Iran's Runaway Girls Challenge the Old Rules

Runaway, a documentary film directed by Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, was shot in late 2000 in Tehran, and is set in Rayhaneh House, a shelter for runaway girls. This film is a sequel to their earlier film Divorce Iranian Style.

Runaway shows how Iranian women are learning to challenge the old rules, and how rapidly their country is changing. The film follows the stories of five teenagers, exploring their longing for freedom, their hopes for a brighter future, and their experiences of society's double rules and standards when it comes to gender rights.

The film portrays the courage and resourcefulness of the rebellious new generation of Iranian women. It opens with a 14-year-old teenage girl who has run away from home. She is not new to Rayhaneh nor are her grievances unique; they are shared by many runaway girls in contemporary Iran who feel that they have little freedom to do what they want in life, that their parents do not understand them.

Then come the stories of the film’s five main characters. Manayam, a boisterous 12-year-old from Doroud, a small town in the west, far from Tehran. She ran away from her abusive brother. Setaareh’s family broke up after her mother’s death; her father became a drug dealer and prostituted her to feed his addiction, then disappeared, most likely arrested. Setaareh became homeless, was picked up by the police, then after some time in prison was sent to Rayhaneh to rebuild her life. At the shelter, 19-year-old Setaareh starts to reinvent herself, and comes a source of strength and comfort to other girls. A close friendship develops between her and 17-year-old Parisa, who, the counsellors suspect, is not revealing her true identity. Indeed, it turns out that far from being without family as she claimed, she was married. Parisa turned to drugs when her husband and her husband’s family, who desperately need her, despite having abused her.

Making connections:

Facing reality

The problem of girls suffering abuse at home and running away from intolerable situations is neither new in Iran nor confined to particular sections of Iranian society. It is an age-old and deep-rooted phenomenon that until recently was shrouded in silence and ignored by the authorities. But the creation of the Rayhaneh House in October 1999 as a temporary shelter for runaway girls, and the media attention this centre has received, are transforming the issue from a taboo subject into a pressing social problem.

The makers are at the root of this transformation. First, a new generation of girls recognize that they have rights and are no longer prepared to put up with domestic abuse. By running away from home, these girls both register a protest and seek to change their situation. Secondly, the unexpected victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election, and the birth of a reformist movement, also brought a less ideological approach to social problems, which has gradually opened a space for a public debate on many taboo subjects.

The very existence of Rayhaneh, its philosophy and its strategy for dealing with the problem of runaway girls run parallel to the history of the reformist movement which found a voice in the structure of power after the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997. Since then the reformists, who enjoy massive popular support (as shown in the free elections conducted since), have been locked in a fierce political battle with their opponents, who have so far managed to block most of their legislative moves. At the heart of the battle lies one of the main ideological conflicts that is now being fought in Iran – over the very notion of ‘rights’. The early discourse of the Islamic Republic, premised on the notion of duty (haya) as understood and constructed in Islamic jurisprudence, is now challenged by a reformist discourse premised on the notion of haqq (right) as advocated by modern democratic ideals.

Runaway gives us a glimpse of how this wider ideological struggle is playing itself out in the lives of individuals. It is the story of a struggle for dignity, respect and human rights. As each story unfolds in front of the camera, we learn about the gender biases, contradictions and double standards of the patriarchal culture in which these young girls live. We come to appreciate how strong and resourceful they are, how much they are needed by their families, and yet how, in the name of preserving the ‘family honour’ and ‘fulfilling their duties’, they are deprived of basic human rights. We also learn about the centre’s success in eliciting their conflicting judgements and decisions about the girls; we learn about the world outside the centre, which both girls and counsellors refer to as ‘full of wolves’. It is a world that is changing fast: old rules and boundaries are breaking down and the new ones are hazy and fragile.

Making connections:

The by 2000 there were 22 centres for runaway girls nationwide. Rayhaneh is the only one that offers media access. The recent run by the Social Services Organization, impose a strict ban. Aware of the important role of media, Rayhaneh is keen to have its stories told. It is pleasing to note that its human rights discourse has made its impact in reformist Iran. Similarly, the fact that unlike in the case of Divorce we did not have to go through an ordinance to get our permit to film tells something of the ways in which the reformist government of Khatami has been successful in creating a more open society in Iran. This time our main negotiation was with Rayhaneh and Mrs Shiri, whose principal task was to protect the girls from the film crew.