

"A POIGNANT, MOVING MARRIAGE OF POLITICS AND ART" *PETER BOWEN, FILMMAKER MAGAZINE*

"THIS FILM GRABBED MY HEART" *ANG LEE, JURY PRESIDENT, VENICE*



NEW DIRECTORS
NEW FILMS '10



A FILM BY SHIRIN NESHAT

WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

INDIEPIX FILMS & CO-PRODUCTION OFFICE PRESENTS AN ESSENTIAL FILMPRODUCTION, COOP99, PARISIENNE DE PRODUCTION PRODUCTION CAST PEGAH FERYDUNI, APITA SHAHRZADI, SHAGNAM TOLOUEI, QRSI TOOTI DIRECTED BY SHIRIN NESHAT IN COLLABORATION WITH SHOJA AZARI WRITTEN BY SHIRIN NESHAT, SHOJA AZARI
ADAPTED FROM THE NOVEL "WOMEN WITHOUT MEN" BY SHAHRINUSH PARSIPOUR DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MARTIN CSCHLACHT MUSIC RYUICHI SAKAMOTO PERFORM MUSIC AGBAS BANGTOHAI PRODUCTION DESIGN KATHARINA WÖPPERMANN SET DESIGN SHAHRAM NAHMI COSTUME DESIGN THOMAS DLAH HAIR MAKE UP HEIKO SCHMIDT MINA CHOPRAISH
CASTING LISA DLAH, MARKUS SCHLEINZER SOUND OVE HASSIG EDITING GEORGE CRAIG, JULIA WIEDENALD SOUND MIX DIE BASIS DESIGN ANSGAR FRIEDRICH SOUND DESIGN SEBASTIAN TESCH SERVICE PRODUCTION MARCOZZO AGORA-SOUAD LAMRARI, BENEDETTO BELLODO LINE PRODUCER PETER HERMANN, BRUNO WÄGNER
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER SHOJA AZARI, JOERIG E. SCHWEIZER EXECUTIVE PRODUCER BARBARA CLAUSTONE, JEROME DE NOIRMONT, OLEG KOKHAN PRODUCERS SUSANNE MARIAN, MARTIN CSCHLACHT, PHILIPPE BOBER CO-PRODUCERS PETER RIMMEL, DENISE BOOTH

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IN COLLABORATION WITH ZDF/ARTE, ORF (FILM/ZEHNSEH ABKOMMEN), CINÉPOSTPRODUCTION, SCHÖNHEITSAHM, SCHWEIZER BRANDUNG FILMPRODUKTION

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Screening Dates

March 22nd – Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art – Cleveland, OH
March 30th – 31st – New Directors/New Films – New York, NY
April 7th – Hammer Museum – Los Angeles, CA
April 9th – Laemmle Music Hall 3 – Los Angeles, CA
April 9th – Regal Westpark – Irvine, CA
April 9th – Laemmle Town Center 5 – Encino, CA
April 16th – 17th – The Walker Arts Center – Minneapolis, MN
April 16th – 17th – Sarasota Film Festival – Sarasota, FL
April 16th – 17th – The Riverrun Film Festival - Winston-Salem, NC
April 22nd – 23rd – Washington DC International Film Festival – Washington, DC
April 30th – AMC Shirlington 7 – Arlington, VA
April 30th – The Landmark Bethesda Row – Bethesda, MD
May 5th – May 10th – 360 365 Festival – Rochester, NY
May 7th – May 20th – The Zeitgeist Theater – New Orleans, LA
May 14th – The Gene Siskel Film Center – Chicago, IL
May 14th – Lincoln Plaza Cinema – New York, NY
May 14th – The Quad Theater – New York, NY
May 21st – Camelview 5 – Phoenix, AZ
June 4th – The Angelika – Houston, TX
June 4th – The Center For Contemporary Art – Santa Fe, NM
June 4th – Camera 12 – San Jose, CA
June 4th – The Clay Theatre – San Francisco, CA
June 4th – Elmwood – Berkeley, CA
June 10th – Lake Placid Film Festival – Lake Placid, NY
July 9th – Northwest Film Forum – Seattle, WA
July 9th – Fort Worth Museum Of Art – Fort Worth, TX
July 30th – The Wexner Center – Columbus, OH
August 15th – Hopkins Center For The Arts – Hanover, NH
August 26th – Cleveland Cinematheque – Cleveland, OH

