

Critique

Meena Karnik

***No Mercy: The Fierce Lens of Female Directors***



German director Isa Willinger's documentary *No Mercy* has interviews with female directors from around the world—both past and present—where they talk about their movies, perceptions, perspectives, and primarily the much-discussed 'Female Gaze'.

A woman living in the city. Educated, working in a high position. On the other side, there is a simple village girl. Earning money by doing small-big jobs. Both love the same man. Even if he has a fairly serious affair with the city woman, he also has a relationship with the village girl while traveling for work. The village girl comes to the city looking for him and starts working at the urban woman's house; eventually, one of them leaves this love triangle, and the film ends.

What is unique about this story, given that love triangles have been seen on screen

since olden times? When Russian/Ukrainian director Kira Muratova brought this to the screen in 1967 as 'Brief Encounters', it did not remain a simple tale. She shows the nuances and complexities of relationships through a non-linear narrative, with flashbacks that do not explicitly explain everything. Her masterpiece, 'The Asthenic Syndrome' (1989)—referring to a lack of strength or power—is divided into black-and-white and colour segments. The first frame shows a trash bin with a doll lying on the road like a fallen baby, which appears even more tragic

against the backdrop of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. We also see withered flowers and a stopped clock, suggesting that time has no place in this story.

In the next scene, three elderly women speak simultaneously about how everyone should read Leo Tolstoy to become loving and wise. This appears humorous and seems to have no connection to the main plot. The frames then transition from a boy blowing bubbles to men digging and a camera focusing on a coffin, showing how life is momentary.

The film's actual story begins much later when we meet Natasha, who has lost control due to her husband's death. Her behaviour expresses anger toward the living; she pushes friends and tells people on the street, 'You are alive and I hate you'. When Natasha's journey ends, it is revealed that this was all a film, and the real hero is a bored audience member who too, like Natasha, is gripped by asthenic syndrome. He realizes he has no strength left, and there's a desperation in falling asleep anywhere.

Muratova's films often depict this hopelessness, offering distress rather than entertainment. A Ukrainian critic noted that while her films seem surreal, they are realistic because they reflect the absurdity of their country. Although she faced censorship and bans from the Politburo, her work possesses immense power, though she is not as globally famous as her contemporary, Agnès Varda.

Why write so extensively about Kira Muratova here? Her cinemas are not the subject of Izza Willinger's 'No Mercy' documentary. But her cinemas are the reason behind this documentary happening.

Isa Willinger was deeply influenced by Muratova while studying film. When Isa's career as a director started, Muratova's was in its final phase, she was filming 'Ordinary People' in 2001' Isa got her phone number from a Russian journalist and expressed her desire to meet; but Muratova brushed her off. She was somewhat unhappy about giving interviews and talking about her cinemas. Izza didn't give up. She called once, twice, thrice. Finally, Muratova got annoyed and told Isa, "I don't like speaking at fixed times. If you really wanted to talk to me, you would have come directly." Saying that, she hung up.

Izza wasn't one to accept defeat. She directly took a flight to Odessa, Muratova's city in Ukraine, and landed at her home. No need to say she got the interview.

She later wrote a book on Muratova. "Muratova's cinema is remarkably expressive. The extreme clarity and firm stance on what her films want to say felt very rare to me. To take such a bold stance in art and cinema, captivated me. I also liked her special Ukrainian sense of humour. I think the attraction to incongruity is their specialty and the unique female perspective added to Muratova's strong voice."

"I didn't think films made by women are different," Muratova said in the interview to Isa. "But then I went to a women's film festival in France and saw many films there that felt harsh, ruthless. They weren't 'girly' in any way. I realized that actually, women's films are harsher."

This last sentence from the interview lingered in Isa's mind. Are they really? And if so, why? How to exactly define harshness in cinema or real

life? With what different awareness do women want to make their cinemas? How exactly do they want to express it? What do they want to say? Does the agony, anger, discomfort in their minds inevitably take the form of violence to come out intensely?

Such questions must have haunted Isa. From them perhaps, 'No Mercy' was born. Izza studied cinema from Munich. She has master's in Slavic Studies, Sociology, American Studies. Her documentary 'Hi, AI' (2019) won many awards. Her next 'Plastic Fantastic' (2023) won the Graine d'Or at the Festival International du Film Ecologique et Social Cannes, also bagged the German Ocean award and the best documentary from Greenpeace Italia.

