

# Film Review: Powerful critique of male dominance does Arab cinema proud



VENICE: Saudi film director Shahad Ameen's first feature, "Scales" (Sayidat Al-Bahr), had its world premiere in the Critics' Week at the Venice Film Festival last week. Truly arthouse fare in luminous monochrome, taken mostly in close-ups and medium shots, the movie tells us a fairy tale that is rather darker and more dystopian than Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood. Turning her 2013 short, "Eye & Mermaid," into subtle but unmistakable critique of imposing patriarchal power, she shoots her work on a rugged, visually arresting Oman coastline.

"Scales" is inspired by folk tales and Arabic culture's incredibly rich stories, and is set in a superstitious fishing community where a man's word is law, convention and custom. A cruel practice requires each family to sacrifice its firstborn daughter to sea monsters. Starting on a note of magic realism, with images accentuated in black and white, the movie opens on a night of the full moon. Muthanaha (Yaqoub Alfarhan) stands on the sea shore holding his newborn baby girl, Hayat, but does not have the heart to obey the village diktat and drown her in the waters infested by monsters.

“Scales” moves on 13 years to show a young and pretty Hayat (Baseema Hajjar) — who bears some features of a mermaid, hence the title of the movie — counting the days until her mother gives birth to her second child. If it is a girl, Hayat will live. But if it is a boy, she cannot escape this time around and would have to give herself up to the marine monsters.

It is clear what Jeddah-born Ameen is aiming at. As she said in an interview, “it is very important for us to stop victimizing women. It is very important for young girls to have a hero to look up to. It is the first time ever, I think in cinema, that we are going to see a 13-year-old Saudi or Khaleeji girl... be awesome.”

And the mermaid has been used very effectively as a metaphor for a woman who is strong-willed and who has the guts to walk a path less trodden. Hayat has all this, an epitome of rebelliousness who chooses to fight male domination. A 15-year-old big screen novice, Hajjar has us riveted with her brooding expressions against the background score by Mike and Fabien Kourtzer.

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