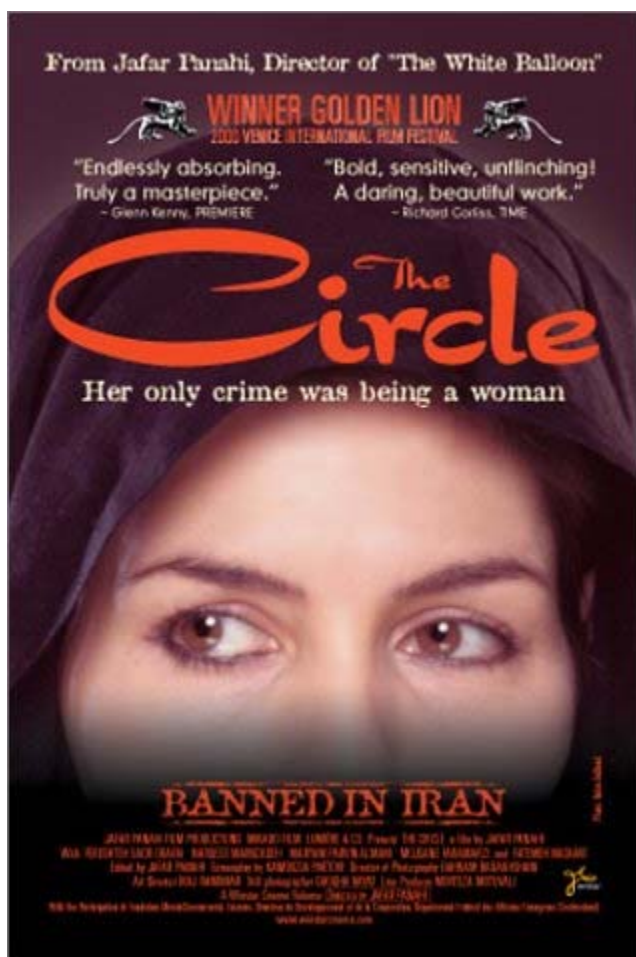


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Wednesday, January 2, 2008

***The Circle (Dayereh)* (2000)**



Introducing *The Circle*

In the prologue to *The Circle*, unseen behind a black screen and the opening credits, we hear the cries of a woman, Solmaz, giving birth. The film's first words, 'It's a girl,' are met with despair by the woman's mother - 'but the ultrasound said it would be a boy.' She is certain that her daughter's parents-in-law will demand a divorce. This chilling vignette sets the scene for a connected series of powerful and engaging stories of women's experience in modern Tehran, their force enhanced by the film's stunning formal confidence and audacity.

Like Panahi's acclaimed first feature, *The White Balloon* (1995), *The Circle* uses the quests of its central characters to provide a subtle and original evocation of city life. But whereas the earlier film was unashamed to trade in the

charming and the picturesque, and its plot hinged upon a large element of fakery, *The Circle* jettisons these props, displaying Tehran as a place of relentless intimidating bustle, seared by the noise of traffic and car horns. Above all it is a city of men - on Tehran's streets men trade, make music, ride motorbikes, swoop down in their police vans and arrest people. In this world, women are excluded, fearful, conscious of the arbitrariness with which danger can strike. Newly released from prison, Nargess alternately gazes with wonder at the energy and vigour of it all - the shops speaking the signs of modernity, the Western perfumes, a Swatch advert, a shirt 'made in Turkey, best quality' - or hides in dark corners to avoid being seen.

The men who run this world are rarely glimpsed. Elham's Pakistani husband is seen only through a window, while the cinema cashier Monir's is not seen at all. But they have arbitrary power over the lives of their wives - the Pakistani doctor has divorced his first wife, who just didn't suit, and Monir's husband took a second wife while Monir was in prison. Faced with this, the women have a choice between solidarity and frightened subservience. The first of these causes Monir to be grateful to wife number two for looking after her children in her absence. It is the latter that makes Elham unable to offer Pari the help she needs.

