

Film Review: ‘Beauty and the Dogs’ takes hard look at an unfeeling society



CHENNAI: A brutal title, “Beauty and the Dogs” is an electric French-Tunisian drama by Kaouther Ben Hania (“Imams Go to School,” “Zaineb Hates the Snow”), which has been entered as Tunisia’s submission for the best foreign-language film at the 2019 Academy Awards. Although the film is yet to earn a nomination, it is a powerful piece of cinema that deserves recognition.

Based on a real-life incident in 2012, the movie begins at sunset and ends at sunrise and zooms in on a woman traumatized by an unfeeling society. A rather weak script, but bolstered by a strong, moving story mounted on lovely long takes, Hania’s creation is an unflinching look at how a young woman who is raped by a policeman fights a degenerate system.

Hania does not sensationalize and focuses on the aftermath of the horrifying incident when her protagonist, Mariam (Mariam Al Ferjani), doggedly pursues the villainous cop, who has all the muscle power and support of his superiors. They try every trick to derail Mariam’s grit and determination.

The movie begins on a note of fun with Mariam attending a college party at a Tunis disco. After a mild flirtation with Youssef (Ghanem Zrelli), the two go for a walk on the beach, where she is raped. We only see Mariam running with Youssef at her heels, and we get a feeling that he is chasing her. But no, she is running away in desperation.

“Beauty and the Dogs” is a hard critique of an unfeeling society. Even a woman police officer that Mariam approaches is uncaring and, worse, throws her back into the den of dogs, so to speak. Earlier, a female attendant at a clinic where Mariam goes for a mandatory physical examination seems contemptuous. The film is littered with points of horrific humiliation for Mariam, something which leads to audience sympathy staying unwaveringly strong.

The film is especially important in the current #MeToo climate, where an international discussion on sexual harassment and rape is taking place from Hollywood to Bollywood but has yet to shake up the Middle East.