Synopsis

Against the tumultuous backdrop of Iran's 1953 CIA-backed coup d'état, the destinies of four women converge in a beautiful orchard, where they find independence, solace and companionship. Acclaimed photographer Shirin Neshat makes her directorial debut with this incisive and sumptuously filmed reflection on the pivotal moment in history that directly led to the Islamic revolution and the Iran we know today.

Women Without Men, an adaptation of Shahrnush Parsipur's magical realist novel, is Iranian artist, Shirin Neshat's, first feature length film. The story chronicles the intertwining lives of four Iranian women during the summer of 1953; a cataclysmic moment in Iranian history when an American led, British backed coup d'état brought down the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, and reinstalled the Shah to power.

Over the course of several days four disparate women from Iranian society are brought together against the backdrop of political and social turmoil. Fakhri, a middle aged woman trapped in a loveless marriage must contend with her feelings for an old flame who has just returned from America and walked back into her life. Zarin, a young prostitute, tries to escape the devastating realization that she can no longer see the faces of men. Munis, a politically awakened young woman, must resist the seclusion imposed on her by her religiously traditional brother, while her friend Faezeh remains oblivious to the turmoil in the streets and longs only to marry Munis' domineering brother.

As the political turmoil swells in the streets of Tehran, each woman is liberated from her predicament. Munis becomes an active part of the political struggle by plunging to her death. Fakhri frees herself from the chains of her stagnant marriage by leaving her husband and purchasing a mystical orchard in the outskirts of the city. Faezeh is taken to the orchard by Munis to face her own awakened self where Zarin has found solace in her communion with the land. But it is only a matter of time before the world outside the walls of the orchard seep into the lives of these four women as their country's history takes a tragic turn.



Director's Statement

Women Without Men captures a pivotal moment in the summer 1953, when the hopes of a nation are crushed by foreign powers in a tragic blow that lead to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Thirty years later, as we look at the young men and women protesting in the streets of Iran in the face of ruthless brutality, we are reminded, once again, that this struggle is alive and well. I can only hope that *Women Without Men*, will make a small contribution to the vast narrative of Iran's contemporary history, in reminding us of the voice of a nation that was silenced in 1953 by powers both internal and external and that has risen again.

The film is dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy in Iran - from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the Green Movement of 2009.



Director's Biography

Iranian-born visual artist Shirin Neshat is known for her hauntingly beautiful explorations of Islam and gender relations. Over the past 15 years, Neshat has created provocative expressions drawn on her personal experiences in exile, and on the widening political and ideological rift between the West and the Middle East. Her potent statements in still and moving images evoke the struggles that define her.

Born in Qazvin, one of the most religious cities in Iran, Shirin Neshat is perhaps the most famous contemporary artist to emerge from that country. Neshat left Iran just before the Islamic revolution (1979) and the fall of the Shah. Her consequent visits to Iran after the revolution led to the creation of a body of work which launched Neshat's artistic career, however, since 1996 she has not been able to return to her country due to the controversial nature of her art. After receiving her degree in art from the University of California at Berkeley, Neshat moved to New York, where she continues to live and feel the pull and push of her roots. She examines her homeland from a distance, as well as in closer perspective on her travels across the Middle East.

On today's complicated global stage, Neshat's voice is unmistakably relevant. She first gained prominence with *Women of Allah* (1993-97), a series of photographs depicting women in veils carrying guns with their skin covered in Islamic poetry. These arresting images reflected Neshat's sense of how the revolution had changed the Iran that she knew, especially the lives of women seeking freedom, rebelling in martyrdom and militancy. By 1998, when Neshat began experimenting with film and video installations, she met Iranian artist/filmmaker, Shoja Azari. They began a collaboration which has led to numerous important video pieces such as the trilogy—*Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000)—about gender roles in the restrictive Islamic society. In the first two cinematic statements, she immersed the viewer literally in the middle of the works, which were projected on two screens, each occupied by actors of one sex. The men and women are physically separated here in art, as in real life. In *Turbulent*, Azari performed the role of male singer while Sussan Deyhim, was the female singer. Here Neshat explored singing as a metaphor for freedom, inspired by an Iranian ban on women singing. In *Rapture*, she continued her theme with a story about women moving across the desert, and how a few eventually break free to leave on a small boat. *Fervor* expressed the passionate yearning of a couple who can only make contact with their eyes, closing the trilogy with an emphasis on the common ground shared between the sexes.

