

Films about Afghan Women

Kimia Kamoei*

*Correspondence: kimydaanaa@gmail.com

Abstract:

Film Reviews of Sonita (2015; Dir: Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghamsi); A Thousand Girls Like Me (2018; Dir: Sahra Mousawi-Mani); Hava, Maryam, Ayesha (2020; Dir: Sahraa Karimi).

Fiction films and documentaries offer valuable insight into a country's culture and can help highlight the unknowns as well as the voiceless subjects of society. The feature-length film and the two documentaries that are reviewed in this article focus on Afghan women and their dilemmas in a world torn apart by decades of war, imperialist interventions, and persistent misogyny.

The first documentary, entitled *Sonita* (2015), is about a teenage girl named Sonita who has fled Afghanistan and lives in Iran but continues to struggle with the cultural norms of her homeland. The second documentary, *One Thousand Girls Like Me* (2018), is about an abused woman who for years was raped by her father and her desperate efforts to put an end to his abuse. The feature film, *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* (2020) examines the difficulties that most women experience when they become pregnant.

Sonita (2015) is a documentary directed by Iranian filmmaker Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghamsi, telling the story of eighteen-year-old Afghan rapper and refugee Sonita Alizadeh in Tehran. Ghaemmaghamsi, a graduate of Tehran's Art University with six documentaries under her belt, including *Pigeon Fanciers* (2000) and *Going up the Stairs* (2011), met Sonita through her



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cousin. The film *Sonita* has garnered multiple awards, such as the IDFA Amsterdam Film Festival's Audience Award for Best Documentary, the World Documentary Grand Jury Prize, and Audience Award at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival.

Over the course of three years, Ghaemmaghami followed Sonita, an undocumented refugee who had fled from the Taliban in Herat (Afghanistan) when they came into power in 1997. As a child, Sonita

endured significant trauma during her emigration from Afghanistan. When we meet her, she was trying to escape a forced marriage arranged by her brothers. The brothers wanted to send her back to Afghanistan to marry an older man for the \$9000 bride price they would receive. Sonita decides she has no choice but to call her mother in Afghanistan to come to Iran and help her out of this unwanted marriage. Sonita is under the

impression that her mother would understand her predicament and support her, because she, too, was a victim of child marriage. But this proves not to be the case. The story continues with her trying to seek help from anyone who might help her to pursue her dreams and avoid this marriage. Many girls in Afghanistan have been sold in marriage, and selling girls appears to be an endless cycle perpetuated by destitute families. Sonita explains her mother's life as a child bride in the documentary. The film shows the relationship between Afghan girls and their family



Figure 1: *Sonita* (2015) poster as she raps onstage wearing wedding gown.

members. Men rule the family, whether as fathers, brothers, husbands, or even sons.

For thousands of years, Afghan women have been told that their only job is to be wives and mothers. Sonita, however, dares to think big. Sonita's story is an inspiring one for many young women worldwide who have dreams of becoming something bigger than what the men and society tell them they are capable of being. Eventually, she does escape the cycle of abuse and proves to other young women that they can do the same. She is persistent and is able to achieve her goal through her passion for music.

Sahra Mousawi-Mani's eighty-minute documentary *A Thousand Girls Like Me* (2018) unveils the life of Khatera, an Afghan woman repeatedly raped by her father since childhood. Mousawi-Mani, an award-winning filmmaker, university lecturer, and founder of Afghanistan Documentary House, collaborates with producers Nicole Levigne, Khosrow Mani, and Emmanuel Quillet to bring Khatera's story to the forefront. With a master's degree in documentary filmmaking from the University of the Arts, London, Mousawi-Mani's filmography includes works such as *Kaloo School* (2013) and *Beyond the Burka* (2014). Her 2018 film won at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival and Overcome Film Festival and was nominated at the 2019 Seattle International Film Festival, the 2018 Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival, and the 2019 Fribourg International Film Festival. This documentary serves as a way to inspire women in Afghanistan who face sexual abuse from their family members and who are too afraid to speak out for fear of disgracing themselves and their families.

When we meet Khatera, she is twenty-three and pregnant with her second child from her father. Her father has emotionally and sexually abused her since she was a child. Khatera fights not only her father, but the cultural



Figure 2: Still of Khatera from A Thousand Girls Like Me (2018) as she walks the streets of Kabul.

norms, the justice system, and her own family to stop the abuse. She starts with her own family and first seeks help from her mother, but her mother, who has also been abused by her husband, seems powerless against him. Corruption in

the justice system of Afghanistan is so common and normalized that even people from the lower classes can have the police look the other way by paying a small bribe and avoiding prison. Khatera says that she talked to fourteen clerics, but everyone ignored her or told her to pray instead of helping her. Eventually, a cleric told her that she needed to publicly make a plea for help if she wanted to get justice from the “broken legal system.” After Khatera showed up on a TV show in Afghanistan, a lot of people told her that she had brought shame upon herself and her family. Indeed, her life became far more difficult as neighbors and landlords forced her and the family to move from one house to another. Most women are too scared to talk about domestic abuse because of how society will look down upon them. The corrupt and prejudiced justice system is also a dead-end for most women who seek legal help, as no case ever gets brought to light. Khatera is upset by the corruption she sees around her, but she believes that if the Taliban, which always claimed to be moral and ethical, were in control of the government, this could never happen to her. This shows the

degree of her frustration at a time when Western-backed governments were in power in Afghanistan and her sadly misguided assumption that a radical Islamist group would rule the country in a more just way.

