

On SECOND TAKE

Film festival SECOND TAKE - Gender and Society in Cinema,
Kabul 28th of April - 2nd of May 2008

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For the people of Kabul, the explosion of a bomb in a street leaving tens of dead and injured people is more predictable than organizing an international film festival through which tens of Afghan and foreign films have been screened. In the spring of this year, a film festival entitled "SECOND TAKE, Gender and Society in Cinema" was held in Kabul from April 28th to May 2nd 2008, the main theme of which was shedding light on women's issues from a cinematic perspective. This film program in which 18 films from 6 different countries were screened in 5 days, included a special seminar on women's rights that was warmly welcomed by the public and in particular women. In the following I attempt to give a picture of some of the festival's focal points. Although I have been somehow involved in the festival, I am trying not to write from the perspective of one of the organizers, but instead I'm taking up a stance, and position myself, looking at the films and the festival with the eyes of a film critic.

Every month in Afghanistan several girls' schools are burned by Taliban forces, about the same number as schools that are being built by the government in collaboration with donor countries. Since the traditional society of Afghanistan has only seen women cooking and washing, it will find it difficult to see them reading and writing. The film *Rushany* (Lightness), by 58-year-old Afghan director Latif Ahmadi is a sign of the effort and campaigning of the government and international organizations to convince the strict Afghan men to allow their women to take part in literacy courses. Unfortunately this film, like other campaigning films in Afghanistan, suffers from a cliché story and a poor structure. There are a dozen of short films produced every year in Afghanistan to teach illiterate villagers how to vote in general elections, how not to use opium as a medicine, how to use a condom for birth control and in *Lightness's* case how to have an educated wife at home. The main goal of these propaganda videos is not to tell an artistic story but to teach a moral/civil lesson. The mass-production of these videos is financed by generous western charities who know perfectly well that they are neither art houses nor film companies dedicated to caring about the technical quality or the artistic originality of their products. The making of such films is increasingly subject to a certain formula: a hard-headed husband/father + a mis-fortuned wife/daughter + a good-hearted village teacher = a dollar-paid little movie. The film starts with a man hanging around in the dusty streets of Kabul and, being illiterate, unable to read the signboards of the shops he needs. He comes across a man who gives him a moral lesson: "Illiteracy means blindness". The main story of this film is about the country man's wife. She is trying to register for a literacy course that has been established in her village by an international organization, but her husband disagrees. She tries to convince him through one of the teachers of the village and finally succeeds. Latif Ahmadi, who started his career in the 1980s as a cameraman, has made nearly 10 feature movies. This film, like Ahmadi's other films, was co-financed by the government.

The film *Saya* (Shadow), adapted from an Iranian short story, is about a widow whose second husband is unhappy with her little son from a previous marriage. In order not to lose her husband, the woman takes her son to a crowded bazaar and leaves him in one of the busy streets of Kabul and comes back home alone. This motherly brutality is not understandable for many people, but those who know how it is to live as a widow and lonely woman in an Islamic society would not be surprised by her decision. Nacir Alqas made this film in 1990. *Saya* was his fifth film and he has not made another since. Afghan cinema, even in its best days, has suffered from a lack of suitable technical facilities. Though this film was produced shortly after the golden age of Afghan cinema – during communist regimes in the 80s – the film technically suffers from a noisy sound, a not-so-smooth montage and a worn-out image. This technical problem was partly caused by the years that the footage of the film along with all Afghan Films' archive was buried in earth to avoid being burnt by the Taleban.

This film, along with *Talabgar* (The Marriage Candidate, Khaliq Alil 1969), was selected from Afghan cinema archives for the SECOND TAKE film festival. *Talabgar* is the story of a dodgy young man who wants to beguile a student girl named Sima into marrying him. The girl resists a lot, does not agree to marry him. "I want to finish my studies," she firmly responds. The film tries to give a moral lesson. Though Afghanistan has come a long way since the release of these two movies, many women are still experiencing the same stories in different ways - stories that became more terrible during the years of war and violence. In both *Saya* and *Talabgar*, we can observe in Kabul streets all the familiar paradoxes of a transitional period, the same as today: hijab versus no hijab, moving Burkas versus provocative mini-skirts, American Chevrolets versus horse carts, turban-wearing long-bearded old men versus well-shaved young men wearing ties. All are hanging around in the streets amid dust, smoke, heat and sunshine.

