

Shattered Promises



NOWHERE TO GO: In *'Paradise'*, Dorna Dibaj plays Hanieh, a young school teacher who feels stifled by her environment and craves change.

Iranian filmmakers excel abroad despite theocratic censorship back home

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NEWSWEEK MIDDLE EAST

January 20, 2016

When Ayatollah Khomeini ascended to power in the aftermath of Iran's 1979 Revolution, he promised people a new paradise on Earth: social and economic prosperity, freedom of expression for everybody, and a strong, independent nation.

Amidst an atmosphere of war with Iraq and violent domestic political consolidation in the years that followed, Iranians saw the promise of a democratic state give way to the establishment of an Islamic theocracy. Religious doctrines were imposed as part of new restrictive laws that were pinned in the country's national education system. Authorities enforced strict dress codes requiring public veiling for women, irrespective of personal belief.

In the 37 years since the revolution, some of these social pressures have been eased. But there remains a stark dichotomy between the public image which Iranians must present and the private lives they truly live.

Filmmaking in Iran has also remained a challenge. In addition to political restrictions via the state's censorship, filmmakers must abide by specific social guidelines to obtain a permit from the Ministry of Culture to legally film and screen their movies inside the country.

Romantic scenes may never be directly conveyed—only implied; and while Iranian public television routinely broadcasts Turkish soap operas featuring foreign actresses with no hijab, Iranian film and television actresses must cover their hair with a veil or wig in every scene of a show or movie.

But, despite such attempts at state control, a strong second-wave of Iranian cinema emerged in post-revolutionary Iran.

Prolific filmmakers such as cinematic legend Abbas Kiarostami, Oscar-winner Asghar Farhadi, and acclaimed directors Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi have helped garner international praise and recognition for Iran's film industry.

The need to maneuver around state restrictions has made Iranian filmmakers especially adept at innovation and allusion, creating films saturated in symbolism and allegory.

Irrespective of censorship threats, sensitive themes like drug addiction, infidelity, crime, political discord and corruption play out in both underground and permitted movies and television series.

One notable example is internationally renowned director Panahi, who, albeit an existing 20-year government ban prohibiting him from filming in Iran, has continued to make and showcase award-winning films at festivals worldwide.

His latest film, *Taxi*, a subtle critique of censorship has him playing the role of a cab driver in the streets of Tehran. The movie won the prestigious Golden Bear for Best Film at the Berlin Film Festival last year.

Creative works such as these, which push for freedom of expression in spite of state restrictions, are a filmmaker's "duty," said acclaimed South Korean director Park Chan-wook, on the sidelines of the Marrakech Film Festival last month. "Art is full of paradoxes. It's not always the case where you make good works of art in a space where full liberty is guaranteed."

Young Iranian filmmakers have been especially prolific, Kiarostami tells *Newsweek Middle East*. "Notwithstanding the hardship and the real difficulties that they have, young people in Iran ... make many informative films with a lot of energy," says the 75-year old master of Iranian cinema, whose film *A Taste of Cherry* won the Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1997.

"No matter what you have already done, as long as you are alive and as long as you [can] see, there are still questions; there are still wonders, and there are still subjects,"

Kiarostami says, adding: "The only thing that may change is that the older you get, the more you realize there are no answers to your questions."

In first-time filmmaker Sina Ataeian Dena's movie *Paradise*, which was made without obtaining formal permission from Iran's Ministry of Culture, many scenes are confined to classrooms, apartments, schoolyards and buses. Such scenes are among the most vivid in the film, which is the first in a trilogy on violence.

In *Paradise*, the duality between private life and public space prevalent in Iran is embodied by 25-year old Hanieh, (Dorna Dibaj), a middle-class school teacher who lives in Tehran and commutes daily to teach at an all-girls public school in the impoverished, conservative suburb of Bagherabad. Like many of Iran's roughly 55 million young people, Hanieh feels stifled by her environment, where economic growth has declined and corruption has flourished in the wake of sanctions. She drifts through each day yearning for change, circling between her home and job much like the goldfish she often watches swimming in circles around a fish tank in a Tehran street shop.

Paradise also chronicles how violence can be tacit: an uncomfortable pat on the back; a passive-aggressive comment and a weird stare.

"Everything I try to show in this film is somehow one example of how you can treat each other in daily life that can also be violent. And it's not necessarily physical violence," Dena tells *Newsweek Middle East*. "It can be non-physical, like a ghost ... and we feed this ghost with our behavior subconsciously."

Woven into the film's story is the disappearance of two young girls on their way home from school. The decision to weave in child kidnappings was based on actual events, says the 33-year director, who wrote the script in 2005. That year, a man dubbed 'Iran's Desert Vampire' was convicted and executed for the sexual assault and murder of sixteen children. The melancholy permeating *Paradise*, which was filmed over the course of the last three years, mirrors the sadness Dena felt as he wrote the script, he says.

For Hanieh, the ideological heaven on earth promised almost four decades ago has devolved into a form of purgatory. Billboards across the country proclaim the Islamic Republic's unique laws offer "protection, not limitation," but its citizens aren't immune to the risks and violence.

Paradise is now making the rounds of the international film festival circuit. It screens next at festivals in Göteborg end of January, Rotterdam and Istanbul in April. The movie has also picked up a jury award at the 15th annual festival in Marrakech last December and won two awards at Switzerland's film fest in Locarno.