film Market with its seventeen stands arranged in the lobby of the famous Laleh Hotel (the Inter-Continental of the old regime) welcoming 110 foreign guests among whom were thirty nine representatives of international companies and buyers. It is interesting to note that, the first year of the market in 1996 only five domestic stands were available to sixteen foreign guests. The market, which will be extended to the Middle East next year according to its chief, Mr. Amir Esfandiari, was an excellent venue to screen videos or to chat with colleagues until past midnight over tea and cookies.

Recent productions we had a chance to see displayed an urge on the part of the filmmakers for a wider and freer artistic expression to interpret Iranian people's (particularly the young generation's) struggle for a freer society. Contrary to the rural stories with child-heroes (often male) that have made the fame of the Iranian cinema in the West, many new films depicted urban settings and urban families with the classic family problems worldwide- children, divorce, adultery to name a few. Films dealing with women's issues, drug addiction and other aspects of life that had not appeared or were somewhat camouflaged in the previous films have come to the surface

Only a few years ago, Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf or Dariush Mehrjui were the major names that excelled. Today there are many young talents who are taking bold steps in the way they tell their own stories as the generation before is also searching for new ways to deal with the society on the move. (Interesting to note that one of the most accomplished Iranian directors, Abbas Kiarostami finally made a film about women. Entitled *Ten*, the film was unfortunately 'not ready' for Fajr, saving the big surprise for Cannes.)

Dariush Mehrjui from the older generation is the director of several films dealing with women and their issues, such as *Banu, Sara, Pari and Leila*. While some critics have applauded him as the feminist filmmaker of Iran, others (particularly women critics and/or filmmakers from Iran) have often thought that he was more for the status quo and simply not the voice of Iranian women today. Mehrjui's latest film, *Bemani (Stay Alive)*, which he produced with the leading feminist filmmaker of Iran, Tahmineh Milani and her husband Mohammad Nikbin is the tragic story of three girls and their struggle to survive in a world dominated by men and their rigid laws. Bemani is forced to marry an old man to save her family from poverty. In the meanwhile, she watches the agony and self-burning of her closest friends, young girls like herself who are victims of fatherly or brotherly prejudices and violence. She rebels against the cruelty that surrounds her.

Although the film which is shot in the town of Ilam is based on a true story about a girl who had burnt herself there, Mehrjui states that he chose that location for the geographical features as the story can happen anywhere. In his opinion, self-burning, suicide, self-destruction, especially among the young people is a major problem in Iranian society. According to him, the film is about women's abuse by men, men's abuse by the society and other evils such as unemployment and poverty.

There is a tendency among Iranian filmmakers to use the documentary form in fiction. After doing field research on the subject, Mehrjui decided "the reality of the matter was so deep and impressive that I had to give it an aesthetic sublimity, to transcend the normal reality and reach a superior one. So it had to have an aesthetic form of its own. It is not a documentary because you put it in a different text and context. It can be a sort of fiction. Due to economic shortages, Iranian filmmakers cannot produce films with big budgets, so they try to make simple films, which is not bad in itself. Every generation and era has a kind of cinema of its own. My main concern in making this film was to attract the people and authorities' attention to this disastrous problem. The film can perhaps draw attention to the fate and ways of life of people in a town, or a region, where social disorientation claims the life of an individual person everyday."

A favourite among the majority of the foreign guests was *I'm Taraneh, Fifteen* by Rasul Sadr-Ameli. The film narrates the story of a fifteen year-old-girl from a lower middle class background who lives with her grandmother as her father is in prison and her mother long dead. A student with a part time job, Taraneh is a good girl who cherishes the moments when she visits her father. She was formally engaged to a young man but the relationship was broken and now Taraneh is pregnant. The boy leaves for Germany and his mother does not want to accept the fact that her son is the father of the unborn child. Taraneh wants to keep her baby and live a decent life despite the negative social atmosphere. The film ends with the baby's smile.

This is the sixth feature of Sadr-Ameli who is known for his previous film *The Girl in Sneakers*, about a teenager who runs away from home. A journalist before the revolution, Sadr-Ameli had started his career in film business with melodramas but after a six-year break, *The Girl* moved to a more sociological realm bordering on documentary.

Examination, the first feature of Naser Refaie is also a film about the struggles of women in a society dominated by men. The film begins with a group of young women from different walks of life arriving to take part in an examination. They stand outside the school waiting for the doors to open. We learn about them and their lives through several episodes that take place before they enter the building. Their responses to the existing cultural and social relationships are often on the basis of their attitudes and social positions.