Arezu Bayat, in *Ruzegar-e ma* (Our Times, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad 2002), is a low-ranking officer in an insurance company in Tehran. She is head of a family and a candidate for the presidential election. These are not her only responsibilities. She has to search for a new place to rent as her previous rent contract is about to terminate. Bayat hits all neighborhoods in Tehran, desperate, but no one wants to rent a place to a lonely woman, who has divorced her drug-addict husband and is the head of her family consisting of her young daughter and blind mother. At about the same time, she is disqualified by the "Guardian Council" and cannot take part in the election. The difficult life in an Islamic-traditional society teaches her that, for a woman, finding a place to live is as difficult as becoming a president. Among Islamic countries, Iran is one with a high percentage of educated women, this despite the fact that the country is ruled by a religious and conservative government. Apart from involvement in key political posts, women are also engaged in other social fields. Although people are systematically trying to prevent women from having access to their very fundamental human rights, civil rights movements are making efforts to give hope and awareness to women who comprise more than half of Iran's population.

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad is a well-known female filmmaker in Iran. Thanks to her protesting and enlightening standpoints towards Iranian women, she is also a famous and successful face of Iranian cinema in the world's cinema circles. The term "feminist" is a word that Iranian pro-government papers use mainly as an insult, and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad is one of those people whose name is always accompanied by this attribute in newspapers. *Ruzegar-e ma* is one of the few documentaries that 54-year-old Bani-Etemad, has made. Despite the beauty and power of the film, in comparison to other works of the filmmaker, this film is not as well-known as it deserves to be. It has a simple appearance and structure, but an extremely dynamic and impressive quality that

attracts the audience till the end of the film. *Ruzegar-e ma* was one of the rare films that I was tempted at the end to watch once again.

The film consists of two parts. The first is about a group of young girls who are voluntarily campaigning for the reformist Iranian Mulla Mohammad Khatami in the 2001 presidential election. Khatami was the one who had promised to give more freedom to the youth and women if elected President. The excitement of these young girls in the streets of Tehran is an image of the civil awareness of women who try to determine their own destiny. One of those talkative girls is Baran, the 16 years old daughter of Bani-Etemad who voted for the first time that year. Overtaking his rivals, Khatami won the elections at the end. Some of his rivals were the 48 women Rakhshan Bani-Etemad goes to in the second part. So far, the Iranian government has not allowed any woman to take part in the presidential election. However, some women still try to register during the candidature period and after a while the women would be disqualified by a state body called "Guardian Council". As mentioned by Bani-Etemad, among the 48 women who had registered for the candidature, only two were politically known and the rest were housewives, low ranking employees, and some 19-year old girls who had just graduated from high school. Among these women, Arezu Bayat is one of the most interesting candidates in that period: A young 25- year-old woman, hard-working, experienced with the ups and downs of life, is the head of her family and facing some particularly bad luck with men. She fell in love twice and started a life with her ideal man, but after a week she realized she had been married to a drug-addict. Therefore, her deep love turns into severe hatred. Bani-Etemad asks her the reason for her candidature. She says: "I have experienced the life of all people of Iran. I have tasted comfort as well as poverty and I know homelessness and loneliness. If I become President, I will be able to understand all sorts of people and will specifically address women's issues". These reasons are the same as the reasons stated by other women who registered for the presidential post. The post, they know well there is no hope to gain it, but their candidature represents their determination to change the status quo and also shows how they have to take such desperate actions. Bayat cannot find a place to rent until the end. On election day, thanks to a loan from Bani-Etemad, she manages to find a place. While people are voting in the presidential election, she is busy with moving and does not vote. We wish Arezu's story would have finished happily here. Unfortunately, the day after, when she goes back to work after three days off (which she had taken to find a place), her employer abuses her verbally and physically and makes her leave the office - right in front of Bani-Etemad's camera. Arezu finds herself alone once more, she bursts into tears as she usually does in such situations. When this film was screened in Kabul, most of the audience in the hall said that they had cried during the film. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, who had specially come to Kabul, went on the stage and said: "I've watched this film more than 100 times and each time could not avoid crying". The story of Arezu is obviously the story of many Iranian women.

