

Festival Review

Latika Padgaonkar

FAJR International Film Festival 2019



The Narrow Red Line

The 37th edition of the Fajr International Film Festival was held with verve despite the US sanctions, the soaring inflation, the tumbling Rial and the overall economic stranglehold on the country. There seemed to be a determination to carry on with a veil of normalcy. At the festival, the print and visual publicity material, the posters, the film market, the day trips to museums and bazaars organised for foreign guests, the workshops, press conferences, the master classes and of course, the screenings – all appeared to carry on as they would have in a ‘normal’ year.

Held on 18-26 April this year, Fajr showcased 109 films from some 74 countries. Six different juries themselves needed a good deal of looking after. Paul Schrader, the celebrated American director, scriptwriter and critic, found his auditorium packed for his master

classes (I couldn't get in!). There were Chinese and German retrospectives, restored classics, films from the East, documentaries and animation.

I have chosen here to dwell on Iranian cinema. Where else would I see the latest films from this country? As I look back and reflect on what I saw, I realise that a large majority of the disparate and intense films I watched dealt repeatedly with two themes: Death and Incarceration. By death I mean impending death, fear of death, suicide, murder, assassination, a voice from beyond the grave – all these seemed to either lead the story, give it force, surround it or design its atmosphere – with dark shadows but no tragic figures. And by incarceration I mean – literally - jail, women's prisons, juvenile homes, penitentiaries, night shelters.

SouroushSehat's *Dance with Me* (Silver Simorgh for Best Director and Dipolma of Honour for Best Actor) which had its world premiere at Fajr brings together a group of friends of Jehangir who is celebrating his birthday – a get together, a wedding, a funeral are all too frequently the staple of many stories. What should be a fun weekend morphs into something quite the contrary. Jehangir is dying. He has a mere two months to live. Around this, are constructed elements of the plot, complicated relationships, some fantasy, some burlesque components and just enough philosophy for the occasion.

On the other hand, Mohammad bin Talebi's *Without My Friend* (Trophy for Best Asian Film) is in another mode altogether. It begins with a three-minute video posted on Youtube by two fifteen year-old girls. They look happy as they walk briskly down the street, laughing. But the video tells us they are walking to their death. And they are. Somewhere deep inside, they are troubled. Perhaps something the girls themselves cannot comprehend– like the deaths of many youngsters where families fail to go beyond the surface and

recognise the intensity of their emotions. They are about to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge into the traffic below. And they do. One dies, the other is injured and survives. A filmmaker, then, decides to make a film on this tragedy – somewhat unconvincingly - and try and understand what drives the young to such depths of despair.



Hamid

Mahin by Mohammad Hussein Heydari was a documentary based on a true story of a series of murders of middle-aged women in 2009 in urban centres as well as its peripheries. The unapologetic killer with a darkened soul, it turns out (not too late in the film), is a young woman who has suffered her mother's indifference as a child, and as an adult and as a single mother, she has to raise two children, one of whom has cerebral palsy. She quite simply, needs money for the child's treatment. A killer with a cause.

Another documentary - Kamran Heidari's *None of Your Business* – was based on the life and death of Ebrahim Monsefi, a popular guitar player, singer and poet who died over twenty years ago at the age of 52. Heidari recaptures the poet's life by having Monsefi recount from beyond the grave moments of his childhood, adulthood and music,

each musical moment presented by a different actor. He lived, he says, the way he wanted and none of it is none of our business. Yet a film on him was made!

Another docu was *Baharestan, House of Nation* by BabakBehdad. Five years in the making, Behdad needed three years of research and two years to validate the historical documents, photographs and footage (much of it shown for the first time) he used for his film. Baharestanis the name of the Iranian Parliament Building inaugurated in 1906 when the country got its first Constitution. It was the lower house and continued that way until the 1979 Revolution when Parliament became unicameral; and it was also the name of the



23 People

neighbourhood where it stood. Behdad has reconstructed the first of 73 years of the history of Iran in the 20th century – from the moment the memorable words “Long Live the Nation” were uttered till the exit of the last Shah – Mohammad Reza Phehavi.

With a wonderful voiceover, it records the frequently violent and murky story of murder, abdications, coups, fire bombs – apart, of course, from reforms, benefits, changes in dress and pix of the young and somewhat diffident Shah. Then there is the side story – only referred to - of the German agents sent to Iran in an alleged bid to assassinate the Big Three (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin) during the 1943 Tehran Conference.

Let me turn to ‘Incarceration’. In a different genre was *The Unseen* (dir. BehzadNalbandi), a beautifully made animation where everything and everyone is made out of cardboard – houses, walls, towns, traffic and human beings – the outdoors and the indoors. It’s a

sad tale of a subculture – both literal and metaphoric – about what happens in Tehran when foreign dignitaries visit. Homeless people (‘unsavoury’ characters, drug addicts, prostitutes etc.) are rounded up to give the city a ‘clean’ look. They are released a few days later, but only the men. Not the women. The women – many of who are on the streets because of rape, parental mistreatment or abandonment– are interned in perpetuity. Mostly, they end up in ‘cardboard’ boxes, as fragile as their lives.