The leading woman filmmaker of Iran, Rakhshan Bani Etemad recently made a documentary about the presidential elections. *Our Times* is very strong on the issues of women, in particular women without partners. In the first part, a group of young film actors, who have just reached voting age, set up campaign headquarters. The second part focuses on the 2001 presidential elections when forty-eight women had nominated themselves for the post of presidency and all were announced as disqualified. At the height of the campaign, one of the nominees, Arezu Bayat has only three days to vacate her rented home and find a new place to live with her nine-year-old daughter and blind mother. Bani Etemad stresses the frankness of the young generation and the difference between their views and the views of her generation. One major difference is that the young generation does not tolerate censorship and conservatism, according to the director.

Another documentary, *Women's Prison* by Manijeh Hekmat, which deals with the memories of prisoners who had spent long years behind the bars was prevented from being screened to the foreign guests.

Bahman Farmanara was one of the distinguished faces of the pre-revolution Iranian cinema. Not only that he directed acclaimed films such as *Prince Ehtejab* and *The Long Shadows of the Wind*, but also produced works by celebrated directors such as Bahram Bayzai (*The Crow*) and Abbas Kiarostami (*The Report*). After the revolution, Farmanara left Iran and continued his career as a producer and distributor abroad. He returned to Iran in 1999 and made a comeback with the autobiographical *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine* which received accolades worldwide. Originally titled *Coma*, *A House on Water* is the fifth feature of Farmanara in the capacity of a director. A deeply religious work, the film is also a reflection on the

personal life and experiences of the director. The film relates the story of a doctor who has no hope or faith. His wife and two children left him years ago and emigrated to the United States. He has had an ill-fated affair with his secretary. His father is lonely in the home for the aged. He feels he is being followed by unknown people. Furthermore, his estranged son returns home after fifteen years and reveals he is an addict. The life of the doctor has taken the form of a free fall until he is saved by an eight-year-old boy who can recite the entire Holy Koran by heart. The title refers to life without hope, which is like a house on water.

Low Heights, the first non-war film of Ebrahim Hatamikia is about a desperate hijacking attempt. A man wants to emigrate along with his family just as his forefathers had been doing for generations when they were forced to move from one place to another. However, unlike his forefathers, today he has to face wars and financial obstacles. He has only his own life to forfeit. Hatamikia got the idea for the film after reading a similar story in the paper. As most hijacking incidents involve political motives, he wanted to explore another angle and depicted someone who does the deed for human needs. The socio-economical and political message is somewhat camouflaged with one-liners and some clever jokes resulting in a TV sit-com style film just like his *Glass Agency* that gave him some recognition in the West. One of the moments that will be remembered from this film is when the women on the hijacked plane try to take off their *hijab* thinking they will land in the West, the men warn them that they are still Muslim and still Iranians!

As is often the case with the films of this director, *Low Heights* was more appreciated by the local audience (including the critics) than the international one. According to Said Ebraimifar, who is shooting his second film after eight years, directors such as Hatamikia who were soldiers during the Iran-Iraq war are now in a position to shoot one film after the other. Ebraimifar's *Nar o-ney* won the prestigious Crystal Symorg in 1989 and several awards abroad, but Ebraimifar has not made a film since. In 1994, he had a project that he discussed with Farmanara in Montreal, but later on Farmanara backed down saying the moment was not right. Said is trying to finish the film with the working title of *The Palm Tree*, but is still faced with financial difficulties.

Hamid Jebelli's second feature after *Son of Maryam* (1999), *White Dream* is the story of a simple man who lives with the dream of an impossible love. Reza works in a shop that supplies gowns for weddings. He feels lonely and thinks he should find himself a woman to share his problems. He often goes to his mother's grave and pours out his heart. One day a very sophisticated woman tailor walks into the shop with her attendant. The fact that she belongs to an entirely different class does not bother Reza, but his hopes are crashed when he finds out that she is married. In the meanwhile, he is blind to the attention of a simple girl who is working for the shop. The film brings up issues of loneliness and vulnerability with a sensitive approach that has the right dose of gentle humour that plays with mistaken identity and impossible dreams.

Heaven's Path is the first feature film of expatriate Mahmud Behraznia who has appeared as an actor in *Baran* (2000) and *Djomeh* (1999) and made a documentary on Abbas Kiarostami, *Kiarostami in Close-up*. The film is a docu-drama about Jalil Nazari, an Afghani refugee who played the lead in *Djomeh*. Nazari was officially invited to attend the Hamburg Film Festival to present the film, but once the festival was over and he had visa problems to return to Iran, his hosts turned a cold shoulder and sent him to a remote camp for asylum seekers. The film has very pertinent and thought provoking episodes on the refugee problem, which is a burning issue in Europe at present.