The film *25 Darsad* (25 percent) is the same, from one point as *Rushany* (Lightness) as it has been financed by foreign organisations that provide a campaigning narrative about the situation of Afghanistan after the Taleban. This film shows that 25 percent of Afghan Members of Parliament are women, which could not even have been dreamt of before. Diana Saqeb, through her first film after completing her studies in Iran, narrates the story of the lives of six female Members of Parliament and how they simultaneously manage their roles at home and in parliament. One of the female MPs wears a burka when she goes to work while her colleagues prefer the small veil on their head. They are the first generation of post-Taleban Afghan women. Thanks to the new situation, they lead a pro-woman legislature and represent the glimmers of hope for all women of the country.

Some of them are even war widows; they are well-aware of the difficulties lying ahead of them to properly accomplish their jobs. Saqeb's camera accompanies the female MPs individually to their provinces of representation. And shows how people react to their female political leaders for the first time. The film says, despite the fact that 25 percent of the MPs are female, we do not have the same number of women participating in social life on a broad scale of society.

The films *Zanan va Sinema* (Women in Cinema) and *Nejat* (Rescue) were made by two women who represent Afghan popular cinema: Amina Jafari and Saba Sahar. Both of these women play leading roles in action video films made in Kabul and sometimes direct these kinds of movies themselves. Jafari in her *Zanan va Sinema* talks about the lack of actresses in Afghan cinema, which is apparently an old and unsolved problem. By reviewing some footage of films made in the 1960s and 1980s in Afghanistan, in which many women play roles without the Islamic veil, she compares that period with the present and asks cinema professionals and the public the reason for this evident difference. The 20-minute documentary is obviously amateur. The film lacks technical standards, but its' idea seems good.

Saba Sahar, who is a police officer in Kabul, is the main female character in all her own movies. In the film *Nejat*, which was financed by some German organisations, she is a police officer who, by taking on a fake identity, is able to find a connection to a group of professional child-kidnappers. Through physical fighting she "rescues" the lives of children. Saba Sahar, imitating Indian and Pakistani movies, uses heavy make-up, wears fabulous local clothes, rides a horse, and sets off to fight with the bad guys of her film; she removes them all with punching, kicking and lashing. This 90-minute video, like Sahar's other works, is aimed at campaigning and entertainment purposes. Most of her fans are from the low social class, illiterate and villagers. *Nejat* is a production of Afghan pop culture and an image of women's presence in this culture.

Among the other films at this festival, there was a film named *La Promesse* (The Promise) – one of the well-known films of the Dardenne brothers - which is about a father and son who make their living by giving shelter to illegal migrants in Belgium. This film, like other works of Pierre and Jean-Luc Dardenne, is a reminder of the forgotten tradition of Italian neo-realist cinema. In this film, as in *Rosetta* (1999), the Dardennes brilliantly demonstrate poverty in a European context. In *La Promesse*, the vigorous Igor and his father have rented some houses to groups of illegal migrants and employed some of them in construction works. One day, one of the workers dies because of an incident. Igor promises to take care of his lonely African wife. The rest of the film is about Igor's struggle with his father who does not allow him to help the African woman. The film is extremely entertaining and without the need to give sentimental slogans, it provides a humane narrative of the life of forgotten social groups. The film is a showcase of Eastern family structures. Unlike that of Western culture, the Eastern family is based on a head who is the father. When he dies, a big brother replaces him, if there is no big brother, the female members of the family are in devastating trouble. They must be sheltered and supported, otherwise they could not survive. Igor has to play the role of a big brother for the African widow and her child, who has lived her entire life *dependent* on a man. *La Promesse* is the story of two different cultures encountering each other in a shared context of poverty. It is about cultural adaptation and its discontents, and political power and its misconducts.

Twenty-four-year-old Nazifa Zakizada, in her first film *Edame Rah* (The Path to Follow), went to a group of girls who go to a Taekwondo club every day. The girls, who are mainly school teenagers, are in some way considered the new generation of women who, after the Afghan wars, try to be trained like modern women. They talk about their big wishes and the fact that they wish to make women's sports public, or the fact that they do not want to leave the bossy and disturbing men and boys in the streets unanswered. This 11-minute documentary is a first student film and was made in a French-German workshop (Atelier Varan). In the style of "Direct Cinema" it narrates the story without dialogue and uses the camera only as an observing eye.

