

Screening of Iranian films

Between 14th October and 24th October we screened three films on Iran, Close Up (Kiarastomi), Divorce Iranian Style (Kim Longinetto and Ziba Mir Hosseini) and Leila.

This was a project conceived with two objectives in mind: an attempt to conduct a discussion on Muslim cultures and law without being overwhelmed by the demands of secularism among the Anveshi community; and to bring the members of Nisa (a Muslim women's group that largely consists of madrasa teachers and students) to the secular location of Anveshi, along with Movement for Peace and Justice and COVA. Anveshi collaborated with Nisa and EFLU Film Club for this programme. M.A.Moid translated the background note and the invite into Urdu that we sent to many organizations and departments.

The first film screening had four members from Nisa, two from COVA and others from Anveshi (twelve on the whole, I think). Rajiv Velicheti, from HCU, gave a detailed introduction to the Iranian cinema and its themes. Close Up is known as a classic, short in a semi documentary style, reenacting and shooting the story of real-life deception by a small time printing worker who poses himself as the famous Iranian director Mohsin Makhmalbaf. After the screening, though the audience dwindled to largely Anveshi crowd (as the screening got delayed) there was an interesting discussion: about the way the film shows the Iranian courts and its judges as reasonable and ordinary, the role of performance in court proceedings, the impact of the presence of the camera in shaping the court proceedings shown in the film; and of course, the brilliance of the deceiver who in the end comes out as the intelligent and smart performer, in the court and on camera. It was thought that it may be simplistic to take the Iranian courts portrayed here as 'empirical and factual' but this film should be seen as an interesting attempt by the Iranian cinema to complicate the picture of courts there, through a layered approach to the questions of justice and performance.

For the second film, *Divorce Iranian Style*, there were two screenings, one at EFLU and one at Anveshi. This documentary film, made for BBC in 1998, was set in a family court setting, and documents the proceedings in the court, following six women's cases in detail. The EFLU screening had fifteen to twenty students most of whom did not stay back for a discussion. Two Ph.D students, Swathy and another student had questions to ask about the presence of the Western gaze in the documentary, the similarities between Iranian family courts and here, if any, the history of Iranian revolution, Iranian women's movements, the nature of family laws in Iran etc. The Anveshi screening was also attended by two students from EFLU, one from Iran and one from Yemen, apart from three members of Nisa. There was an interesting exchange after the screening. Both the students drew attention to the fact that this is an old documentary and situation in Iran has changed a lot over the last ten years. Now, the marriage contracts (*nikhanamas*) are being insisted upon by urban middle class women, with provisions of *talaaq* and much increased *meher*, as a measure of protection against divorce induced economic deprivation. Zainab, the Iranian student said that while her mother had to forego *meher* to obtain a *talaaq* twenty years ago, today's women need not. Yemeni student also drew attention to it. Rafat Seema, Noor and Kaneez said they were impressed by the boldness and the fighting spirit of the women shown in the documentary.

The third film was *Leila*, a sombre take on second marriage by Dariush Mehrjui, where the protagonist gets her husband married to another woman under family pressure, even while undergoing enormous pain and suffering. This screening had a good audience, numbering fifteen, at Anveshi. It drew sharp reactions. Lateef Khan commented that no Indian Muslim woman would agree in the manner that *Leila* does in the film, at such cost to her own self. Should we take it as a critical attempt by a film maker to deal with a problem in Iranian culture? The film's politics was problematic, many felt. Madhumeeta commented that while it may have dealt with second marriage as a problem and that too beautifully and in rich detail, when we place the film in a context where Iranian women were fighting for equal rights, it appears dangerously close to be sliding towards a sentimental, and emotional saga.