

cinema



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Abu Dhabi Film Fest gripping

The focus on women's anguish and predicament in the face of restrictive dogmas and unnerving revolutions made a lasting impression.

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of the best aspects about covering a movie festival in the Gulf is the opportunity it affords to watch cinema from the region — and, well, also beyond. Usually, there is also a fair smattering of African fare. The recently concluded Abu Dhabi Film Festival had a gripping package to offer. Family bonds, the longing for homeland, illegal immigrants, suffocating religious values and more were on the plate at Abu Dhabi. What was of even particular significance was the focus on women. Several entries pictured their anguish and predicament in the face of restrictive religious dogmas and unnerving revolutions

— all spearhead by men and pushed to fulfil their own agendas. These movies were covert assertions of a woman's longing for a freer and better life.

Hidden Beauties by the veteran Tunisian helmer, Nouri Bouzid is a disturbing study of two women, best of friends, who nurse diametrical opposing views on religion and its practices. Against the backdrop of the turbulent revolution, they struggle to keep their peace, fighting a restrictive faith and the compulsions of love and career. How they eventually strike a balance — but of course at a huge compromise — makes for some interesting moments.

Another woman-centric film by

Algeria's Rachid Benhadj, strangely titled *Perfumes of Algiers*, talks about the quandary of a highly successful woman photographer who runs away to Paris to escape the tyranny of her father. Years later, when she returns to help free her brother jailed for terrorism, she runs into painful truths that she had once rebelled against.

There was more about women on the screen.

Anmmarie Jacir's *When I Saw You* takes us back to the summer of 1967, when Israel captures the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria. Families are separated when a huge exodus

of Palestinians takes place, and in one refugee camp, we meet 11-year-old Tarek and his mother. The boy's father is missing, and his desperate longing for the man is heart-rending. Jacir, herself a Palestinian, says that it is extremely painful to be not able to return to her country and merely catch a glimpse of it from across the Jordan Valley. For little Tarek, this was something he could not neither understand nor reconcile with. So he does what he knows best.

Another excellent work, a documentary called *A World Not Ours*, offers a poignant study of a Palestinian refugee camp. In a remarkable example of first-person narration, Mahdi Fleifel returns to the Ain El-Helweh camp in Lebanon — where he had spent his early childhood — to meet the heroes and the anti-heroes. The documentary grippingly tells us the stories of many of the 70,000 refugees living in about a square-kilometre area. Keen to flee the camp, many are also frightened by the unknown lands that lie beyond, and Fleifel's camera captures the pain of such personal turmoil.

Yousry Nasrallah's *After the Battle* moves away from the fairer sex and refugee camps; here he scripts the story of a fallen hero. Mahmoud, instigated by Hosni Mubarak's henchmen, transforms himself from a showman to a "Tahrir Knight", charging at those revolutionaries at the square. When the regime crumbles, Mahmoud — whose face has been seen a million times on television — finds himself jobless and ostracised by his society. It is then that he comes across a young divorcee, Reem, and when

the two meet, they are impacted by the terribly uncertain times. A moving film about the intricacies of personal wants and the overwhelming desire to dream.

Documentary man Massoud Bakhshi made his foray into narrative feature with his slimy drama curiously called *A Respectable Family*. Which is everything but respectable, as the protagonist, an expat academic, finds when he returns to Iran to sort out a minor family squabble that turns out to be a deadly trap for him. He confronts violence, extortion and kidnapping all neatly concealed under a bureaucratic and familial blanket. Seen as a modern-day Cain and Abel story, the work had serious political overtones. Will it land Bakhshi in a soup as it had some of his fellow directors?

Away from the region, the films were varied in the themes they tackled. Nisha Pahuja's documentary, *The World Before Her* (from India), about two absolutely different kinds of thinking can be an exaggerated view. But it does drive home its point. In an Indian camp, we see several young women all aspiring to win beauty crowns, but beneath the makeup and mascara lies a "certain shallowness and the import of a degenerate culture from the West". However, to term this degradation of women is farfetched. I do not think that there is any compulsion among women to join the race. On the other side of the spectrum is a school run by a radical Hindu woman nationalist who teaches girls/ women violence, hatred and racism — all these disguised as instruments of empowerment for them!

This year's Festival appeared to be besotted by women. Kamal's *I.D.* also from India looks at the angst of a young working woman who does not know what to do when a painter about to start repairing the wall of her house, collapses and dies later in hospital. Her sheer inability to cope with the episode is dramatically told, though many of the situations worked into the script are hard to believe in today's modern India. Now why would the woman walk into some of Mumbai's filthiest and possibly dangerous slums all by herself trying to find the identity of the dead painter? Pray, why.

The Japanese God — or so they call him — Takeshi Kitano directs and acts in *Outrage Beyond* — a tersely told tale of the country's underworld (Yakuza) skirmishes. Plenty of blood and gore here, but neatly edited into a seductive package. There is Pierce Brosnan in *Love is All You Need* in a delightfully romantic role, while Portugal's Manoel de Oliveira — 103 young — helms a riveting French incarnation of a 1923 play.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran covered the recent Abu Dhabi Film Festival for the fourth year, and may be contacted at gautamanb@hotmail.com)