Jafar Panahi's contention is that women are powerless and marginalised, dependent on the whims, prejudices, and occasional kindnesses of men. This is realised through a series of dazzling visual and narrative devices. Always covered from head to toe, they additionally don dark chadors at moments of danger, which render them indistinguishable and almost literally invisible. Fearing re-arrest at the start, Arezou and Nargess run away looking like two huge crows. When Pari visits her prison friend Monir, their conversation is hidden as men buying tickets completely block the screen. This invisibility is compounded by a pervasive uncertainty about their fates - we are given no backstories, no reasons for their arrest, and the minimal information about their plans and desires is delayed or withheld with disorientating effect. In key cases we are not even given the characters' names until they are required to identify themselves to authority - Nargess in order to be sold a bus ticket, Nayereh when she faces arrest. In most cases, too, the characters share the actresses' own names, adding to the sense of universality. And the formal structure of a relay of incomplete narratives leaves the viewer with a shockingly unsettling series of unfinished stories, untold lives.





The Circle is also related through a subtly deployed system of metaphors. Throughout the film women look out at the world through bars, and windows and doors slam shut; they are forbidden to smoke in public places; they fail to complete their journeys to a place of safety. Seeing a cheap copy of a Van Gogh, Nargess recognises it as the paradisical Raziliq of her childhood, 'only the painter didn't get it quite right.' And throughout the film, a wedding party wends its way as ironic commentary.

Panahi observes the classical unities - this is the story of a single day in a single town, a day in the life of everywoman and her daughter. At the end, when darkness falls and the women enter a communal cell, the metaphor of women's life as a prison is uninsistently realised. The circle of the film's title is a place in Tehran where Pari goes to meet Monir, but it also serves as a subtle motif of closure. As the film ends, a young male prison guard asks whether Solmaz Gholami is among the women in the cell. But she is not there, having been transferred to the maternity hospital of the start of the film to give birth to a daughter. Sound outlasts vision. Against the black screen of the closing credits, a cell door slams.

- Julian Graffy, BFI.org.uk

Discussing *The Circle*

Solmaz has just experienced the pain of childbirth, only to find that her ultrasound results were wrong, as she's given birth to a girl. Why will her marriage now result in divorce?

Interpret the following statement: "Without a man, you can't go anywhere." How does this remark figure in the film?

What is the significance of (not) smoking in the film?

Arezou goes through the unspeakable to help her friend Nargess return to her idyllic childhood home. Why doesn't she seek a similar escape?

The sights and sounds of Tehran can be experienced through the innocent Nargess. What are her thoughts as she waits for her friends on the streets?

Why does Nargess buy the shirt and decide not to take the bus home? What are her motivations?

Pari is recently escaped from prison, pregnant, unmarried and seeking an abortion. What will become of her circumstance? If you were Pari, what would you do?

What price has Elham paid in hiding her prison past from her husband? How is it that she is unable to help her pregnant friend despite being a nurse?

Nayereh has attempted to abandon her child several times before the episode in the film. What fate do you feel will befall the little girl?

Mojgan is the quietly defiant young woman who is sent to prison for prostitution near the end of the film. How do you interpret her world view in light of the corruption and hypocrisy she witnesses?

What is the significance of Solmaz being an unseen character in the film?

What crimes have these women committed? What does the prison symbolize?

For more information about the film and its context, click through to the following links:

[The Case of Jafar Panahi: An Interview with the Iranian Director of *The Circle* by Stephen Teo](#)

[Women and Islam 1 / 2 / 3](#)

[Sharia: Women in Islamic Religious Law 1 / 2 / 3](#)

[Why Islam](#)

"I liked *The Circle*. What do I view next?"

- Close-up (1990, Abbas Kiarostami)
- The White Balloon (1995, Jafar Panahi)
- The Mirror (1997, Jafar Panahi)
- Taste of Cherry (1997, Abbas Kiarostami)
- The Apple (1998, Samira Makhmalbaf)
- The Day I Became A Woman (2000, Marziyeh Meshkini)
- Kandahar (2001, Mohsen Makhmalbaf)
- Motevalede Mahe Mehr (2001, Ahmad-Reza Darvish)
- Maya (2001, Digvijay Singh)
- Ten (2002, Abbas Kiarostami)
- At Five in the Afternoon (2003, Samira Makhmalbaf)
- Osama (2003, Siddiq Barmak)



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