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Sonita

Abstract

This is a film review of *Sonita* (2015) directed by Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami.

Author Notes

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.

Sonita
(2015)

Directed by Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami



Sonita was the 2016 Sundance Winner of the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize for Documentary and the 2016 Sundance Audience Award for World Cinema Documentary

The documentary *Sonita* follows the dreams of an 18 year old Afghan girl living in Iran; Sonita Alizadeh wants to be a rapper. She regularly attends classes and works at the Tehran Society for Working and Street Children. When she's not working, she spends her time trying to get settled in Iran but she has no documents to prove who she is. The rest of her free time is spent writing lyrics for rap songs.

As we are introduced to more of the young Afghan girls at the Society, we are let into their private lives, dreams and fears. They all know that Afghan girls are married off for money. And when that happens, they cannot attend school any longer. They become the property of men. While

waiting for these events to transpire, these young Afghan girls have therapy sessions to deal with the traumatic events that have led them to Tehran. Sonita acts out a scene where she escapes from Afghanistan and is almost killed crossing the border with her sister. Her trauma is visceral.

Sonita also wants to form a band but it's impossible for women to be solo singers publicly in Iran. The fact that she has no authorization to be in Iran and no papers makes her a risky investment for music agents. No one seems to want to help Sonita become a rap star. What is so important about this documentary is the message that Sonita wants to put into her music; that forced marriage is not in the Qur'an – "the Qur'an never said that women are for sale" (Sonita's lyrics). It is a bastardization of Shari'ah law, that men (and her mother) are forcing her into a marriage specifically to sell her off to the highest bidder, so that her brother can have money for his own dowry because he wants to get married. The only way he can get enough money is to sell his sister into marriage.

Halfway through the documentary the director, Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami, finds out that Sonita's mother has come to Tehran to take her daughter home for marriage. The director, during the debut showing of the documentary at Sundance, said she feared losing her story, so she paid Sonita's mother \$2000 to let her stay in Tehran for another six months. After Sonita gets the documentary director to make a video of her song, the director enters the video into a contest and Sonita wins for best female rapper. This gives Sonita a new chance – Wasatch Academy in Utah offers Sonita a scholarship to make music and she eventually flees the trapped life she foresaw for herself. Her final dream is to become an attorney specializing in human rights law so that she can help end child marriage.

Sonita examines the harrowing life of young girls in Afghanistan, who are forced to leave their families to grow up alone in strange cities, and who are carving out new and perhaps

dangerous dreams for themselves within a strict and fundamentalist culture that still views women as property. It also shows us that the message Sonita carries through her music is a powerful force in itself.