



Haram Yemen: The Hidden Half Speaks. Fibi Kraus and Gudrun Torrubia.

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Frank, Intimate, and Often Poignant Self-Portrayals

At the beginning of this film, before the opening scenes and credits, the screen reads: "This film was requested by the Women's National Committee of Sana'a in order to make Yemeni men and politicians aware of the reality of <cite>their</cite> women" (emphasis in original). <p> In "Haram Yemen" we hear some voices of the "hidden half" of the Yemeni population, women for whom virtue (and their family's honor) demands their near invisibility in the public sphere, women who have had to struggle to be able to study, to work, and to improve their own lives and others' lives. The film cuts back and forth among the narratives of five main characters: Aisha, Amal, Hamida, Halima, and Ali. The women (and some of their family members) tell of personal experiences, shaped by their social background and economic circumstances, and influenced by their natal families, spouses and communities. Ali relates the difficulties facing a young man in Yemen who wants to get married. <p> Ali's account reflects the social strictures that the women have experienced as limiting their autonomy and challenging their very being. Certain themes recur. The social ethos in which family honor is embodied in women places severe restrictions on women, particularly since female respectability is vulnerable to community opinion. The result is widespread social pressure against women studying, working, or being active outside the home. Women lack autonomy within the natal family and within marriage, often having little say in whom and when they marry. The risk of shame accruing to family honor through misbehavior, real or imagined, impels families to marry their daughters young. Some fathers exploit a young daughter's marriage to command a high <cite>mahr</cite> (bride-payment, which in the-

ory belongs to the bride, but in reality may be appropriated by her father). Women end up dependent and vulnerable to criticism from family and strangers. <p> Aisha, a medical doctor specialized in gastroenterology, relates her struggles to pursue her education in a Tihama community where girls did not study. She was first sent to school with her small brother to protect him from bullies. Later, when her father was working in Saudi Arabia, she persuaded her mother to allow her to attend school during his absences. Her father felt that girls' education was contrary to "tribal values" and he was influenced by criticism of his daughter's studying. When he learned of her covert studies, he threatened to kill her; yet one reason for his anger was the fear that her studying would provoke someone to harm or kill her. She considered escaping her father's control by marrying. She even considered "getting rid of him," but was deterred by the prospect of eternal damnation. <p> Eventually she persuaded her father to allow her to study, with him keeping a close eye on her. He saw that she behaved well and excelled in her studies and his trust grew. His pride in her success led him to enable girls in the area to study by exerting influence on the men fearing that change. One of the high points in the film is a scene of Aisha and her father, in which he expresses his pride in her success and her activities, to her palpable joy. <p> Amal, a human rights activist, reveals her dream of women's freedom, with women and men working together to create a better life for all. Her NGO, Sisters' Arabian Forum for Human Rights, intervenes in cases of domestic violence, works for laws that guarantee women the right to receive their inheritance, and supports women's right to education, work, economic independence, and autonomy. <p> In

a measured manner, Amal frankly shares her marital experiences. When she was seven, she was “married off” to her father’s friend’s son. That marriage was later dissolved, without consummation or cohabitation, for reasons not specified, perhaps because her mother opposed it. Later, she married a suitor of her choice, with whom she had a son, but that marriage failed due to her husband’s inability to trust that she had been a virgin at marriage. Neither she nor he realized that not every virgin’s defloration results in bloodied sheets. <p> After a problematic period as a single divorcee, Amal married a man whom she admired (although she considered herself unworthy to be his wife). After initial difficulties establishing intimacy, they built a loving relationship based on shared values and ideals. Devastated by his untimely death, Amal continues her work, living for her two sons and to honor her husband’s memory. Her brave account of her intimate life and its difficulties recalls the venerable feminist adage, “the personal is the political.” <p> An outspoken and strong woman, Hamida has raised her ten surviving children by selling goods in the market and by running a restaurant. Her husband had no authority to prevent her working, as he did not work and support the family himself. Although she met with societal reprobaton for her activities, she ignored it, confident that working hard to raise her family was an honorable endeavor. When opponents blocked access to her restaurant, she moved and opened another one. Against social convention and against all odds, this remarkable woman supported her family and succeeded in business through hard work and stubborn perseverance. <p> Halima too strives to support her children, defying convention by selling in the market and peddling goods to ladies door-to-door. Hampered by illiteracy and innumeracy, she perseveres in order to provide her daughters with the education to have a better life than hers. She was married young to a widower with five children, without her consent. When she ran away from her husband and returned home, her father beat her, then returned her to her husband, who beat her. Her father obtained a divorce for her, for his own reasons, and after bearing the widower’s child, she was married to another man. She professes to be satisfied with her current husband, although she is shy to say so on camera. She returns to her home

village, where family members and others in the community contradict one another on the question of whether a girl should consent to a marriage. Some say the witnesses to the marriage should go to a girl to ascertain her consent. But in a men’s gathering, the last word seemed to be that the girl should do what her father wants, and that a mother who even suggests an alternative match is inviting violence. <p> Ali, a young bachelor, chafes against the ways that Yemeni social mores limit his possibilities of marriage. He deplores the fact that women are treated like objects, as evinced by the \$5,000-8,000 required as <cite>mahr</cite>—much more than he and many young men can afford. And he is frustrated by the reality that women focus on how much a man is able to pay, as opposed to other qualities. He disparages the pervasive preference of men to marry an uneducated simple village girl who will stay home rather than working, or even being seen in public. He fantasizes about a marriage based on mutual understanding, a life shared by partners, but finds that possibility precluded by a society in which a woman is not supposed to “go out.” <p> The interwoven stories illustrate, through real people reflecting on their life experiences, general problems faced by women (and men) in Yemen, with its particular renditions of tribal custom, local traditions, and Islamic law. The film may not manage to fulfill its expressed mandate of raising the consciousness of Yemen men and politicians, through no fault of its own. But it should serve as an excellent tool for those wanting to learn about women and society in Yemen, or more generally about gender issues in the Middle East, the Muslim world, or the developing world. <p> Since the film is presented through the voices of its subjects, without an “omniscient” explanatory voiceover, it leads the viewer to empathize with the personal struggles, successes, and ongoing dilemmas of individuals of very different backgrounds and experiences. In this way the film avoids facile generalizations about Islam and about gender issues. It instead presents a multifaceted and nuanced view of individual lives and the social system, circumstances, and accidents of fate that shape those lives. The filmmakers did an outstanding job of eliciting the frank, intimate, and often poignant self-portrayals of the Yemeni participants who courageously shared their thoughts and lives with us.

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