Hava, Maryam, Ayesha (2020), an eighty-six-minute Dari (Persian) drama, was directed by Sahraa Karimi, a second-generation Afghan refugee and award-winning filmmaker. With a background in acting and cinema studies from Slovakia, Karimi transitioned into directing, earning accolades like the Sun in the Net Award and Best Documentary at the Dhaka International Film Festival. The film was produced by Katayoon Shahabi, a prominent figure in Iranian cinema and CEO of Shahrzad Media International, known for her past collaborations with Abbas Kiarostami and her role on the jury at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival.

The movie is about three women in Afghanistan from different social classes and with dissimilar lifestyles. However, they are all tormented by society and those around them during their pregnancy. Hava is a pregnant housewife who lives with her husband and his parents. She cooks, cleans, does all the chores in the house, and takes care of her husband's parents, but she is still perceived as inadequate and remains unappreciated by her husband and father-in-law. Her husband seems only to care about work and hanging out with his friends. When it comes to his wife, all he does is abuse her, either verbally or physically.

The second character, Maryam, is a married news anchor from an affluent family who finds out she is pregnant. But when she realizes that her husband cheats on her, she gets a divorce. After the divorce, she faces a great deal of pressure from society, because culture makes it impossible to raise a child as a single mother. This is when her problems become too big for her to handle.

The third character in the movie is Ayesha, a teenage girl who is a lot younger than the other characters and faces a very different set of

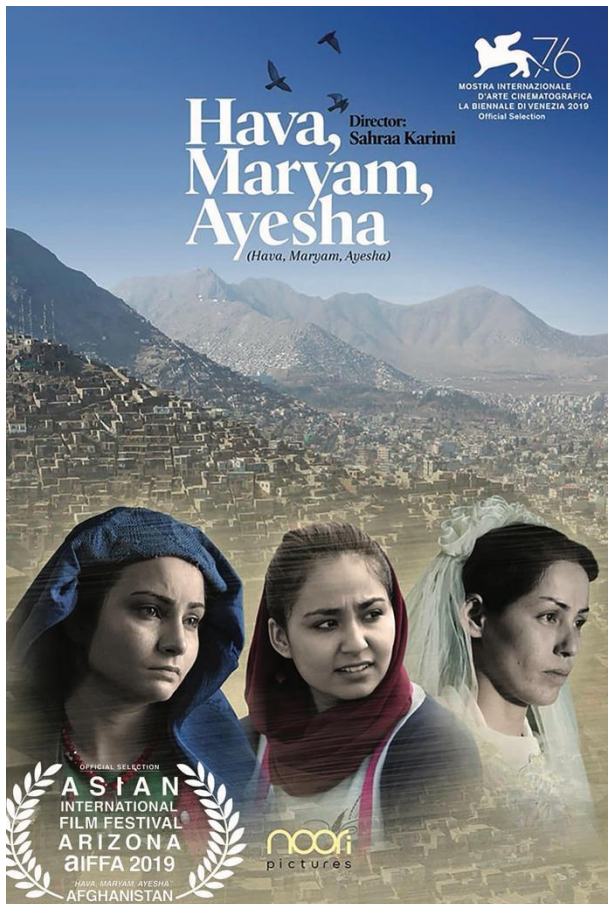


Figure 3: Poster from the movie *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* (2015)

challenges. She lives with her sister and mother, a very traditional woman and widow. Ayesha has agreed to marry her cousin, but she has been secretly in love with another man and visits him. After some time, and without quite understanding what happened to her, she finds out that she is pregnant; however, her boyfriend soon disappears. Now she must either tell her cousin, whom she is supposed to marry, or abort the child.

The movie does an exceptionally good job of describing the problems that the characters face, and the audience comes to sympathize with the women. Hava, as a housewife, experiences a type of abuse that is primarily seen among the lower classes

and among women who are less educated. In the case of Maryam, who comes from an educated, upper-class background, the struggle does not involve physical abuse, but it is no less traumatic and ultimately life-altering. Ayesha might not at first be seen as a victim and be blamed for her own pregnancy. But it is society's job to provide young people with sex education—something that is entirely lacking in Afghan society. As a result, young women like Ayesha end up risking their lives to get an abortion with unqualified practitioners who are neither certified midwives nor doctors.

The directors of all three films want to inspire change in Afghan society by drawing international attention to the issues that Afghan women face in their society. The fact that each of these documentaries has received awards in the West shows that the directors have indeed gained such international recognition. However, since the takeover of the Taliban in

August 2021, hope seems to have diminished for Afghan women, who now face even greater oppression under the tyrannical fundamentalist regime.

Kimia Kamoei received her BA in Middle East Studies, with a minor in Applied Psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2023. She was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1999, and moved to the United States when she was seventeen. She has translated Persian poetry and literature into English and has also researched the lives and experiences of Afghan women since the second Taliban regime took over in 2021.

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