In the first film from director Roya Sadat, *Se Noqta* (Three Dots), we observe the traditional life of Afghanistan that transpires in a village in Herat close to the border of Iran. In Afghan tribal traditions, women are mainly in the role of victims. Based on a traditional custom in most parts of Afghanistan, once a man dies in a family, his wife should be married either to the brother of the dead person or to one of his heirs, no matter if the man already has wives. The young woman in *Se Noqta* does not want to respect this tradition. In order to escape this situation, she seeks help from the Khan of the region who sends her to the dangerous borders of Iran and Afghanistan for drug trafficking. During this film we become familiar with Afghan culture: The holy power of the mosque and mullah, the expanding domination of the Khan and gun, anger and hatred of men who ride horses around, and the sorrows and pains of waiting women in smoky kitchens. We see all this in a straight rural story. There are some weak points in picture and sound, and acting that reveals a certain inexperience of the director. However, it is worth remembering that, despite all this criticism, *Se Noqta* is Sadat's debut and one of the first films that women filmmakers have made after the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The English-Iranian film *Divorce Iranian Style* addresses almost the same issue from a different perspective. Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, through this film, take an adventurous journey into the lives of women who want to leave their husbands, which is not something easily done in Iran. It is stated clearly in Iran's Constitution that only men can divorce and women cannot take any decision on this. In case a man has sexual dysfunction, or he is mentally disabled, a woman's demand for divorce will be taken into consideration. This film was made by Mir-Hosseini who is a family law expert, but both filmmakers have managed very well to explore the judiciary system of Iran and its destructive bureaucracy. The whole film is spent in the family court of Tehran city, and we become familiar with the interesting characters. Once we are familiarized with the different aspects of their private lives and their family problems, it surprises us, makes us cry and sometimes even laugh. One of the captivating characters of the film is a polite and patient mullah who is the judge of the court and also interlocutor to all women who refer to him. Beside these women, there are other women who come to claim custody of their children, over which women have no authority, as in a divorce situation. The 90-minute *Divorce Iranian Style* film may seem to be a little long. But to cover all aspects of family problems and legal mechanisms in the Islamic Republic will definitely require a feature-length documentary. The director Mir-Hosseini proves to be an insider in Iranian codes and courts and Longinotto shows that she is a master story teller – proving it again when recently received the 2009 Sundance IFF award for best documentary for her latest film *Rough Aunties* (2008) about a women's group in Africa helping children.

The three films *Nedamatgah* (Women's Prison), *Tehran, paytakht-e Iran* (Tehran, Capital of Iran), and *Qal'eh* (Women's Quarter) are from Kamran Shirdel, who is a pioneering Iranian documentary filmmaker. These three short films, which were made in 1960s, show the forgotten groups of Iranian women and men under the rule of the Shah. *Qal'eh* is a painful narrative of a red-light district in Tehran named "Qal'eh". This place, which is the gathering point of prostitutes of the city, is notorious. By exploring different angles of the lives of these women and the pain they suffer because of their job, Shirdel recorded part of urban culture of Iran in the 1960s. But *Nedamatgah* is a film on Iranian prisons that was commissioned by the government. This film attempts to assess the services provided in jail and the conditions in which prisoners are kept. Although Kamran Shirdel has sometimes made films commissioned by the Shah regime, he never manages to avoid censorship. In *Tehran, Paytakht-e Iran* he depicts poor people in the suburbs of Tehran who sleep under the bridges and sell their blood out of hunger while their children come together and read from their school books out loud: "Tehran is Iran's capital...The Iranians are Arian. The Shah is the king of the Arians. The Shah lives in Tehran". The interesting point is that even after the revolution and the regime change, Shirdel finds himself restricted by state censorship and in most cases cannot address the issues that may offend the government. If he casts another look at Tehran, capital of Iran, and wishes to again narrate a story of this big and crowded city, he will find out that the stories of this megacity with twelve million inhabitants have not changed and he just needs to change some words in the schoolbooks: "Tehran is capital of Iran... The Iranians are Muslim. Khamenei is the Sun of Islam. Khamenei lives in Tehran".

