

AIFF: Critique

G P Ramachandran

## Family - What is Lost when it Falls Apart



Babak Khajepasha's *Dar Aqoosh E Derakht* (*In the Arms of the Tree*/Iran, 2023) marks his feature film debut. The theme of a nuclear family—often seen as a source of love and security—breaking apart is hardly a new one, and the impact on children is a familiar narrative. However, by focusing on the individual significance of each child's life, it becomes evident, almost without explanation,

that such a rupture and sense of orphanhood will profoundly affect them. Khajepasha tackles this complex issue in a style that is characteristic of many Iranian films, exploring the emotional and social consequences with a quiet, nuanced approach.

Kimia and Farid have decided to end their twelve-year marriage. Despite this, they continue with their daily lives, each managing

their time through various jobs and responsibilities. They have two sons: Taha, an eleven-year-old with a maturity beyond his years, and Alisan, a lively five-year-old. Despite the challenges their family faces, the bond between the brothers remains strong and unwavering.

The divorce agreement stipulates that the father will take responsibility for the older son, Taha, while the mother will care for Alisan. To help manage this arrangement, Kimia asks her brother, Raza, to follow the counsellor's advice and keep the two boys separated. Raza, who frequently looks after his nephews, may not be the most reliable caregiver, but his love for them is unquestionable. That said, his affection has a darker side—he often finds ways to profit from the children. He even encourages them to engage in dangerous activities, like standing on train tracks until a train comes. This reckless behaviour further emphasises the stark contrast between Taha's maturity and Raza's immaturity, making it clear that, despite his youth, Taha often appears to be the more responsible one.

Taha and Alisan decide to place the ducklings in a basin of water inside the house, but it is Raza who suggests they take the ducks to the river instead. Eager for a new adventure, the boys follow his lead, heading toward the river—but they soon disappear without a trace. What follows is a story marked by uncertainty, confusion, and deep disappointment, as their absence leaves everyone grappling with the emotional fallout.

As the saying goes in *"In the Arms of the Tree,"* a fish only realises the value of water once it's out of it. Similarly, it is only

when the family is gone that each person comes to understand its true importance.

This theme transcends being merely a localised issue within a single family—it speaks to a broader, universal problem. Set in the Iranian countryside, the film uses its rural backdrop to symbolise deeper emotional and social dynamics. One character even declares that Alisan will die if Taha is not by his side. While certain events in the film make this statement seem almost literal, it ultimately underscores a more profound message: the separation of siblings can feel like a death sentence, both emotionally and psychologically. This is the core principle implied throughout the narrative, highlighting the inseparable bond between the brothers and the devastating impact of their separation.

Farid, sitting on a rock at the border between Iran and Turkey, reflects on how his family is being torn apart. This moment serves as a powerful symbol: the divisions of nations mirror the divisions within families. The Kurds, for example, are fragmented across four countries—Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria—creating a complex web of borders that separates both land and people. The film never explicitly clarifies whether the characters are Kurdish. Still, this ambiguity only reinforces the symbolism, suggesting that the fractured family reflects the broader, ongoing fragmentation of cultural and national identities.

Recently, there has been a decline in the freedom to make films in Iran. We've seen the struggles of filmmakers like Jafar Panahi and others. Mohsen Makhmalbaf has been living in Paris for years, having left Iran. Mohammad Rasoulof's Iranian film, *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, was submitted to the

Oscars from Germany. Rasoulof, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for including political themes in his films, continues to face the repercussions of his work.

In this context, one might wonder whether Babak Khajepasha, making his film debut, is apolitical or aligns with the views of the theocratic regime. However, after watching "*In the Arms of the Tree*," it's clear that jumping to such a conclusion would be premature. The film presents a sincere exploration of the tension between patriarchal family values, individual modern aspirations, and the legal system in a society like Iran.

The film maintains a profound sensitivity and cultural nuance throughout. Set against the scenic backdrop of northern Iran, the contrast between the region's natural beauty and the conflicts unfolding within the story is striking. This juxtaposition highlights the transnational nature of the family's struggles, suggesting that these issues extend beyond geographical boundaries.

Ahoura Lofti and Rayan Lofti deliver profoundly moving performances as Taha and Alisan. Maral Baniadam shines as Kimla, Javad Qamati brings depth to the role of Farida, and Rohollah Zamani portrays Raza

with remarkable nuance. Each actor outdoes the other, creating a truly standout ensemble.

The drama of *In the Arms of the Tree* is built on a heartbreaking balance between destruction and hope. While the film depicts the children becoming orphans and their dreams fading as a family falls apart, it also acknowledges that no one has the power to keep people trapped in incompatible relationships. Khajepasha presents the challenges and crises of life with striking transparency, never imposing moral lessons but instead allowing the story to speak for itself.

*In the Arms of the Tree* has garnered significant recognition, winning multiple awards for its powerful storytelling. At the 41st Fajr International Film Festival, the film took home eight awards, including Best Film and Best Director. It also received the Special Jury Prize at the 10th Annual Los Angeles Asian World Film Festival and the FIPRESCI India Award at the 10th Ajanta Ellora International Film Festival, further solidifying its critical acclaim on the international stage. *In the Arms of the Tree* was submitted from Iran for consideration at the 97th Academy Awards (Oscars), but it ultimately did not receive a nomination.

**G P Ramachandran is a Member of FIPRESCI. He served as a Member of FIPRESCI-India Jury in 10<sup>th</sup> Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival (15-19 January 2025).**