Hard Soft by Manohar Khushalani



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Filmmakers are trying to understand the real intentions of America in its 'war on terror' in the post September 11 world

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There has been a perceptible shift lately in the subjects chosen by politically inclined filmmakers around the world. Cinema, of the kind not created for pure escapism, often reflects the prevalent political and social climate. So in the 1950s and 1960s, many filmmakers focused on the horrors of the holocaust, the problems of newly independent post-colonial countries and, of course, the Cold War, among other things. In the 1970s and 1980s filmmakers concentrated on realities like the Vietnam war and the various proxy wars being fought by former rival U.S. allies. In the 1990s, the drug trade in South America, the first Gulf war and the conflict in Yugoslavia provided fodder for politically and socially aware cinema.

Now, in this post-September 11 world, filmmakers are trying to understand what the true goals of the U.S. really are in its "war on terror." Does the U.S. want to establish democracy which is not on its side? Or is it genuinely wishing the world of those who really pose a threat to humankind? And is Israel's war a just war?

The 34th International Film Festival of India showcased several films on these subjects.

Samira Makhmalbaf's Kandahar, an Iranian film set in post-Taliban Afghanistan, Aghaleh (Neighbor), a young refugee woman, dreams of becoming the President of Afghanistan. Her witness, a poet and a fellow refugee, puts up campaign posters for her in an abandoned palace where the only residents are rats. The film lampoons the extravagance of western-style democracy in a ravaged land where peace is still a dream. The film also depicts the plight of refugees who have to fight for small comforts such as a few square feet of covered space and a few drops of water. In an arresting final sequence, Aghaleh and her father meet an old man in the desert who says he is going to Kandahar to avenge Mullah Omar. "Too late," he is informed, "the Americans have already overthrown him."

The Olive Harvest is Palestinian director Hanan Elias's first feature film. Elias has made several documentaries about Palestinian women. On the face of it, The Olive Harvest is a romantic triangle involving two brothers and a woman. Mazen has just returned to his village from an Israeli prison and his brother Tahsy has arranged a 'hero's welcome' for him. Soon, Mazen falls in love with Randa, his brother's fiancé. Randa's patriotic father pushes Mazen, the freedom fighter as a groom for his daughter. He sees Mazen as a protector of Palestine. The film is a veiled commentary on the lack of unity amongst the Palestinians.

The most talked about film in the festival was Danish film-maker Lars von Trier's highly stylised Dogville. Also been screened at Cannes, where a section of viewers thought it was ridiculously anti-American. The entire film is shot on a set representing a small town called Dogville. The central character is a suffering, semi-vivacious Grace, played with considerable intensity by Nicole Kidman, who is on the run from gangsters who have put a price on her head. She wanders into Dogville where a young writer gives her shelter. Some critics believe the film's commentary on male mentality, scapegoating and the fear of "the other" is actually an indictment of the U.S., which post-September 11 is "ignoring the United Nations once when convenient to the "war on terror."