Films based on true stories were the stuff of the day.²³ *People* (dir Mehdi Jafari) is about 23 teenagers who joined the army voluntarily during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and who are captured by the Iraqis on the frontline. Young and impulsive, they are caught in the

crossfire and taken prisoner. Along with adult prisoners, they suffer beatings, intimidation and mistreatment (but no great torture since they are young). Their insufferable



Widow of Silence

incarceration stretches their patience to the

limit, they become volatile and go on a hunger strike. This patriotic film focuses equally on Iraq’s devious ways of dealing with young POWs – ensuring the world, on the one hand, that it is caring for the youngsters (new shoes and clothes, for a meeting with Saddam Hussein, a boat-ride in a park in Baghdad with ice cream cones in hand, promising them that their release is imminent), and on the other confining them and mocking them: We want so much to send you back but your country does not want you.

The gorgeously shot *The Charcoal* (dirEsmaelMonsef) in the rural north-west of Iran is a tale of poverty in the mountains. With a fine performance by the protagonist, an elderlysubmissive charcoal producer and respected by his little community, this memorable tale of smuggling, of money needed for the wedding, of his son who is sentenced to jail and escapes across the border to Azarbaijan, also ends in a shoot-out that turns the film and the protagonist around. The film's cinematography captures in its shades of colour the mood of the story and the monotony of life in these remote parts.

The Netpac winner, *The Narrow Red Line* (dirFarzadKhoshdast), takes us into a penitentiary for juveniles locked up for a variety of crimes – murder, theft, assault, drugs, sodomy, adultery. The dance therapy they receive from an inspired instructor provides them with a focus, and they give their all to this new art form that has entered and transformed their lives. When they perform on stage is when they step out of their confined quarters for the first time. So convincing is their performance that they are invited to Germany.

My curiosity was aroused by these two thematic concerns in Iran. Death and Prison were what the directors engaged with, whatever theirartistic approach to their subject. Some were quite clearly made in the realistic style; others added fantasy (having a small orchestra play in the middle of fields and mountains while the story of the dying birthday man is being played out); the voice from beyond the grave was quirky – it took us into deserts and springs and urban centres, with the dead man being impersonated by different actors every time; and the cardboard characters seem to embody the brittleness of life. And I wondered if all of this was just coincidence.

But the two Indian films I viewed were no different either. Both are set in Kashmir, despondent tales played out against the wonders of nature. *Hamid* by Aijaz Khan which won a Diploma of Honour at Fajr

this year, was both heart-breaking and heart-warming. It could be anybody's story in Kashmir. A 7 year-old boy loses his father one night. The father, a boat-maker, steps out to buy a cell for his son to enable him to watch a programme, and never returns. On his way home earlier, he had been stopped and frisked by the Indian security forces but nothing had been found. Now, the child doesn't know or understand what has happened to his father, while the young mother stops talking altogether.

We are also shown security forces who are tightly stretched – away from their families, overwrought, afraid but can't show fear. And one jawan is particularly jumpy and high-strung. As the child finds and uses his father's mobile, he decides to call Allah on 786 to ask about his dad. And, through trials and errors, reaches the mercurial Indian soldier.

A lovely yarn, this story of an innocent child seeking answers (even if all of it is not fully credible) brings change in all the players – the son, his mother and the soldier. As events unfold, the protagonists shift their perspectives and their minds. The knowledge of the death of the husband/father at the end of the film leads to an acceptance. Mother and son wake up to life again. The jawan recognises that the situation in Kashmir is more complex than what he imagined, and doing his duty is only one part of his job.

Same yet different. *Widow of Silence* by Praveen Morchhale is also set in luxuriant Kashmir. This time it is centred on a widow's pain. Her husband, a saffron farmer (an engineering graduate actually who could not find a job), had 'disappeared' in 2010, and she is left to care for an old mother-in-law (who has not spoken ever since) and a young daughter. What happens to a widow whose husband does not return? Well, she becomes a 'half-widow' and her daughter a 'half daughter'. A Death Certificate eludes her. The Registrar's office uses

bureaucratic tactics incessantly to deny widows like her Death Certificates; a corrupt Registrar tries to bully her into selling her land, then asks for sexual favours. A man courts her and wants to marry, but she demurs, feeling that her husband might return, even as her daughter is harassed by her classmates in school.

With an impressive dialogue, the languid rhythms of life and the character of a truck driver who plies the widow every day to the Registrar's office (he is a poet who comments on everything in lofty language and verse that is sharp, witty and bitter – he talks of daily life in metaphoric language) and poignant performances by the lead characters, *Widow of Silence* needs to be seen widely in India to understand the struggles of imperilled women post the disappearance of their men. The story of the women who must live on – somehow.

There was no FIPRESCI jury at the Fajr International Film Festival, but an International Critics Jury had been set up.

Latika Padgaonkar is a Member of the Fipresci-India.