

Dishonored. Sigrun Norderval and Gard A. Andreassen. 2007. Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films. 52 minutes.

They Call Me Muslim: Two women, two choices about the hijab. Diana Ferrero. 2006. Italy/France/Iran, Subtitled. New York, NY: Women Make Movies. 27 minutes.

ARUSI Persian Wedding. Marjan Tehrani. 2008. US/Iran, Subtitled. New York, NY: Women Make Movies. 63 minutes.

Four Wives – One Man. Nahid Persson. Produced by Setareh Persson and Nahid Persson. 2007.

Sweden/Iran, Subtitled. New York, NY: Women Make Movies. 76 minutes.

Reviewed by Lydia Foerster¹

There is a common thread connecting these four very different documentaries about Muslim women and gender issues in Asia and the Diaspora: the ever-present tension between old and new, memory and hope, tradition and change, East and West. Whatever the language, it's too simplistic to dichotomize. All of these films do their best to mess up the distinctions. The two documentaries about Iran are directed by Iranian-born women who now live in the West. The film about Pakistan begins and ends in New York City (with a Latin soundtrack). In *They Call Me Muslim*, director Diana Ferrero deliberately seeks out non-conforming voices to complicate our stereotypes. But, the tension remains. Whether driven by fascination or fear, these filmmakers wrestle with understanding, confronting those pernicious divisions that just won't go away.

In June of 2002, in a rural area of Pakistan, Mukhtar Mai was the victim of revenge gang-rape. The crime, tacitly sanctioned by a local tribal council, was meant to humiliate Mai's family in retaliation for an incident between her younger brother and the daughter of a powerful neighboring clan. It was expected that Mai would commit suicide after such a violation, but instead she began a four-year struggle for justice in an often corrupt and sexist legal system.

Told in mostly chronological, journalistic style, *Dishonored* uses interviews and voice over to piece together Mai's personal, financial, legal and political obstacles to justice. Interviews with lawyers, officials and representatives of various NGOs comment on her case as it moves from convictions at Anti-Terror court, through appeals and finally Pakistan's Supreme Court.

Though Mai's story is fairly well-known and documented at this writing, the film is a good introduction to the problem of "honor violence" and provides an overview of the many difficult legal, political and social twists and turns surrounding this case. But the film does little to address the emotional and social devastation this form of violence wreaks on women, children and families. Throughout the film, Mai is mostly stoic and quiet. In a lighter moment, Mai smiles as she proudly tells us about *attending* one of the schools she created with the "settlement" money given her by the Pakistani government. In Mai's case, her inability to read the police report she signed contributed to her legal

¹ Lydia Foerster teaches Media Studies at The New School in New York.

difficulties. Mai sees education and literacy for girls and boys as a potential antidote for the violence she suffered.

Dishonored does a very good job, however, of foregrounding the links between activist groups and local and international media in pressuring for social change. The local Imam, who first speaks out against the rape, brings Mai's story to the attention of journalist Mureed Abbas. Within days of the report in a regional paper, the story is headline news in Pakistan, fueling public protests. The BBC and *Time* magazine pick up the account and international NGOs throw in their support. By 2005, *Glamour* magazine has named Mai one of their "Women of the Year" and in 2006, Mai published *DÉSHONORÉE*, her million-selling memoir, in France.

Of course, none of this could have happened without Mai's courageous willingness to take on her attackers via the national legal system rather than suffering at the whim of local feudal bodies and traditions. Perhaps most powerfully, Mai's actions reframe women as citizens rather than mere repositories of family "honor." "I think that violence against women is not only a crime against women," she says, "but a crime against the state."

In *They Call Me Muslim*, director Diana Ferrero interviews two young women about their relationship with the hijab: Syrian born Samah Mazounian, an 18 year old pharmacology student in Paris, and "K," a stay-at-home mom in Tehran.

Samah's friends are expelled because they refuse to remove the hijab at school after France's ban on wearing religious garb in 2004. Samah, who complies by constantly taking her headscarf off and on, sees the rule as a violation of her identity. Because she has *chosen* to wear the hijab, Samah sees it as a symbol of personal, religious and even physical freedom. The headscarf "allows" women freedom, she tells us, and serves as a protection from men's looks "because a woman is a precious object to be protected."

This is a view shared, in some sense, by K in Tehran, who begrudgingly covers her head in public with a fleece cap from The Gap rather than wear the "mandatory" hijab. "As a person who wants to live in this country I have to wear it, but I wear it in my way," she says. However, at home, away from the eyes of Revolutionary Guards, K walks around in short shorts and a tank top, smokes and plays cards. "Home is safety," she tells us. Controversy over the hijab is nothing new in Iran. In 1936, the hijab was banned. As of 1979, as part of the Islamic Revolution, the hijab is now *required*. The official punishment for not wearing it is death.

By juxtaposing Samah's and K's stories, it's clear that Ferrero's argument is feminist. A clip towards the end of the film shows 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi at a podium (not wearing hijab). "As I disagree with forcing the women to wear hijab, I also disagree with forcing them to take it off," she says. "Is there any law to tell men to shave or grow their beard?" Ferrero's aim to give voice to the minority view in each country is perhaps more interesting than the film itself. She had some initial difficulties finding women willing to talk on camera. But the short does challenge media stereotypes and moves the conversation about hijab beyond religion and state to issues such as identity, choice and safety, which could serve as a useful catalyst for classroom discussion.

