

Film Review: Afghan tale of three troubled pregnancies fails to deliver



VENICE: Dubbed Afghanistan's first female director, Sahraa Karimi grew up in Iran with her refugee parents, and later studied cinema in Slovakia.

With 30 shorts and a couple of documentaries under her belt, she travelled this year to the Venice Film Festival with her debut fiction feature, "Hava, Maryam, Ayesha."

Studying and making movies in Europe was not her scene. "Somehow, from a storytelling perspective, I don't belong to that part of the world," she said, recalling her days in Slovakia. "I belong to Afghanistan."

She returned to Kabul to shoot "Hava, Maryam, Ayesha," which was produced by Katayoon Shahabi of Noori Pictures that once helped introduce Iranian directors such as Asghar Farhadi and Mohammad Rasoulof to the world.

In her film, Karimi profiles the lives of three young Afghan women, linked only by problems with the men in their lives.

Hava's (Arezoo Ariapoor) husband is callous to the point of being cruel, and her only comfort is talking to the baby in her womb. But when it stops kicking, she panics.

Maryam (Fereshta Afshar) is a popular television news reporter who wants to divorce her philandering husband. However, he insists on giving their marriage one more chance, and Maryam finds out she is pregnant.

Another expectant mother, 18-year-old Ayesha (Hasiba Ebrahimi), comes from a middleclass family but is left with no choice but to marry her cousin after being dumped by her cowardly boyfriend.

The three stories, while seemingly interesting, fail to engage because there is hardly any dramatic curve in them.

Possibly the only high point about the movie was Karimi's relaying of the real-life tales she drew from women during her travels as a UNICEF representative. The experience was cathartic for many.

"Women don't share their secret lives with their families or their communities, because they're scared of rumors and gossip," said Karimi. But with the female director, they felt comfortable and began to speak "about their suffering, wishes, and dreams."

The more difficult part for Karimi was the shoot itself. The crew had to film under trying conditions with at least four bombs exploding in and around Kabul. But she labored on.

This probably prevented her from getting better technical results from an interesting concept, but the film could still have been pepped up with livelier storytelling.