In 'No Mercy,' Isa speaks with many women directors from around the world. She also shares her personal experiences. The writing, direction, and commentary voice of the documentary is hers. It feels like French directors get a slight tilt; but that doesn't diminish the core subject anywhere.

We meet artists like Anna Lily Amirpour, Catherine Breillat, Céline Sciamma, Apolaine Traoré, Jackie Buet, Marzieh Meshkini, Nina Menkes, Valie Export, Virginie Despentes, Monica Triet, Alice Diop, Joey Solowe, and Jackie Buet, director of the Women's International Film Festival of Creteil. They tell us why they make cinemas, why they make them the way they do, what their stance is when showing violence or graphic sex. We see clips from their famous cinemas; Muratova's point is always in the background; but they talk about another extremely important point. 'Female gaze'—

which is now being discussed as a counter to the 'Male Gaze'.

The term 'male gaze' was first used by cinema scholar Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Her point was that depiction of women in visual arts, media, and literature is from a man's perspective. In her writing, she notes that the “male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.”

In response to the same essay, feminist scholars proposed the concept of 'female gaze.' It talks about women's issues, emotions, and words in story form through visual media. As critic and Turner Classic Movies host Alicia Malone states in her book, “The Female Gaze: Essential Movies Made by Women,” the female gaze asks the question: “What happens when we look at the world from a female point of view? How do women see themselves? How do women see other women? What makes a movie essentially feminine? What can audiences, of any gender identification, gain by looking at film through a female lens?”

Céline Sciamma's interview is in this documentary. I had watched her 2019 film 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire.' The story is set in 18th-century France. A young girl's marriage is fixed to a man she's never met. Another girl comes to her grand seaside mansion to paint her portrait. They walk on rocks, talk, and at some point, an attraction builds while looking at each other. As one film critic said, "Sciamma shows this love on screen just through the peace they experience in each other's company, their glances at each other. Through their breathing. Music is minimal in the cinema. Sound of footsteps, rustling

curtains, wind movement, and then suddenly music hits our ears in one scene. Devastating. A woman's gaze is like this. 'Female gaze' is not gentle, not safe, purely honest!"

"Our cinema is the definition of 'female gaze,'" Sciamma has said. In one interview, she says, "That's why the male gaze is obsessed with representing lesbians, for instance. It's a way to control it. Our stories are powerful because they are dangerous. We are dangerous. So it's a very good strategy to despise us—to undermine us—because it's giving us less leverage for a very powerful political dynamic".

Cinema is always political, according to Sciamma. Thus, women making films on women is also a political statement. In 2018, at Cannes Film Festival, many women artists including Agnès Varda, Kate Blanchett, Léa Seydoux, and Sciamma protested against unequal treatment of women. They demanded equality in the film industry. In 2020, during César Awards, Roman Polanski was announced best director, and 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' lead Adèle Haenel walked out of the theatre. Sciamma and her entire team followed. (Polanski was arrested for raping a 13-year-old girl in 1977.) Speaking about it, Sciamma says, "There was no plan. It's all about the moment, a matter of seconds. It's about moving your legs, as simple as that. And that's hard. It's hard to stand up, hard to move your legs. I understand why people don't. But sometimes you have to."

Some filmmakers in the documentary say, "Many male directors advise us: if you want to make a film, do it on relationships, family. Violence, crime, sex—these aren't your subjects." And then ask, "Men have

rarely experienced the violence women face in real life."

Alice Diop is also French. She has made some documentaries. But her 2022 first feature 'Saint Omer' became a hit. The subject was such. Fabienne Kabou was convicted in 2016 for drowning her baby. Alice used to attend the court during the trial. In the film, Rama is a novelist, pregnant, attending the trial of Senegalese woman Laurence Coly. Laurence abandons her 15-month-old baby on the beach. She knows the sea waves will take it away. In fact, that's her purpose.

The film won the Grand Jury Prize at Venice Film Festival; but many women criticized her. Most viewers, especially women, said no woman, no mother could do such an act. On the other side, some women admitted having such unwanted thoughts after childbirth.

Apolaine Traoré from Burkina Faso asks in 'No Mercy,' "For years men have talked about women, but do they really know us?"