On a more personal note, Neshat explored her own displacement in *Soliloquy* (1999). Again using duo projections, she places an image of herself in the Middle East on one screen, and an image of herself in the West on another, visually revealing the split between the two very different cultures that are both a part of her life.

Shirin Neshat is the winner of numerous awards, including the Lilian Gish Prize (2006), the Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art Peace Award (2004), the Grand Prix of the Kwangju Biennial in Korea (2000), and the Golden Lion Award, the First International Prize at the 48th Venice Biennial (1999). She has exhibited widely around the world at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo in Leon, Spain; and the Tate Gallery in London.

Interview with Entretien with Shirin Neshat

You weren't born until 1957 but can you describe the impact of August 1953 on your immediate family?

By the time I was born, it became almost taboo to speak about the 1953 Coup openly, so I hardly remember even hearing my own family discussing their views and experiences. I found out later that several of my close relatives and friends were sympathizers of Dr. Mossadegh and ex-communists who didn't dare talk about it. The reality was that immediately after the Coup, the Shah took full control of the country, including its army and had shifted the Iranian society from a once democratic society to a type of dictatorship, severely monitoring the people through his secret police called Savak. So it was very problematic to criticize the Shah even in social gatherings since Savak agents were known to be among civilians. Regardless, a large student opposition group developed across the country against the Shah and his foreign allies, in particular the United States, which eventually led to the formation of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The framing of the story is a fundamental event in Middle Eastern politics — the first and last democratic period in Iran — yet it's almost unheard of today. Why is August 1953 so unknown outside the Middle East?

I'm not sure why, but I sense that it's only since Sept 11th that the American public has developed a genuine curiosity and interest in Islamic and Middle Eastern cultures and history. As far as I know, in the recent past very few scholars or the media have pointed back to the Coup of 1953 organized by the CIA, which was directly responsible for the formation of the Islamic Revolution. I happen to believe revisiting history will prove to be helpful so we can put certain facts straight; to comprehend the foundation behind the conflict between the West and Muslims; and to offer new perspectives, for example how Muslims indeed have been a subject of the criminal behavior of the great Western empires such as the United States and the British.

What were your initial thoughts upon reading Parsipur's novella? Can you tell us how you first encountered the book and what made you want to turn it into a feature film?

"*Women Without Men*" is quite a well-known book in Iran, and indeed Shahrnush Parsipur is one of the most celebrated living Iranian women authors. So from a young age I was familiar with her books, and mostly fascinated by her imagination and the surrealistic style of her writings which lends itself to a very visual film. But it was not until 2002, when I felt the urge to make a feature film, and was looking for the right story that a scholar friend of mine, Professor Hamid Dabashi from Columbia University brought this novel back to my attention. I became quickly convinced that "*Women Without Men*" was the right story for me. It navigates between complex themes of socio-political, religious and historical realities of Iran; and yet profound personal, emotional, philosophical and universal subjects that transcend any notions of time and place. Also I was captivated by the poetic nature of the novel, and the use of symbolism and metaphor; for example how the orchard where the women take refuge functions as a place of 'exile,' a subject so poignant and relevant to so many of us Iranians.

Did you strike up a friendship with Parsipur? Can you tell us your working relationship with her and how her works in general have affected your own work as an artist?

As soon as I decided to commit myself to this project, I started to look for her. I found out she was living in Northern California, so I went to meet her. Ever since that encounter, she has been a major force in my life; both for her writing and as a woman who has

endured pain more than anyone I know; years of imprisonment, separation from her child, poverty and illness. Yet Shahrnush remains as one the most positive and optimistic people I've ever met. It was particularly touching when she agreed to play a role in the film, and I think she did a great job as the 'madam' in the brothel in Zarin's story.

