A little known-aspect of Australian history

Serenades, directed by Mojgan Khadem

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Serenades, Mojgan Khadem's first full-length feature film, attempts to dramatise a little-known aspect of life in late 19th century Australia: the role played by Afghan cameleers in outback South Australia and the social relations between these contract workers and their families, and local Aborigines and German missionaries.

Khadem's film, which is a serious but not entirely successful effort, tells the story of Jila, a part Afghan and part-Aboriginal young woman who falls in love with the son of a Lutheran missionary. The fictional tale, which is set in 1890, after Afghan cameleers established regular transport links to the Killalpaninna Lutheran mission in the far north of South Australia, traces Jila's efforts to free herself from the moral and religious demands of the conflicting outback communities.

During the last four decades of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th, Afghan cameleers formed the core of every major expedition into Australia's central desert region and provided transport and communication links with sheep and cattle farms, mining projects and religious missions on the desert fringe. Their camels, which foraged on semi-desert plants and could go for days without water, were faster and cheaper than horse or bullock transport.

As the demand for this transport increased, hundreds of Afghans travelled to Australia on three-year work contracts. Low wages—in the 1880s between £3 and £4 a month or about a quarter of the amount paid to bullock team drivers—ensured that most remained in Australia. Many married and established families. Afghan settlements, later known as Ghantowns, sprang up around shipping ports and outback railheads in South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia.

Soon after *Serenades* opens, one of the cameleers, Shir Mohammed (Sinisa Copic), is involved in a sexual relationship with Wanga, an Aboriginal woman, as payment for gambling losses incurred by local Aborigines. While Jila is conceived out of this union, Shir Mohammed, like the scores of other Afghan cameleers constantly on the move throughout the outback, does not learn that he has a daughter until some years later.

Jila (Katayla Williams) is raised by Rainman, her Aboriginal grandfather, and in the first phase of her life is taught traditional Dreaming stories. She also learns to read and write at the Lutheran mission where she becomes best friends with Johann, son of the mission pastor. The childhood friends are separated when Shir Mohammed learns that he has a daughter and takes the young girl from the mission and raises her as a Muslim.

The film moves on 10 years and Jila (now played by Alice Haines) is a young woman attempting to assert her independence from her father's restrictive religious moral code. Shir Mohammed tells Jila that he will determine her life and whom she can marry. “If I tell you to marry a monkey,” he tells her, “you'll say, where are the bananas?” To complicate matters, Johann (Aden Young), Jila's childhood friend, returns from Germany where he had been sent for specialised music training. On his journey back to the mission he stays at the Afghan settlement and renews his acquaintance with Jila.

Johann and Jila begin to fall for each other but Shir Mohammed has other ideas. He has organised for Jila to marry Mullah Jalal-Shah (Nico Lathouris), the local Muslim priest. An outraged Johann attempts to circumvent this arrangement by offering a higher “bride price”. Shir Mohammed angrily rejects this offer, declaring that he will only allow a Muslim to marry his daughter. “You Christians think you own everything in this land,” he shouts at Johann.

A despondent Johann returns to the mission but finds he is increasingly out of step with its life. Meanwhile Jila, who is about 30 years younger than the mullah, decides to poison herself at the wedding feast rather than marry the priest. But Jila's desperate plans go astray when the mullah accidentally takes the poison and falls seriously ill. Distraught by what she has done, Jila flees the Afghan settlement. The old man recovers and instructs Shir Mohammed to find Jila and return her to the marriage. According to strict Muslim faith, if she has been with another man Shir Mohammed must kill her.

Jila seeks refuge in the Lutheran mission but is turned away by Pastor Hoffman (Bille Brown), Johann's authoritarian father, and she heads into the desert. Distraught and disoriented by the conflicting religious demands and afraid that her father will kill her, Jila attempts to find solace in her Aboriginal upbringing. She covers herself with religious markings and begins performing ceremonial dances.

Shir Mohammed tracks her down, however. In one of the

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film's emotional climaxes, he decides to allow the young woman her freedom, while devising a scheme to fool the mullah into believing she has been killed. At the same time Johann, who has been in conflict with his father, breaks with the mission, denouncing its values. Johann locates Jila and the film concludes with the couple united in the desert.