Based on an Afghan legend, if a girl passes under the rainbow, she will become a boy. This tale is told by a grandmother to her grandchild in the film *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, 2003). In some ways, passing under the rainbow is the wish of all Afghan women, who live in the land of men and tolerate permanent pain because of their gender all their lives. Elfe Brandenburger and Sandra Schäfer, independent German filmmakers, in the documentary film *Passing the Rainbow* go to some Afghan women who do not want to pass underneath, who want to remain women and fight to achieve their wishes for equality. The film begins with the members of the "Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan" referred to as "RAWA", a radical political party whose members operate secretly in Kabul. For fear of being recognized, they appear veiled even in front of the camera of *Passing the Rainbow*. The film through its many characters tries to provide images of women's fights in different battles: a police officer making a movie, a school teacher who is playing a role, a young girl who is trying through a theatre show to make illiterate women understand the meaning of democracy and voting, and finally a female politician who tries to achieve her radical goals secretly. Some characters of the film appear with fake identities and some of them even with a deformed image in order to not be recognised. This shows the difficult situation in which these women live.

Aqila Rezaie, mother of four children and schoolteacher, in a film named *Panj-e Asr* (Five o'clock in the Afternoon, Samira Makhmalbaf, 2004), plays the role of a woman who wants to run for the first general presidential election of Afghanistan. She is present in this film too, but in the role of the president. Aqila Rezaie, who could not become president in Samira Makhmalbaf's film, has, in Brandenburger's and Schäfer's film, been allowed to sit behind the president's desk in a fake scene and addresses people's complaints. In other parts of the film we see the re-dramatization of past incidents which are actually expansions of meaning of "reality" in documentary cinema.

The amusing documentary *Postcards from Tora Bora* is a nostalgic journey to a lost past. This film, directed by Wazhmah Osman and Kelly Dolak, is the story of the return of Osman to Afghanistan, country of her childhood after 20 years of exile in the United States. The voice of Osman, like a regretful tone, accompanies the images of the film. She comes to Kabul, but finds it completely different from the images in her mind. The Kabul of her childhood no longer exists. In 1979, at the time of the invasion by the Soviet Union, Osman and her family left Afghanistan via Pakistan to the United States. She remembers that one of her bags containing souvenir pictures of Afghanistan was stolen at the Islamabad airport. She says: "By coming to the US, I lost not only my country but also memories of my country". Now she has returned to Kabul and tries to use any clue she can to remember the years of her childhood, a task that causes her nothing but regret and disappointment. The documentary *Not Far, Not Near* is about the filmmaker Abdu-Rahman and his poet wife in Finland. The two exiled Afghan artists try to continue creating art despite their problems. Shakiba Adil made this film when she herself had left Kabul and migrated to Finland. By making this film, she has shown her sympathy to Afghan migrant artists who share the same fate as she does.

Undoubtedly, the only film of very well-known Iranian poet, Forough Farrokhzad, is the best Iranian documentary film and is undisputedly a masterpiece. *Khaneh Siah ast* (The house is black, 1962) is actually a bright black poem about suffering, pain and ugliness. The way the words and dialogues have been arranged, like a fine and harmonious poem, accompanies the painful images of lepers in Tabriz. The voice of Farrokhzad in the film narrates unknown sorrows with poetic words and invites us to listen to the "voice of a man" who "sings in a pathless desert". *Khaneh Siah ast* is divine poetry and a black-and-white portrait of misery and disaster. This film and the films by Kamran Shirdel from pre-revolution Iran were in the festival. Farrokhzad, the only woman of Iranian New Wave Cinema in the 1960s, introduces a feminine visual aesthetics and a sublime political commentary with her film. Farrokhzad and Bani-Etemad, two outstanding figures in Iranian cinema, represented two different generations of Iranian female filmmakers in SECOND TAKE.

The SECOND TAKE film festival came to an end, and the people of Kabul could, over these 5 days, watch films they would otherwise never have had the opportunity to see. This festival, previously organised in three cities in Germany under the title SPLICE IN, attempted to open new perspectives and make them visible to all Afghans, men and women.