How did you go about transforming the book into a film?

I knew that it was going to be a big challenge, mostly because in this particular story one must simultaneously follow five main characters, each character being totally unique in her nature, aspirations and representation of distinct social and economic class. Some characters were so surrealistic, that it gave a fairy tale quality to the narrative; for example Mahdokht, being the woman who could not cope with her humanity and eventually planted herself to be a tree. So at the end, we eliminated Mahdokht from our script. As you will see in the film, Munis and Zarin are quite magic in their nature while Faezeh and Fakhri remain very realistic. Also, in Parsipur's novel, the political material was only mentioned as a background to the women's lives; but I decided to expand the narrative by emphasizing the historical, political crisis of the time, which was the American organized coup d'état that overthrew Dr. Mossadegh's government. I went as far as shaping Munis, one of the main characters of the film, as a political activist. So through Munis, we follow the political development.

Obviously you were unable to film on location in Iran. Where did you film instead?

We shot the film in Casablanca, Morocco. Mainly because we found that Casablanca beautifully resembled Tehran in the 1950's, and having worked in Morocco several times in the past, we had developed a great working relationship with the film industry and people of Morocco. So then it became the question of how we could recreate Tehran in Casablanca!

How was your Women of Allah series of photographs perceived in Iran and how do you think your film will be embraced there?

The *Women of Allah* series was never publicly exhibited in Iran; and even its reproduction in prints caused a lot of controversy. Many of the officials found it subversive and criticized it, even if they couldn't quite comprehend its meaning and conceptual orientation. I suspect *Women Without Men* would not be permitted to be screened in Iran, partially due to my own history as an artist but mostly due to the controversy over the novel which has been banned since its publication; and most obviously due to nudity that occasionally appears in the film.

Can you tell us the general saturated look of the film, and what you intended by this? In particular the stark contrast between the sepia palette in the Tehran scenes versus the more colorful textures of the garden. What are you aiming for by using such a stark contrast between the 'inside' and the 'outside' worlds?

The question of color or absence of color has always been tied to my concepts. For example in the *Women of Allah* series, I felt the severity of the subject; the portraits of revolutionary militant women lent themselves more to stark black and white imagery. Similarly, in the case of video installations such as *Rapture* or *Turbulent* where the narratives evolved around the notion of 'opposites,' so again the black and white helped me to exaggerate the dichotomy between the different genders in Islamic cultures. But in the case of the film *Women Without Men*, I thought it was interesting to have saturated color, mainly to pay tribute to the period that the film takes place; the 1950's. However throughout the film, the scheme of color changes from, let's say, the orchard which is quite colorful, to the scenes of street protests where I purposely drained the color, to give a sort of archival quality to the picture.

Can you discuss casting the film - did you use professional actresses, or did you cast unknowns?

The casting for the film was quite challenging as we knew from the start that it was not possible to cast Iranian actors living in Iran. So we were limited to the actors living in Europe. Then the problem became that most of second generation Iranians living abroad speak Farsi with an accent. So the process of casting took over one and a half years. We worked with a wonderful Austrian casting agency that travelled all across Europe to bring us some of the most talented Iranian actors. In the end, all our main actors had professional experience, and I invited my friend Arita Shahrzad (Fakhri) who is a painter and had collaborated with me on a short film and had been my favorite model for photography. Also, I should mention that Orsi Toth who played the role of Zarin, is a Hungarian actress, whom I came to know through her wonderful performance in the film called *Delta*.

You're obviously enchanted with the visual image of the chador. Is this fascination purely cinematic or is there something deeper?

My interest in the veil, or the chador has both aesthetic and metaphoric reasons. The veil has always been a complex subject; some consider it as an 'exotic' emblem, some find it a symbol of 'repression,' while others find it a symbol of 'liberation'. The veil seems to remain a Western controversy, while in fact the veil is what many Muslim women wear in the public domain, so it does not always have to be so politically loaded. In *Women Without Men*, since it takes place in the 1950's, when the women actually had a 'choice' regarding the veil, we have women like Munis and Faezeh who are constantly veiled, then we have Fakhri who is Westernized and fashionable and not at all covered by it.

