

Critique

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Eclectic ‘Exam’ination of Gender Emancipation



“Women in the Kurdish regions resort to suicide in order to gain some control over their lives, to escape repressive values towards them within society and from within their own families.” Pg37 - European Parliament Study on Women’s Rights & Gender Equality.*

Reflective of this rather depressing and disturbing phenomenon is the FIPRESCI International Critics Prize winner at the recently concluded 55th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival – *The Exam* by renowned Iraqi-Kurdish director Shawkat Amin Koriki.

The searing and soulful account of the ill-fated lives of two women protagonists in *The Exam* stands as a telling testimony of how women of these regions are still fighting against the State & a Patriarchal Society, trying to get a grip on their lives.

Kurdish women may be playing important roles in the social and political spheres, enabled by progressive movement within Kurdish society, their rights and equality improved. However, gender inequality, forced marriages, and denial of education, et al., are still blighting their right to life of dignity and freedom, as the findings of the study point out.

The Kurdish region, which spans the entire area between Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, is incidentally once again in the global spotlight with the ominous resurgence of the Taliban.

The abject failure of the US & allies in Afghanistan has brought the fate of women into the collective global consciousness, not only in the strife-ridden nation but also in the region, near and far, pitchforking their future on to global discourse.

The Taliban, by declaring “girls, women may study in no-men classrooms” and “wear Hijab” and “cannot work alongside men”, has portended things to come in the days ahead for the women’s lot.

That the Afghan women’s lot, though, it may be said, in these two score years, having tasted empowerment, education and legitimate expression of their rights, are not giving in and putting up a resistance truly speaks of their resilience and grit

against the odds and bleak, dark future they are staring at.

Yes, the entire world is watching with bated breath how things will pan out for these angst-ridden women staring at a bleak future. Not that the situation is any different for the millions of women that populate the Middle East and other regions of the sub-continent.

It is pertinent here to recount that “Kurdish cinema began inching its way onto the world stage with human rights themes at their core.” They stood out “from their Middle Eastern counterparts and world cinema in that they are message-oriented representations of prevalent human rights issues and a plea for righting wrongs.” As Jano Rosebiani* in her seminal, four-part feature on Kurdish Cinema, observes.

“Kurdish cinema, practically non-existent in the 20th Century save for a few titles, began to flourish, specifically following the defeat and removal of Saddam Hussein and the strengthening of Kurdistan Region’s autonomy and serve as a window on Kurdish culture, geopolitics and way of life.” (ibid)

“From 2000 onward, a wave of Kurdish filmmakers from all parts of greater Kurdistan and the diaspora turned out a slew of films, gaining international recognition and winning awards from prestigious film festivals. Kurdish cinema has continued to flourish in the present decade in spite of the speed bumps created by the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS).” (ibid)

“In these and in numerous other films, women are portrayed as helpless and voiceless victims of a patriarchal society.” (ibid)

It is in this context that *The Exam* succinctly spotlights “women’s position within Kurdish society focusing on patriarchal social-cultural structures and how they have generated patterns of domestic abuse from which women have few means of escape” (ibid), eventually leading them to take their own lives.

A reflective and absorbing drama which daringly probes into the woman’s right to her own life and a searing indictment of the situation the region’s women are boxed in and driven into, *The Exam*

speaks of how even though Kurdish women make it bold to question “socially constructed gender roles.”

However, trapped in a “predominantly patriarchal system and male dominant ideology that culturally and morally imprison them” and lack of effective State intervention, are left with no choice but to take to dubious means to escape the tyranny of expectations and, when that fails, resort to suicide. (2)

Yes, “if Rojin does not pass the university entrance exam, she will have to go through with the arranged marriage. If she does get in, she will be free,” says their father, a traffic constable on the verge of retirement, which sees the protagonist caught in the quintessential life-threatening dilemma.

The Exam centring around two sisters - who wage a valiant and tragic battle for their individual freedom and self-determination, and narrated with all the nuance and deftness, turns into a severe indictment of a social system that still treats women as “marriageable commodities” and more so “‘male’ child producing machine,” and a chattel of man to do his bidding and subsist under his hegemonistic pleasure.

While a depressive and mournful Rojin, lamenting the disappearance of her beau in the war, facing the disastrous prospects of being married off were she not to pass the university entrance exam, is clutching at the last straws, having already attempted suicide once.

Her elder sister Shilan, who goes about moving heaven and earth to help her younger sibling with all the will at her command, is herself facing a similarly hopeless situation. With a girl child, she has taken to medicating with contraceptive pills to avoid another pregnancy, saddled with a demonic fishmonger husband wanting a son badly.

The elder Shilan takes all in her means to ensure younger Rojin does not face a similar pitiful fate as hers and seeks to do everything to ensure she passes and flees the constrictive coup they are cooped up in the stifling patriarchal set-up.

It does not matter, even if it means young and desolate Rojin is assisted through extraneous means, wearing a Bluetooth device in her ears, in scaling the exams, with Shilan reading out the correct answers

from home. Thereby, every well-meaning action is taken, drawing the two young women deeper into a perilous web of deceit and lies.

THE EXAM, in that context, is not just about selfless love and exceptional care of sisterhood and their fight for emancipation by ensuring Rojin passes her physical university exam to have a better life but also an allegorical reference to Shilan's personal examination of her own suffocating situation she is stewed in.

The fact that Shilan wills it more for herself that her traumatised teen sister Rojin succeeds so that at least she does not suffer the same fate that has befallen her is what makes *The Exam* an exemplary and engaging cinema.

Despite each knowing within herself they are virtually chasing the chimaera and fighting an almost lost cause, the sisters in arms try every means at hand to find a window of hope. However, that's not to be.

The starkly soulful saga of sisters' struggle against the stifling social strictures that have clipped away their rightful wings of desire for individual freedom and empowerment is indeed truly reflective of the times women are still incarcerated.

Indeed, director Amin Korki, with his deep understanding and craft of cinema, brilliantly brings out the suffocation, stagnation and abject sense of social and claustrophobic captivity the two sisters go through shackled in a stone-hearted patriarchal society that does even consider them as respectful humans and entitlement to lead their own lives as they so wish.

What makes *The Exam* an even more engaging cinema and tugs at your social conscience is that the two women protagonists playing the sisters are non-professionals and have given a bravura performance.

As the director states: I have intended to focus on the pressure young women experience – the balance between marriage and motherhood and education, a constant battle and sacrifice for women, especially in this region.

According to the director, despite the presence of strong women in Kurdistan and it was not inimical to women's rights, the problems depicted by the two main characters go through were sought to be portrayed through the eyes of the two sisters, especially the bigger one, who fights for her younger sibling.

In effect, *THE EXAM* is a social treatise on the reality of two young women living in today's Iraqi Kurdistan, a region that has long suffered from tragic wars, misery, and constant crises and continues to do so what with the Taliban back in power and turning time back to the dark days yet again for the women's lot.

In that sense, the sensitively nuanced film comes across as a novel work bravely which takes up an issue that is otherwise rarely explored in Middle Eastern cinema, of women rights and their living conditions in the region. For this alone, director Amin Kokri needs to be appreciated for his larger social and cinematic vision.

References: Internet-Based Sources:

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* Jano Rosebani is an American-Kurdish scriptwriter, director, producer, and editor associated with Kurdish New Wave cinema.

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