Kianush Ayyari who is well known for *Beyond the Fire* (1988) and *Abadanis* (1993) made *The Persian Feast* about a counterfeit 10,000 rial note that passes from hand to hand in various parts of the country and used the opportunity to depict local traditions and social relations in various parts of Iran.

As the programmers tried to be fair to everyone, some main stream commercial films were also included. One of these, *The Intruder* by Sirus Alvand was about divorce. A fifty-year-old popular actor is married to a young student of an acting college who gives up her career to sit home and read recipes. The actor is shooting a film called *Ashes of Love* in which a middle aged man living in a typical Iranian bourgeois home with the typical furniture of that class has problems dealing with the violence he manifests against his wife. In the meanwhile, the actor's posh and peaceful life is disturbed when a woman begins to make phone calls claiming she knows the secret behind the death of his first wife. One day, the police arrive at his home because neighbours complain that they are making too much noise in their birthday party. The young bride comments that everything is "free and not free at the same time," which seems to be the key to the newly

evolving society in Iran or to the rules of filmmaking there.

Parallel to the easing up of certain restrictions in Iranian social life, some new images have emerged on the wide screen. Naser Taqvaie's *Blank Page*, a film about a dissatisfied wife who wants to be a screenwriter despite all obstacles, showed the husband, an upper middle class man, naked above the waist in one scene and wearing a tie (symbol of Western corruption) in another. His wife bares her neck by tying her scarf behind her ears at home and wearing a beret outside. Incidentally, the film was based on a real story that took place while the director was teaching screenwriting at a filmmaking centre. One of his students had two kids and problems similar to the ones of the heroine and she proposed the story.

In *Bemani* by Mehrjui, a middle aged husband and wife sat on the nuptial bed of their teenage daughter and the husband tickled his wife as they giggled reminiscing about their own first night. (Opposite sexes normally do not touch each other on screen.)

Out of wedlock teenage pregnancy, drug addiction and prostitution were openly dealt with in *I'm Taraneh, Fifteen*. *Examination* revealed a whole new generation of young women who want to be free -- free from family pressures, from their fathers and brothers to have an education so that they don't have to depend on men.

Men, particularly the older generation, were shown as totally under the pressures of society, customs and traditions in *Bemani*. On the other hand, the new generation, specifically the urban upper middle class, was depicted as under peer pressure to act cool, to dress in a certain way and to show that they are independent and free from the rules that the older generation (or authority) impose on them as in *Examination*. None of this is new to any society but it is new to show it openly in Iranian films.

The success of the Iranian cinema abroad is a continuing debate. Is it a fashion like Chinese or Japanese cinema? Or is there something special that Iranian cinema offers to the world? The answer may lie in its humanistic approach, its modesty, in the poetry of the works of masters such as Kiarostami or the political challenges offered by exceptional talents such as Makhmalbaf. But perhaps the magic is in the way each director tries to find a new language to express personal and universal themes of concern, despite restrictions, financial or political.

AWARDS:

Iranian Cinema Competition section:

- Best Film: *A House on Water* by Bahman Farmanara.
- Best Actor: Reza Kianian
- Best Supporting Actor: Ezzatollah Entezami
- Best Supporting Actress: Behnaz Jafari
- Jury Special Prize (shared): *Exam* by Nasser Refayi and *Blank Page* by Nasser Taghvayi

***I'm Taraneh, Fifteen* received the following awards:**

- Best Director (Rasoul Sadr-Ameli)
- Best Screenplay: (Kambouzia Partovi and Rasoul Sadr-Ameli)
- Best Actress: (Taraneh Alidousti)
- Best Supporting Actress: (Mahtab Nasirpour)
- Best Make-up: (Ali Abedini)
- NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of the Asian Cinema) award

International competition section

- Best Film: Jean Luc Godard's *Eloge de l'amour (In Praise of Love)*
- Jury Special Prize: *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-wook, South Korea)
- Best Actor: Jack Nicholson (*The Pledge*)
- Best Director: Takeshi Kitano (*Brother*)

Author Information

Gönül DÖNMEZ-COLIN is an independent researcher and writer whose publications include *Women, Islam and Cinema*, *Cinemas of the Other: A personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia*, *Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East* (ed.); *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (Reaktion Books), and *Routledge Dictionary of Turkish Cinema* (2014).