The Garden figures prominently both in Persian culture and your own upbringing. What, for you, is the ultimate significance of the garden, in your culture, your work and in this film?

The concept of a garden has been central to the mystical literature in Persian and Islamic traditions, such as in the classic poetry of Hafez, Khayyam and Rumi where the garden is referred to as the space for 'spiritual transcendence'. In Iranian culture, the garden has also been regarded in political terms, suggesting ideas of 'exile,' 'independence' and 'freedom.' I have made several video based works in which their concepts explore the symbolic value of the garden in the Islamic tradition. For example in my brief video installation *Tooba*, the core of the film was the tree of *Tooba*, a mythological tree that is regarded as a 'sacred tree', a 'promised tree' in paradise. I created an imaginary garden where the tree of Tooba stood at its center, while a group of people ran toward it to take refuge. Both in *Tooba* and in *Women Without Men* the garden is treated as a space of exile, refuge, oasis, where one can feel safe and secure.

Political and Historical Background

In the summer of 1953, the British and American governments initiated a joint Anglo American coup to overthrow the first democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh and his government.

A powerful figure of tremendous stature in the history of modern Iran, Dr. Mossadegh was highly popular for his honesty, integrity, and sincerity but most of all he was admired for nationalizing Iranian oil and therefore taking it out of British control in 1951. Although Iran never was officially part of the Commonwealth, its rulers were dependent on British backing and financing. Mossadegh was to become the first Iranian leader who challenged the status quo and openly confronted the British by claiming that Iran's only natural asset – petroleum - should be the source of work and prosperity of the population of Iran.

British officials refused to cooperate with the new Iranian government and the biggest refinery in the world stopped operating. At that time 60% of the petrol consumed in the Western world came from Iran and thus the consequences of the conflict had far wider-reaching effects than those immediately involved. Also, the war in Korea had sparked a new suspicion of Communism and Western powers feared the intervention of Iran's neighboring country, the Soviet Union.

American President Harry Truman tried to intermediate between the British and Mossadegh but due to the unwillingness of the British to compromise on any point of the agenda, no agreement could be found. In 1952 the British plotted to overthrow Mossadegh and his cabinet but the attempt failed and Mossadegh cut off diplomatic ties with the British government and ordered the deportation of all British citizens from Iran. Infuriated by this initiative, the British tried to regain their control of Iranian petrol by blocking off the country's oil export through military force and by preventing all Western countries from purchasing oil from Iran.

Toward the end of 1952, elections both in Britain and the US brought new players to power. Using the threat of the 'spread of Communism' Prime Minister Churchill eventually succeeded in convincing President Eisenhower to carry out a coup in Iran. America, who up to then had never been involved in an overthrow of any foreign government, was to orchestrate the coup as British citizens were no longer allowed to enter Iran. The plan for this coup d'état - called Operation AJAX - was carried out by Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA Agent in charge of the Middle East (a grandson of Theodore Roosevelt and a distant cousin of Franklin D. Roosevelt) in cooperation with the Shah and the Iranian military, led by General Zahedi.

In accordance with the plan, on August 16, 1953, the Shah violated the Constitution of Iran and dismissed Dr. Mossadegh and his nationalist cabinet without the parliament's approval and appointed General Zahedi as the new Prime Minister. He ordered the Royal troops to occupy Mossadegh's house and to hold him under house arrest until further instructions. But the supporters of Mossadegh prevented the coup's success. The news was publicized and caused major dissatisfaction amongst the people throughout the country. In a matter of hours, massive rioting erupted in Iran in support of Mossadegh while the Shah and his wife fled to Italy. The people's protest and demonstration continued for two days and led them to pull down the statues of the Shah and his father all over the country.

