

## Women on the Other Side

Week 7: *The Day I Became a Woman* (Iran 2000)

FILM NATIONAL  
MEDIA TELEVISION  
RADIO MUSEUM WEB  
PHOTOGRAPHY

**Directed by** Marziyeh Meshkini

**Writing credits** Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Marziyeh Meshkini

**Produced by** Mohsen Makhmalbaf

**Cinematography by** Mohamad Ahmadi, Ebrahim Ghafari

**Film Editing by** Shahrzad Pouya

**Original Music by** Ahmad Reza Darvish

**Art Direction by** Akbar Meshkini

**Sound Department** Abbas Rastegarpour and Behroz Shahamat

**Runtime:** 78 min

**Language:** Farsi

### Leading players

Fatemeh Cherag Akhar	<i>Hava</i>
Hassan Nebhan	<i>Hassan</i>
Shahr Banou Sisizadeh	<i>Mother</i>
Ameneh Passand	<i>Grandmother</i>
Shabnam Toloui	<i>Ahoo</i>
Sirous Kahvarinegad	<i>Husband</i>
Mahram Zeinal Zadeh	<i>Osmann</i>
Norieh Mahigiran	<i>Rival Cyclist</i>
Azizeh Sedighi	<i>Hoorah</i>
Badr Iravani	<i>Young Boy</i>



A still from the shooting of the final segment of *The Day I Became a Woman*

house, not because they are hated but because they are loved – women who have to forego emotional attachments in order to win individual independence and active social positions.” (Marziyeh Meshkini writing about the film on the website at [www.makhmalbaf.com](http://www.makhmalbaf.com))

“Eastern societies face a number of elementary problems in spite of their rich cultural backgrounds and their exotic charm. Being a woman constitutes one of these problems so much so that people begin to worry about a baby girl from the moment she is born, and at times the mother is consoled with the expression of hope that her next baby will be a boy. Women are given minor roles in society, and consequently they are transformed from producers into mere consumers and burdens to the productive segment of the society. That is why the birth of a girl is considered an increase in the number of consumers of the family income.

At the same time, the attitude of society towards women is emotional; women are either mothers or mistresses, and that is why every man tries to gain exclusive possession of his mother and mistress. As a result home becomes the safest place where women can be preserved.

*The Day I Became a Woman* depicts the position of women for whom their gender poses a social problem. The film focuses on the lives of women who are imprisoned in the

*The Day I Became a Woman* is one of the steady stream of films produced by the remarkable ‘Makhmalbaf Film House’. The director Mohsen Makhmalbaf is a self-taught man who emerged as a filmmaker, writer and arts activist after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In 1996 he temporarily abandoned his successful directing career to educate his children at home, opening his own film school. The first to ‘graduate’ was his eldest daughter Samira, whose first two cinema features, *The Apple* (1998) and *Blackboards* (2000), were both shown at Cannes, where she became the youngest director in competition (she was born in 1980).

Marziyeh Meshkini was assistant director on both of Samira’s films. She had married Mohsen Makhmalbaf a few years earlier and so became the third family member to direct. She has since been followed by Maysam and Hana, Mohsen’s son and younger daughter.

There are many interesting aspects of *The Day I Became a Woman*, not least its unusual production background and the commentary it offers on the position of women within Iranian society. The production context is almost unique and it means that Meshkini has not had to face the same obstacles to a directing career as many other women who lack ‘insider’ family support. Of course, there may be other



Marziyeh Meshkini

problems associated with working so closely with a husband and stepchildren, however the Makhmalbaf Film House appears to be a truly co-operative and collaborative venture. Meshkini's statement about the role of women in Iranian society is in some ways reminiscent

of the narratives of those old Hollywood 'women's pictures'. Here are women whose gender is a 'social problem' and who find themselves imprisoned in a role that they would like to break out of. But they recognise that they are imprisoned because they are loved and that to break out will mean an emotional wound.

The 'difference' is perhaps for us as an audience. Do we really understand the situation in which these women find themselves? How do we 'read' the images and sounds? Are we able to overcome the sense of an exotic society and see through it to the story as presented by an Iranian woman (and her husband). Here are some ideas about how the story is being presented to us.

### Location

The film was shot on Kish Island, off the coast of Southern Iran in the Persian Gulf. This setting provides the fishing village for the first story, the coastal plain for the second and the tourist resort associated with Kish International Airport (a major shopping area in a 'Free Trade Zone) in the third story. Iran is a large country with many distinctive geographical regions, all of which may appear as 'exotic' to Western audiences, but which in Iranian terms will have cultural resonance.

