

An Untold Horror: A Review of 'The Stoning of Soraya M.'

It took an independent film company to make a movie that exposes the cultural oppression of women in the Middle East.

Millions of women around the world live under the ironfisted rule of male domination. They are gang-raped in Latin America; their genitals are mutilated in parts of Africa; they are forced to wear burkas in Afghanistan; they are sold as sex slaves in Thailand; they are denied education in India. Yet most westerners are oblivious to this cruel injustice. It's out of sight, out of mind.

But now, thanks to an independent film company and a director who cares about issues that Hollywood ignores, we have a movie that exposes the plight of women in Iran. It hit theaters last weekend, just a few weeks after Iran's authoritarian government came under international scrutiny.

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I must first warn you: *The Stoning of Soraya M.* is based on a true story. A woman is executed publicly by stoning—and, yes, her death is portrayed in a graphic scene. Obviously this movie is not for children. But if you care about the global

oppression of women, or the current crisis of freedom in Iran, this movie is a must-see.

The story begins when a French-Iranian journalist named Freidoune Sahebjam (played by Jim Caviezel, who was *Jesus in The Passion of the Christ*) has car trouble outside a rural Iranian village. We are introduced to a woman named Zahra (Shohreh Aghdashloo) who is gathering bones from a stream and burying them while dogs watch.

While Sahebjam waits for his car to be repaired, Zahra begs him to listen to her story while the men of the village try to shoo her away. Sahebjam records her testimony on a cassette player. That tape becomes the basis of both his 1994 book and this movie.

Zahra is distraught because the men of her village (she calls them “devils”) have killed her niece, Soraya (Mozhan Marn). Through flashbacks we learn that Soraya’s immoral husband wants to put her away so he can marry a 14-year-old girl. He has also turned his two sons against their mother but shows no interest in his two young daughters. When Soraya dares to defy her husband’s scheme, he trumps up false adultery charges against her with the help of the local Islamic mullah.

Zahra tries to stop the madness, but in the end the villagers commit the Islamic version of a lynching. Along the way we learn how thick anti-woman attitudes are in this part of the world.

“Women now have no voices,” Zahra says at one point. We see how Iran’s women, under the regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini, were forced to live in prisons of silence and were valued only as sex objects and domestic servants.

The 20-minute stoning sequence is horrible. (I expect some comparisons to *The Passion of the Christ*, since Stephen McEveety produced both films). But if you close your eyes during some parts, don’t miss how various villagers—including

even Soraya's two sons—participate in her execution. You'll find it difficult to forget the way young men in the village click their rocks together while they wait for the signal to kill.

The triumph of this film lies in the character of Zahra, who ends up telling the whole world about a horrible injustice that men tried to hide in a dark corner of Iran. Aghdashloo, the actress who plays her, is equally triumphant: She seethes onscreen with righteous rage against an unfair system. We see the story from her viewpoint, and we find ourselves cheering for her as she bravely confronts the men who have the power to stone her along with her niece.

An Oscar nominee, Aghdashloo is an Iranian-born actress who has told reporters she hopes this film will help the cause of freedom in Iran. She told the *Orlando Sentinel* that she has seen video footage of a real stoning that took place in Iran, and she wants to stop such violence, even if it means that the world's image of Iran might be tarnished in the process.

Said Aghdashloo: "At the end of the day, I think about that woman, sitting alone in her cell, waiting to be stoned. I must stand with her and not worry about Iran's image."

Some movies are purely entertainment. *The Stoning of Soraya M.* is not that. It is artfully filmed, yet in the end this movie is meant to educate us—and hopefully inspire us to cry out for justice against all forms of gender oppression. It is the Christian community's job to do just that.

The Stoning of Soraya M. is in English and Farsi, with subtitles. It is rated R for a scene of brutal violence.

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