Women's Prison (review)

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FILM REVIEWS

Women's Prison, Manijeh Hekmat (director), **2002**

Reviewed by Ezzat Goushegir, DePaul University

The concept of prison and imprisonment in the film "Women's Prison" by Manijeh Hekmat, the Iranian filmmaker, raises a fundamental question about the link between repression, power, and sexuality in Iranian society. Hekmat believes "a prison is a small version of society with many of the characteristics of the society it is among, and that it can reflect the economic, social, and political situation of the particular society."

In this allegorical film, which was made in 2001 and produced in an actual women's prison in Tehran, Hekmat documents an historical perspective. She provides a political analysis on the status of women in contemporary Iran, where women struggle to fight and negate the innumerable mechanisms of oppression in order to survive. The film's structure is formed in three historical periods after the Islamic revolution—1984, five years after the revolution and during the war between Iran and Iraq; 1992, after the war and the beginning of questioning the democratization of Islam; and 2001, after the Khatami's reformation.

The factually based film revolves mainly around the story of two characters, Mitra, the murderer, and Tahereh, the pious prison warden, while revealing stories of crime, drug addiction, rape, prostitution, homosexuality, and political activities. The first scene begins with Tahereh, who is sent by the authorities to suppress the riots in the prison and to establish a new, harsh disciplinary system that consists of punishing the prisoners (including the pregnant and older women) and refusing to give them food and warm shelter. Mitra, the former student of midwifery and

the murderer of her stepfather, confronts Tahereh's strictness for the sake of the rights of her inmates. Tahereh attempts to crush Mitra's strength by giving orders to shave her long hair and by torturing her physically and psychologically. In this game of power, which lasts seventeen years, the two women live together through contempt, hatred, and harmony. Mitra's rebellious opposition and resistance culminate in becoming a leader in the prison and sharing her knowledge, experience, and wisdom as a midwife, mother, and decision maker. Meanwhile, Tahereh gradually loses her power due to the political reforms outside of the prison, aging, and reaching the point of meaninglessness in her life.

In each of the three historical periods, a teenage prisoner represents a symbolic figure of hope, of dreaming of a new generation who will create drastic changes in the society. All three teenage characters—Pegah, Sahar, and Sepideh (meaning "dawn")—are played by Pegah Ahangarani, Hekmat's daughter. In the first segment, Pegah is a political prisoner who is an artist from an upper middle-class family. Tahereh promises to give her parole to visit her family if she plays the cello at the New Year celebration in the prison. Instead, she is betrayed by Tahereh and later blindfolded, most likely sent to her execution. In the second segment, Sahar, who comes from a working-class background and tries to help her family by working very hard, is raped by Zivar the drug smuggler. Later, she commits suicide. In the third segment, Sepideh (known as Essy Gold Finger), a seventeen-year-old streetwise girl who was born in the prison, becomes the leader of the younger prisoners. She later escapes to Dubai in search of a better life.

Hekmat portrays how the strict and harsh discipline imposed by the authorities to reduce crime and violations in society in the years of 1992 and 2001 ironically produced criminal delinquents who imposed violent behavior, even on their own inmates. Furthermore, the prison indirectly produces Sepideh—the child of Revolution whose mother was executed in prison, thus throwing her alone into the lower depths. She learns quickly the old lesson that in order to survive she has to commit crimes and rebel against the abuse of power.

One of the unforgettable scenes in the film is in the last segment, when an old and powerless Tahereh lets her desire for femininity flourish for the first time. She wears lipstick while feeling adulterous, as if wearing lipstick is tantamount to committing a great sin, a sin full of pleasure

and pain. In this breathtaking moment, one thinks, With a long history of domination, control, and exploitation, isn't she a prisoner herself? A prisoner of her belief? The result of her life is loneliness. The only thing that has remained for her is love—loving Mitra, her own longtime enemy, her suppressed double. She decides to place the deed of her home as bail for Mitra's freedom, the freedom of her double.

Picture Me an Enemy, Nathalie Applewhite, 2003

Reviewed by Elissa Helms, Central European University, Budapest

"Picture Me an Enemy" is a portrait of two young women from the former Yugoslavia who came to the US because of the conflicts in their homeland(s). The main goal of this documentary is to challenge stereotypes and homogenized representations of war victims, refugees, and, in the case of Tahija, Muslims as seen by host populations such as in the US. The spoken testimonies of the two women are accompanied by archival footage, maps and background information, shots of Bosnia and Croatia, and artistic clips of the two women in positive, reflective poses, creating a varied, engaging, and upbeat synthetic whole.

The two likeable and articulate women profiled here have clearly (of necessity) thought a lot about their relationships to their home communities, identities, countries, and their reception by the Americans where they now live, in Philadelphia (both are or were graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania). Nataša is from Osijek in the war-torn region of Slavonija, eastern Croatia, the child of a "mixed marriage": her father is a Serb and her mother a Croat (presumably why she is curiously identified in some of the film's promotional material as "a Serbo-Croat"). She came to the US in 1992 at the age of eighteen to be an exchange student but, as she stresses, stayed because of the war. She therefore considers herself a refugee rather than a (voluntary) immigrant. Tahija is a Bosnian Muslim, or Bosniac, from Sarajevo who spent most of the war in the besieged town and came to the US at the age of twenty-two in 1995, the final year of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. She also left to continue her education, impossible in Sarajevo at the time.