

Egyptian cinema at Cairo Festival explores society's ills

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Clash unfolds after the 2013 riots.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

I have always made it a point to watch the local cinema when I go to a movie festival. When I went to the Tokyo International Film Festival, I tried to watch as many Japanese movies as possible. And when I covered the ongoing Cairo International Film Festival, I concentrated on Egyptian fare. This year, Cairo had a special section in it with eight titles that also included the opening night movie.

And Egyptian cinema may not be high on production values, but it is rooted in realism, and it examines society's ills. Much like it is now in India with the currency crisis hitting the poor hard, Egypt – whose historic civilisation may be compared with India's – has also been plagued by problems aplenty. As the noted Egyptian film journalist and critic, Salah Hashem, told me the other day, "The hoarding and resultant shortage of essentials like rice and sugar have messed up life in my country. What can a poor man do if he cannot have these basic food items... Rice is a staple diet here in Egypt."

And, many of the eight titles in the section called New Egyptian Cinema talk about the community's trying times that began with the first revolution in Egypt in 2011, and which probably worsened after the second in 2013. The movies knock you out with powerful punches aimed at the administration. Told through everyday incidents, these films stay with you long after the curtains have come down.

Director Hala Khalil's *Nawara* sets the story after the 2011 uprising, focussing on an almost angelic maid who works for a rich, politically connected family in one of Cairo's gated communities. The maid, *Nawara* (played by Menna Shalabi), has a very tough life. Though married for five years to *Aly* (Ameer Salah Eldin), they have not been able to consummate their relationship, because they have no place to live together. One is told that this is a common situation in Egypt – a theme which has for long been discussed in Egyptian novels and movies.

A typical day in *Nawara's* life begins early. She has to fill water from a community tap and visit her father-in-law suffering from cancer (and sprawled in a hospital corridor waiting for a bed), before heading off to work. She has to change several public buses before she can finally enter her workplace – where fresh misery awaits her in the form of an unfriendly dog. It barks the life out of a frightened *Nawara*.

Khalil draws a disturbing comparison between *Nawara* and her rich employers – whose connections with Hosni Mubarak's inner circle entitle them to an opulent lifestyle which includes a swanky mansion, complete with a swimming pool and fresh food – a part of which goes to the dog, *Buch*. In contrast, *Nawara's* life is one long road of grinding poverty.

The film tells us through posters and graffiti and small talk how the rich are fleeing the country after the revolution, and how the new rulers have promised to credit a substantial amount in each bank account once they get hold of the money stashed away in overseas banks (Seems to ring a bell, does it not?).

Finally, *Nawara's* life takes a dramatic turn when the rich family escapes, leaving behind its mansion in her care. Days later, a phone call from the mistress gives *Nawara* an unbelievably good news which she hopes will solve all her problems. But then destiny has other things in store for her, and in a scene that is awfully distressing, *Khalil* shows us how the poor have to pay for the crimes of the wealthy.

In his latest outing, *Clash*, Egyptian helmer Mohamed Diab lets us witness his country's turbulent history from the inside of a van! *Clash* opened *A Certain Regard* at Cannes last May.

But unlike *Nawara*, *Clash* unfolds after the 2013 riots – when the Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Mursi, was overthrown by the Egyptian military after he had been in power for a year, a year that saw so much of bloodshed and upheaval.

At Cannes, Diab told the media that "I wanted to make a movie on the revolution since the very first day of the uprising. But things were going so fast that by the time I would put down an idea on paper, the scene changed. In 2013, my brother came up with a brilliant theme: place different kinds of people in a van and let them spend a whole day together inside it."

We see in *Clash* a police van moving through the streets of Cairo. A number of people are arrested and thrown inside the van, and as it keeps travelling through demonstrations, the "prisoners" are thoroughly perplexed. Initially, these men want to escape, but when they see the tension outside mounting, they decide that it is, after all, safer to be inside the van.

Clash conveys all too clearly how euphoric joy – which one saw at the start of the Arab Spring when people hoped that things would change dramatically for the better – has now given way to fear and uncertainty. But *Clash* ultimately is a poignant reminder of how humanism transcends political evil and greed.

We see this in *Clash*, and we see this in *Nawara*. As Hashem remarked, "People in Egypt are very patient, and have a strong feeling of kinship." True to this, I remember a scene from *Nawara* where the community chips in to help her father-in-law when he needs money for an operation.

Kamla Abuzekri's *A Day for Women* explores the social, emotional and psychological consequences of opening up a swimming pool exclusively for women every Sunday in a disadvantaged Egyptian neighbourhood, *Abuzekri* takes us inside the psyche of a nation still steeped in male chauvinism. Seen through the eyes of three women – each fighting her own demons – the society seems like a harsh bargain for their sex – with men even resenting a wee bit of independence that the local coach at the swimming pool offers to the ladies.

While one of the women has been pushed by economic deprivation into modelling in the buff ("Yet I have remained a virgin in all these years with men refusing to even touch me," she rues), the second is ill-treated by her brother-in-law even as she grapples with the heart-rending tragedy of having lost her husband and child in a ferry accident. And when she finds peace and solace in the warm embrace of a man, all hell breaks loose. The third is a young girl – teased and taunted by the locals as one with a low IQ, but she is determined to chase her dream. And what is that? To get into a swimming costume and splash about in the pool – and she does precisely that, eventually swimming like a professional.

And the men there go to a nasty extent to stop what they perceive as women's liberation, which comes floating in the waters of the pool. The men sneak into the changing room as the women are out frolicking in the water and escape with their clothes – leading to embarrassing moments in a country where a

woman's modesty is equated with her chastity.

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