She's been making films for the last 25 years. Her 2023 'Sira' is considered her most famous. It's a story of a young girl Sira who fights Islamic terrorists, how she escapes with her little baby, confronts the terrorists. Sira is one of us, staking all her strength to fight. One dialogue stays memorable. In the barren desert, Sira with a gun behind a rock, baby tied to her back with cloth. Terrorists in front.

"You have death in front of you and life behind."

Listening to the interviews of women directors in 'No Mercy,' the diversity of subjects in their films is evident. And it's not that they agree with each other on every facet,

sometimes directly contradicting each other. Virginie Despentes says, "Violence in cinema liberates, especially for women who have experienced violence in real life or live under constant threat—onscreen violence is liberating for them."

On the other side, Marziah Meshkini's view is that images of violence create more violence. Isa feels both are right in their own way because their realities are different. These realities are reflected in their films. And life isn't black and white. It's about the images their films create. It's about the perspective that they depict, the expectations that they fuel. Do their films give power or snatch it? Violence needs to be analysed based on all these aspects, Isa thinks.

Virginie Despentes and Marziah Meshkini's cinema is very different too. 'Baise-moi' (2000) is an example enough to show Virginia Despentes' uniqueness. It's an erotic crime thriller written and directed by Virginie and Coralie Trinh Thi (who is a French former porn star), based on the novel by Virginie, first published in 1993. The film had graphic mix of violence and explicit sex scenes. Sometimes this film is considered an example of the "New French Extremity". Because of the violence and detailed sex, it was banned in many countries. Conversely, Meshkini's 'The Day I Became a Woman' (2000) uses Iranian simplicity to tell feminist stories of three women seeking freedom and searching for self-identity. There is nine year old Hava who spends her last hour of childhood at the beach; young Ahoo continues a bicycle race despite her husband divorcing her; and Hooraa, an elderly widow, goes on a shopping spree.

This film's YouTube trailer is very beautiful. Apart from the visuals, the expressed words too.

The Day I Became - Inquisitive

The Day I Became - Determined

The Day I Became - Independent

The Day I Became - A Woman

These two directors have very different sensitivities and both of them are important as women filmmakers, according to Isa.

Iranian but now settled in America, Anna Lily Amirpour's cinema is even more different Her 'A Girl Walks Alone at Night' (2014) is a unique Iranian vampire western with film noir elements.

Catherine Breillat in her interview in 'No Mercy' she says, "I wanted to do something forceful. Something that smacked you down." Most of her films are really like that. She's been directing since 1975. Her first was a sex comedy. Then came 'A Real Young Girl' which is a story of 14-year-old girl's sexual awakening. Written by Breillat herself, the film had descriptive sex scenes which in 1976 were more than bold. Seeing female-male genitals on screen didn't digest for viewers and it was banned in many countries and finally released in theatres in 2000. The titles of her films like 'Virgin,' 'Dirty Like an Angel,' 'Perfect Love,' 'Romance,' 'Fat Girl,' 'Brief Crossing,' 'Sex Is Comedy,' 'Anatomy of Hell,' 'The Last Mistress,' 'Sleeping Beauty,' 'Abuse of Weakness' are enough to know her style of film making. Described as 'cinema of the body', the phrase she fully rejects she says, "They say my cinema focuses only on physical sensations or is pornographic. That's very superficial. True I show human body in detail and my films become controversial; but what I show has

deeper, complex intent behind, a purpose no one tries to see." Her latest film is an example she cites. In 'Last Summer,' (2023) which is also described as 'erotic drama,' she comments on stepmother-stepson relationship. It was selected for competition at Cannes and received four nominations for César Awards.

Isa Willinger wrote and directed and gave the voice over to 'No Mercy'. Not just that, most of the team working on this documentary is women. Isa says, "It was a conscious choice and, in a way, also an experiment. We wanted to see what happens when you work with as many women as possible, which isn't always easy in every department – colour grading or sound mixing, for example. But it was important to us as a

statement and, of course, because we wanted the perspectives within the team to resonate with the film's themes."

Be it Breillat or Marziah Meshkini, Anna Lily Amirpour, Apolaine Traoré, Virginie Despentes, Céline Sciamma, Alice Diop—these and many like them, have made strong statements through their cinema. I haven't watched all their films nor was I acquainted with all their work but listening to them in 'No Mercy' did form a bond and curiosity too. And eventually, it did make one agree that women's cinema is indeed harsher. While not all their work may be universally accepted, their honesty and existence in the field are profoundly important.

**Meena Karnik is member of FIPRESCI.**