Only a few days later, on August 19th, 1953, a second attempt was made. On that day, a group of tanks led by General Zahedi moved through Tehran and surrounded Mossadegh's residence again. The forces behind the coup d'état managed to pull a large number of bribed hooligans into the streets to rally against Mossadegh. Americans paid several million dollars to high ranking generals, politicians, and newspaper owners

to fabricate false information about Mossadegh and his cabinet. Finally, the army and police forces let the mob reach the Prime Minister's residence and, after hours of bombarding and fighting a bloody battle with the small loyal group of Mossadegh's guards, the mob entered his house and burnt it down. In a matter of hours, Mossadegh and his top cabinet leaders surrendered themselves to the now appointed Prime Minister, General Zahedi, and the Shah came back to Iran. During Mossadegh's trial in the Shah's military court, he was falsely convicted of treason and sentenced to three years imprisonment. Thereafter he was transferred to his country house in Ahmad-Abad near Karadj where he lived under house arrest until his death in 1967 at the age of 85.

A consortium of British and American companies took over the refinery in Abadan. Annual payments were made to the Shah's dictatorial government, but no Iranian auditor was ever allowed to inspect the books. 1953 and Mossadegh's overthrow is a critical period in Iranian history which marks the first and last democratically elected government in Iran. During the brief period of Mossadegh's rule, Iran was a free country in which democratic principles like freedom of expression and religion were respected. The reinstatement of the Shah to power meant a 25-year long cruel dictatorship for the people of Iran and total availability of Iranian oil reserves to the Western world at advantageous terms.

At the same time the illegitimate and bloody coup alienated a nationalist elite within Iran, which had looked to the United States as its ideological ally and its one reliable supporter. It paved the way for the incubation of extremist movements and marked the beginning of the deterioration of the relationship between the United States, Iran and many other Middle Eastern countries.



The Financial Times

An Iranian filmmaker goes to Sundance

By Val Phoenix

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/23f29d22-0161-11df-8c54-00144feabdc0.html>

Next week at the Sundance Film Festival, one film will prove topical to anyone watching the current events in Iran. In the wake of protests against the government of President Ahmadi-Nejad, some Iranians see parallels between the recent unrest and previous political conflicts, in particular the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the lesser-known story of the 1953 coup that restored the shah to power.

Women Without Men, the first feature film from Iranian-born artist, photographer and filmmaker Shirin Neshat, tells the story of the CIA-engineered coup through the eyes of four women. It has already picked up a Silver Lion for the director at the Venice Film Festival, where she walked the red carpet flanked by her cast and crew symbolically bedecked in green and defiantly flashing the two-fingered opposition salute. The 52-year-old is an outspoken supporter of the Green movement that arose out of Iran's disputed election but she is clear about her priorities. "Number one, I want to be an artist and I want to make a good film and I want to make art that can survive over time, not because it relates to issues that we are concerned with today. Then I want to be an Iranian and I want to be an activist. But I think my number one priority is to be an artist."

Born in 1957 into a west-leaning, well-to-do family that supported the shah, Neshat was encouraged to pursue her education and her interests as an artist. She went to a Catholic boarding school, before leaving Iran in 1974 to study at Berkeley in California. She now lives in New York City and often works with other Iranian-born artists such as Sussan Deyhim and Shoja Azari.

The 1979 revolution prevented her from returning to Iran until 1990, when, shocked by the changes she saw, she began to produce artwork focused on women in Islamic societies. The photographic series *Women of Allah* consisted of portraits of Muslim women, often in religious dress, overlaid with calligraphy and juxtaposed with provocative symbols such as guns, as she explored the conflict between religious devotion and violent martyrdom. Her split-screen installation *Turbulent*, which set female and male perspectives in opposition, earned her the international prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999.

Well-established as a photographer and visual artist by 2003, Neshat turned her attention to Shahrnush Parsipur's novel *Women Without Men*. She first developed a series of video installations based on the characters and then reworked the material as a film. The novel by the exiled Iranian author, banned in Iran, appealed to Neshat on several levels. It features strong female characters from a range of social positions, among them upper-class Fakhri, troubled prostitute Zarin, inquisitive Munis and devout Faezeh.