Kish offers both the 'traditional' rural culture of the Southern desert region and the sophistication associated with the duty free shops at the airport. The local communities are also more ethnically diverse than in other parts of the country. Many of the cast in the first and third stories are non-actors and they represent a local population that has long had connections with the outside world via the sailors

who manned trading ships from the 14th century onwards and from the oil industry established at the beginning of the 20th century. Marzhei Meshkini points out that the oil drum is a familiar site in all the small communities of the region, being utilised for many purposes in work and play.

### Colour and lighting

The location offers a distinctive filmmaking environment with bright sun, reflected by white sand, blue water and open skies. This offers a number of constraints (too much light) but also creative opportunities in the richness of certain colours. This could lead to an indulgence in the possibilities of the image. The film begins with a long take of a primitive raft with a ragged black sail, behind which is a translucent sea and a bobbing horizon line. What do we make of this as an opening?

### Filmmaking sources

A new filmmaker faced with the task of presenting three seemingly simple stories on screen is able to turn to several existing filmmaking styles or approaches. The Makhmalbaf Film House is an enterprise built on not only a practical knowledge of film production, but also a deep understanding of film culture and film history.

A good starting point would be neo-realism, the film movement associated first with Italian filmmakers of the 1940s. Although neo-realism emerged during the Second World War, and had its roots in French Cinema of the 1930s, the impact on international cinema was primarily the responsibility of filmmakers in the immediate post-war period when facilities, equipment and above all filmstock were in scarce supply. Neo-realism has been defined in a number of ways, notably:

- location shooting;
- use of non-professional actors;
- stories taken from 'everyday life' (i.e. not 'created' as genre stories);
- a commitment to stories that make some kind of social statement.

From this list of features, it is not difficult to see why neo-realist ideas proved so attractive to filmmakers in countries with limited resources and no real infrastructure for commercial filmmaking. In Africa, Latin America, Asia and parts of Europe, neo-realism became an important influence in the 1950s and 1960s and it has continued to 'echo' ever since, re-emerging in much of the 'New Iranian Cinema' of the 1990s.

There has long been a debate about the expressive possibilities of realist staging and cinematography. Just because a filmmaker has little money for props and must shoot on location with natural light, it does

not mean that 'natural' locations cannot be shot so as to create symbolic images or that natural light cannot be 'moulded' to create atmosphere.

Two ideas which might be relevant in considering *The Day I Became a Woman* are surrealism and magic realism. Surrealism was a movement in the arts in the 1920s which erupted in cinema most notably in the work of Luis Buñuel and his collaborator Salvador Dalí on *Un Chien Andalú*. Surrealism suggests that images formed in dreams and other states of consciousness have as much validity as representations of 'everyday reality'. We might want to think about some of the imagery in the second two episodes of *The Day I Became a Woman* in these terms. Whatever the director's intention, cinema audiences without direct knowledge of local conditions are likely to see the race between 'covered' women on bicycles and men on horses as dreamlike. The arrangement of furniture and electrical goods on the beach in the third story has a similar surrealist feel.

'Magic realism' is a more diffuse term, being claimed by different, mostly literary, traditions around the world, but most notably by Latin American literature. Gabriel García Márquez has perhaps been the best known writer to whom the term has been attached. 'Magical realism' has been used to refer to imagery in literature which sees the fantastical presented in a 'dead pan' manner as part of an otherwise realist depiction of a scene. There has been much discussion of the term, some of it negative because it suggests that such literature is perhaps not 'serious' or simply 'exotic'.

A similar set of arguments has been raised in relation to certain types of African Cinema. African filmmakers of the 1960s tended towards a more 'neo-realist' approach, but in the late 1980s and 1990s, some filmmakers produced 'return to source' films. These included elements of traditional culture, with references to folk lore and pre-colonial African spiritual beliefs. Once again there were criticisms of a lack of 'seriousness'. But other critics claimed that these were very modern 'hybrid films' that stood up well against Western films. (Elements of *Rue Cases Negres*, a resolutely realist film in most ways, might also be described in this way.)

We will want to explore the ways in which the seemingly simple aesthetics of *The Day I Became a Woman* work in an international cinema context. Is the film profound or merely exotic? How do we use our understanding of the film's aesthetic in exploring the social issues about women's place in society?

## Resources

The Makhmalbaf Film House has its own website with resources on the individual family members/filmmakers and their films.

<http://www.makhmalbaf.com>

Roy Stafford and Rona Murray 6/11/07