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Film

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HRW Film Festival 2012 – Habibi



The Gaza Strip is now a narrow stretch of 25 miles by 9 miles, and is inhabited by over 1.5 million people. Successive attempts to restrict the movements of people and resources in and out of this area have left the Gazan population with very limited choices in life. As the myriad protests and struggles rage on in the Middle East and North African region, the people of Gaza live on with the effects of an occupation. Holding down a job is becoming an obscure aspiration for the now over-50% jobless in Gaza. And being a young couple in love in Gaza can mean facing not only hardships enforced by the political context, but also by the pressures of society and family.

As the first fictional film for over a decade for Gaza, *Habibi* is a romantic story based around 7th century romantic Arab poetry, the Majnun Layla, which inspired Romeo and Juliet. It is also a reflection of director Susan Youssef’s personal experience of falling in love in Gaza. Taking place amid Israeli aerial raids in 2001, star-crossed lovers Qays and Layla are caught between an increasingly restrictive Gazan society, and family pressures of honour and marriage. We follow hopeless romantic Qays as he graffiti’s love poetry around the streets of Gaza in his frustrations at being apart from his lover, Layla. Living in a refugee camp on a construction worker’s earnings, Qays seems unable to persuade Layla’s family that he is a good suitor; his only resolve is to express his love for Layla through the graffiti poetry.



Whilst Qays’ increasingly melancholic and unstable mental state highlights some important issues about the effects of sustained military occupation and Arab social norms on love and marriage, it is the struggles Layla goes through in which the film finds its voice. Layla’s position in Gazan social life is limited, despite her liberal middle-class surroundings. Her family presses her to get married to a wealthy doctor, whilst she wants to continue with her studies in the West Bank, and to secretly

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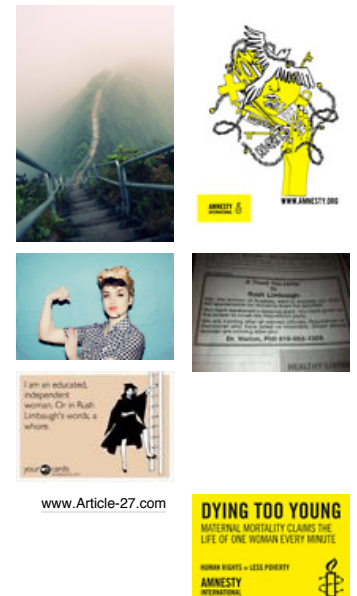
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continue her relationship with her lover. Not only this, but the love poetry written across Gazan walls for Layla is seen as ruinous, and damaging for both Layla's position as an unmarried woman, and for Qays' hopes to win over Layla's father.

Layla's predicament is complicated by the embedded gender inequalities in the Middle East, and which reflects the director's personal experiences. Susan Youssef, who wrote, directed and produced *Habibi* over the course of the last decade, joined *Article 27* in an interview ahead of *Habibi's* UK premiere. She sees Layla's struggle as one based more on the tenets of class than of religious values. 'In my experience, women's ability to do things are related to the way it is in the West, in terms of class; the ways those of the (Middle Eastern) middle class can go to university is the same as in the West.' This can be said of Layla, as although she had potential access to a university education, this, along with options to work and for social development, are 'curtailed by the Occupation'. From this view, Qays' and Layla's unrequited love is less due to social or religious norms than it is to ideas of class, and of limiting options available to the inhabitants of Gaza. Essentially, Youssef tells me, *Habibi* is 'about how the Occupation is infiltrating people's choices amongst one another'.



Whilst Youssef sees gender equality and women's rights in the Middle East and North African region as entwined with conceptions in the West rather than as a new notion spurred on by the Arab Spring, there have been some interesting changes in Gaza. 'I think the Arab Spring did great things for Gaza, because...now Palestinians can move more easily in and out through the Egyptian border'. This change in the political structures surrounding the region could benefit or damage the future of many in Gaza, especially whilst the situation in Syria remains volatile. At a time when hostilities begins again after the 2008 war with Israel, it is essential that the realities of life in Gaza are highlighted to the international community. It is in this way that Youssef sees her project as 'an activist statement...the actual act of making the film was an act of resistance'.

Habibi's UK premiere screened for the Human Rights Watch Film Festival. Since its release last year, Youssef has taken the film to many film festivals worldwide, picking up several awards and recognition along the way. Youssef has even been named as 25th most powerful Arab woman by Arabian Business, as a result of *Habibi's* global success. She plans to take it to various Universities this year, with the hopes of screening it in the West Bank and inside Gaza itself. She credits the help of people she met whilst in Gaza, and notes her project could not have been possible without their generosity, kindness and willingness to be involved in the filmmaking process. Indeed, having spent successive years trying to get into Gaza just to be able to film, Youssef's affinity for Gazans has led her resolve to bring her film to a worldwide audience.

Habibi was screened in London for the Human Rights Watch Film Festival 2012 on 25th March. The film is also known by its international title, *Habibi Rasak Kharban* (Darling, There's Something Wrong with Your Head). You can watch the trailer below.

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