Serenades, which Khadem co-wrote with historian Christine Stevens, devotes much time and effort to creating historically authentic sets and costumes. It includes some striking images by veteran Australian cinematographer Russell Boyd (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Last Wave*, *Gallipoli* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*) and good performances by Sinisa Copic, Nico Lathouris and Katayla Williams (as the young Jila).

Unfortunately, much of the script's dialogue is stilted and some of the characters feel rather artificial. This is most apparent in the adult portrayals of Johann and Jila. Aden Young is stiff and Alice Haines fails to deliver the emotional depth demanded by her character. The couple's relationship is strangely asexual and does not emotionally resonate.

Some of these problems are due to Khadem's relative inexperience as a film director and scriptwriter. More serious weaknesses in the film, however, are related to the filmmaker's tendency to reduce everything to the religious or cultural identity of her characters, who seem to exist and operate independently of real social and economic life.

Khadem was born and raised as a member of the Bahai Faith in Iran, where the fundamentalist Islamic regime persecuted her family. She strongly opposes religious sectarianism and uses her film to highlight some of the destructive features of the Christian, Muslim and Aboriginal religions. At one point Jila shouts out that she “hates all gods”.

But Khadem's story is preoccupied almost entirely with religion to the exclusion of some of the central social and economic factors shaping the attitudes of the film's protagonists.

Anti-Afghan Australia racism was rampant in the 1890s, yet *Serenades* provides no indication of this atmosphere. The cameleers, who were among the lowest paid workers in the country, were subjected to constant racialist abuse, particularly from the media and the emerging trade union bureaucracy. Anti-Afghan Leagues were formed in some towns and physical attacks on Afghans were frequent. If the cameleers retaliated or tried to defend themselves they were severely punished by the police.

In Broken Hill, R. S. Ross, editor of the *Barrier Truth*, viciously denounced the “Afghan menace” in the union-owned newspaper, claiming they were “a danger to the town's morals”. Ross declared that Chinese and Afghans were “inferior alien labourers” and should not be allowed to enter Australia because they were untrustworthy “coloured mongrels” that “tend always to sterility and extinction”. Banning their entry, he declared, was a “fundamental instinct to protect the [white] species.”

The White Australia policy, which formed one of the main planks of the Australian Labor Party when it was founded in the early 1890s, was incorporated in the infamous Immigration Restriction Act, one of the first laws enacted by the Australian parliament created in 1901. This policy, which remained in place until the mid-1960s, effectively banned Asians entering Australia through the imposition of European language dictation tests on all prospective immigrants. Resident “coloureds” had to have government permission to travel between states—a measure directly aimed against Afghan cameleers who frequently crossed state borders in the outback.

Although *Serenades* deals with the strict patriarchal Muslim marriage code, it does not draw any connection between the social and political isolation of the cameleers and how Islamic leaders used these conditions and the prevailing racism to strengthen their hold over the Afghans.

The film also inadequately deals with the situation confronting local Aborigines on the mission. Pastor Hoffman, as head of Killalpaninna, is portrayed as a dour and unyielding man but the mission itself is rather benign. This simply does not ring true.

Aborigines, who were driven from their traditional lands by settlers who murdered resisting natives, came to the missions for physical protection and sustenance. While the missionaries were not as brutal as the settlers, they shared the same belief that Aborigines were little more than animals that had to be tamed and civilised. The regime in these institutions was harsh and psychologically destructive. Those failing to follow mission rules were ostracised and thrown off the settlement.

Serenades concludes rather too easily. All its plot strands neatly fall into place. Jila comes to terms with her own history in a series of semi-mystical sequences. Shir Mohammed, who has been uncompromisingly dogmatic throughout the story, not only decides to allow his daughter her freedom but is prepared to lie to the local mullah about it. The young couple seems to have triumphed over the religious intolerance surrounding them. This is rather simplistic.

Obviously Khadem cannot include everything in her portrayal of this period but her ability to produce an artistically convincing work is undermined because she treats the conflict between her characters and their eventual resolution as purely questions of religious identity. While there are no formulas for making insightful historical drama, this sort of work needs to be informed by an understanding of social and political dynamics.

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