In *ARUSI Persian Wedding*, New York photographer Alex and his red-haired American wife Heather plan a simple Persian wedding ceremony in Iran. Having left the

country as small children in 1977, Alex and his sister, filmmaker Marjan Tehrani, decide to document the trip.

Near the beginning of the film, George Bush's infamous "axis of evil" speech is intercut with Heather posing for passport pictures. This sets up a tension between mutually exclusive impressions of Iran: the fear and dread promulgated by the Bush Administration and the playfully romantic expectations of Alex and Heather. As the couple prepare for their trip, Tehrani weaves old and new home movies with news and stock footage to lay bare the tangles of personal and political history. Alex's father, an Iranian, also married a woman from the US and took her to Iran in the 70's. Heather's father worries that the couple will be targets for terrorists.

A tense family discussion about US-Iranian relations threatens to spoil a pre-trip get together when the couple's fathers meet for the first time. But Tehrani uses the uncomfortable dinner party to shift into black-and-white history lesson, outlining the CIA's involvement in Iran's 1953 coup.

Tehrani foreshadows Heather's good-natured cross-cultural awkwardness when the couple applies for an Iranian visa. Heather has "become a Muslim" and the couple is married by a cleric at the Iranian embassy in Washington DC. As part of the proceedings, Heather must ask Alex for something. "Just... take care of me and your family," she half-laughs uncomfortably. When the translator tells her she has to ask for some *thing*, like a Holy Book, she tries again. "Ok, the Holy Book and a house." The cleric then wonders if Alex can afford a house and suggests a trip to Mecca instead. "I agree," she says seriously. "A trip to Mecca."

But once Heather and Alex get to Iran, the tensions all but dissolve. The couple is greeted at the airport by Tehrani's large extended family. And the only real cultural conflicts are over Heather's clothing: her bright pink, attention-attracting headscarf and her too plain wedding skirt and top. The simple ceremony they planned turns into something more elaborate and friends of the family press Heather to find a "more chic" wedding dress.

After the tension-wrought anticipation of the first half of the film, *ARUSI* gradually turns into the lyrical honeymoon travelogue of a happy newlywed couple. And one of the most satisfying aspects of the film is this gentle tonal shift to apolitical tourist shots of picturesque landscapes and historical attractions. As the couple journey across Iran, they chat with a photographer, have tea in a village, and speak English with a crowd of schoolgirls. Tehrani offers a glimpse of Iran not often seen in Western media and in stark contrast to the vision of "evil" conjured at the beginning of the film. Ultimately, however, *ARUSI* strikes more of a chord as a family album. Memory, history, distance and loss mix with hope, new connections and the desire to go "home," wherever that is.

"The only thing my son thinks about is pussy!" blurts Heda's mother at the beginning of *Four Wives – One Man*. Documentarian Nahid Persson ("*Prostitution: Behind the Veil*" (2004) "*The Queen and I*" (2008)) who fled from Iran to Sweden after the Islamic Revolution focuses her camera this time on a polygamist family in Iran's rural north. Heda, the *One Man* of the film's title keeps house (houses actually) with 4 wives, 20 children, a cantankerous aged mother, numerous uncounted grandchildren and stepchildren and a dwindling herd of sheep. The film, however, is not so much *about* Iran or polygamy as it is an exploration of the women, their relationships, and the forces that keep them together and apart.

As you might expect in this situation, the wives bicker, their mother-in-law rants and Heda alternates swagger and smirk, often pitting the women against each other. But the raw honesty and access Persson achieves is remarkable. Wives Farang, Goli, Shahparb, and Ziba giggle, whisper and cry for Persson, as they might for a trusted friend with a home movie camera. *Four Wives* has none of the jiggly production value of a YouTube video, however. This is a refreshingly beautiful and carefully crafted film with a quietly melancholy soundtrack. The intimacy Persson evokes is all the more noteworthy considering how gorgeous it looks.

The narrative thread of the film follows the wives' shifting concerns and alliances as they jockey for position and security in the household. In one emblematic scene, the women quarrel over portions of meat. Ziba, wife number four, struggles with sharing her new husband, prays to get pregnant and grows increasingly worried by Heda's waning affections. And with ever more mouths to feed, the stress of limited resources begins to creep in. Heda sells some sheep, then the thrasher, then some land to keep the family afloat.

All is not gloomy, however. In one scene, the entire family crowds into a mini-bus for a trip to the seashore. And there are moments of tenderness between Heda and his children. But all of the characters, seemingly fixed in their beautiful but cloistered landscape, pray for just one more thing to be happy: another child, another house, another wife.

As the story progresses, Heda manages tensions by building separate homes for his wives, as if isolating them further could mitigate their palpable loneliness. Literacy is an issue here as is of course, economic and social independence – without them, the women are trapped. And in the end, the overall message is one of boredom – the utter, interminable, heart-wrenching despair that comes from having nothing to look forward to and no one to share it with.