Neshat found parallels with her own work in the subject matter and the novel's magical realism. "For me, this is a poetic gesture, to make a film that allegorically, metaphorically deals with four women looking for an idea of freedom, democracy and independence and the country of Iran looking for an idea of freedom."

Made with a European-based cast and shot in Morocco, the film is the work of exiles: many of the participants are banned from returning to Iran. Neshat has not been back to her homeland since 1996, and in the past has described herself as living between two worlds, not necessarily comfortable in either. Keenly aware that she is afforded more freedom working in the west, she nevertheless draws parallels between herself and women living in the Islamic republic. "In terms of my personality and the way that I function, I am not really that different from the Iranian women living in Iran, because, you know, we all have our own pains and problems. Theirs is oppression. Mine is separation from my country. I feel devastated by the politics that have defined my life and I feel angry but, at the same time, I am very strong and I am a survivor."

Women Without Men amplifies the personal themes she has explored in other works. "Everything I have done in the past, whether photography or film, has been about stressing that Iranian women are oppressed, but they are not losers and they are really defiant, they are a powerful force in the community."

In the film, the leading characters gravitate to a mystical garden, a place of transcendence in Persian culture. This garden embraces women cast out by society or their families. Neshat uses color to contrast the moods of her characters with the turmoil raging in the country, as the garden changes from a bright, blooming oasis to one drained of all color and life.

As the women chafe at the restrictions placed on them by society, the country is rocked by the 1953 CIA plot, backed by Britain, to reinstate the shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and depose the elected prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh, who had nationalised the oil industry. One of Neshat's characters, Munis, takes to the streets to protest, proclaiming, "I was there not to watch, but to see ... to act."

The prominent role of women in last year's protests was a surprise to some foreign observers but not to Neshat, who was well aware that women had been active in 1953 and 1979. She compares the Munis character to Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot dead during a protest in Tehran in June 2009. "In my film we see the whole political movement through the eye of a woman who is not ideologically formed," she says, "and then you think about Neda, who was not ideologically organised. She was just an innocent bystander who cared deeply about what was going on on the street and then became a martyr and therefore a symbol of the Green movement and the struggle for democracy. So I was interested in showing how we can talk about politics through the woman."

By the end of the film, the shah is restored to power and the garden is left a wreck. Munis states: "All we wanted was to find a new way." While the outcome of the current political unrest in Iran is unclear, Neshat feels her film is a hopeful work, one in keeping with the cycle of her homeland: "The movement has started and it will not end. In this film what we are saying is that we fought for freedom and democracy in the 1950s and today, so this idea of struggle continues, and at times we are defeated and we fall down, but we always, as the Iranian nation, rise again."

Cast

Pegah Ferydoni (Faezeh)
Arita Shahrzad (Fakhri)
ShabnamTolouei (Munis)
Orsi Tóth (Zarin)

Crew

Director: Shirin Neshat
In collaboration with: Shoja Azari
Inspired by the novel *Women Without Men* by Shahrnush Parsipur
Scriptwriters: Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari
Director of Photography: Martin Gschlacht
Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto
Persian music: Abbas Bakhtiari
Voice over text, additional dialogue: Steven Henry Madoff
Production Design: Katharina Wöppermann
Set Design: Shahram Karimi
Costume Design: Thomas Olah
Make-up: Heiko Schmidt, Mina Ghoraishi
Sound: Uve Haussig
Editing: George Cragg, Jay Rabinowitz, Julia Wiedwald, Patrick Lambertz, Christof Schertenleib, Sam Neave
Line Producers: Peter Hermann, Bruno Wagner, Erwin M. Schmidt, Isabell Wiegand
Commissioning Editor: ZDF/Arte - Holger Stern, Meinolf Zurhorst, ORF - Heinrich Mis, Arte G.E.I.E - Barbara Häbe, Andreas Schreitmüller
Service Production Morocco: Agora Film, Souad Lamriki, Benedicte Bellocq
Associate Producers: Shoja Azari, Joerg E. Schweizer
Executive Producers: Barbara Gladstone, Jérôme de Noirmont, Oleg Kokhan
Producers: Susanne Marian, Martin Gschlacht, Philippe Bober

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