

Sydney Film Festival

Glimpses of daily life for ordinary Palestinians

A Wedding in Ramallah directed by Sherine Salama

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A Wedding in Ramallah, a 90-minute film by Sherine Salama, documents the arranged marriage of a Palestinian couple, Mariam and Bassam Abed, in the West Bank and their lonely life seven months later in the US. Shot over a 12-month period beginning in July 2000, under conditions of an ever-tightening Israeli economic and military siege of the Palestinian Territories, Salama's film is a thoughtful and compelling work.

While the film does not delve into the political and historical circumstances underpinning the couple's story, it does provide glimpses of life in the West Bank and how ordinary Palestinian people attempted to keep body and soul together during this time.

The documentary opens with the return of Bassam to Ramallah, his hometown, from the US. In 1986 he was forced into exile by Israeli authorities after being jailed and tortured for three years. He eventually settled in Cleveland, Ohio and married. This relationship, however, broke down and he decided to return to Ramallah to wed again—this time in a traditional arranged marriage.

Mariam, a 25-year-old former village girl, has not met Bassam but the couple warm to each other, set a date, and are married. Bassam plans to take Mariam back to Cleveland but she does not have a passport and cannot leave until this and a US visa are organised.

Bassam returns to the US to prepare for Mariam's arrival, unaware that a major political crisis is about to erupt. Shortly after his departure the now Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visits Temple Mount, one of Islam's holiest sites, in a calculated provocation against the Palestinian people, precipitating riots and another *intifada*. The Israelis respond by assassinating key Palestinian officials and sealing off Gaza and the West Bank from the outside world. The economy grinds to a halt as thousands of Palestinian employed in Israel are prevented from working and health, education and other basic services broke down.

A Wedding in Ramallah shows how these events affected Mariam and the Abed family. They live near a Jewish settlement and gunfire regularly echoes through the street. Unarmed and unprotected Palestinian children confront Israeli tanks and the Abed family is often confined to their modest Ramallah home, frightened and huddling under blankets as heavy shelling erupts during night-time curfews.

Unable to obtain a passport or US visa, Mariam is trapped in Ramallah and begins to worry whether she will ever see her husband again. She develops a close friendship with Sirona, her sister-in-law, who is married to Bassam's brother, also living in the US. Sirona, who married at 15, has been separated from her husband for eight years as she cannot gain entry into the US.

Seven months after Mariam's marriage her passport and visa are

approved and she embarks, somewhat apprehensively, to the US. The film covers her first months in Cleveland, where she spends most of her days alone and confined to their small apartment. Their relationship is warm and understanding but Bassam has few friends and Mariam does not speak any English. Her life is no longer characterised by food shortages, curfews or constant gunfire but daily existence is bleak and lonely.

The strength of Salama's film lies in its sensitive examination of the stoic determination, warmth and good humour of Mariam, Bassam, Sirona and other members of the extended Abed family under these difficult conditions. On balance, however, *A Wedding in Ramallah* could have been strengthened if the film had been set more firmly in the broader context. The oppressive conditions of the family are shown but Salama does not examine the political and historic roots of their oppression.

Some documentary filmmakers, particularly those following the "direct cinema" genre, argue that directors should adopt a non-interventionist, hands-off approach. The limitations of this technique are apparent when more complex social issues are posed. It is not simply a question of showing "what is" and how it impacts on individuals. Events can only be understood by probing into their origins—that is, by providing an historical appreciation of why they took place.

A Wedding in Ramallah is Salama's second documentary, her first, *Australia Has No Winter* (1999), traces the life of a Belgrade refugee family in Melbourne. Born in Egypt to an Egyptian father and a Palestinian mother, Salama was raised in Australia and has worked as a television journalist for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and a print media journalist in the Middle East. She decided to make *A Wedding in Ramallah* after spending nine months training Palestinian television journalists on a United Nations project in 1996. She spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* at the Sydney Film Festival.

Richard Phillips: There are so many issues you could have used to examine the situation facing Palestinians, why did you decide on a wedding?

Sherine Salama: I am Palestinian and have lived in the Middle East on and off for the last 12 years. I didn't set out to make a film about the Arab-Israeli conflict, but I was fed up with western media portrayals of the Palestinians as fanatics or worse and wanted to show what life was really like for ordinary Palestinians. A wedding is a universal rite of passage and therefore a wonderful vehicle to showcase the culture, traditions and warmth of the Palestinians, as well as, the difficulties they have to deal with in everyday life. All I had to do was find the right couple.

While in Palestine in 1997 I got to know the owner of Heliopolis, the West Bank's biggest bridal shop. He told me lots of wonderful stories about the difficulties, that people had to go through to get married.

The West Bank had been divided up into different zones as a result of the so-called Peace Process, and as a result people couldn't travel freely from one part of the West Bank to another. Sometimes the Israeli authorities demanded that couples provide the names of all those coming and their ancestry—their fathers and their grandfathers—and then wouldn't tell them until the very last minute whether they could cross the checkpoint or not.

There were incredible stories about relatives and friends trying to get past these controls to wedding receptions. I even witnessed one couple being married at a checkpoint because the Israel soldiers would not let people move through to a reception hall 100 metres away.

I did not set out to make a political film but this provided a powerful metaphor for how Palestinians had been cantonised by the so-called Peace Process.

By the time I got funding in 2000, and met Bassam in the bridal shop and begun filming, the situation had calmed down a lot. Then the *intifada* broke out and Bassam told me that Mariam was stranded. He was in America and she was still stuck in Palestine.

RP: In the Q&A at one of the festival screenings there was some questions suggesting you should have condemned arranged marriages? Can you comment on this?

SS: I have to admit that I was astonished by this and found it really shallow. Obviously people live in different cultural contexts but the most important thing about the Palestinian situation is the bigger picture—that everyone is disempowered. Palestinians have no freedom. How can anything be worse than that? Palestinians are probably the only people in the world who are identified by their loss, the loss of their homeland.

Arranged marriages are partly an economic question. Mariam and Sinora are taken care of within the family structure and they have some security in the knowledge that they will be fed, clothed and their children educated. They may not have certain obvious choices but the situation they endure is imposed on them by deeper problems. Sinora came from a poverty-stricken village. The only options she had were to get married or starve. Her parents couldn't support her—they were struggling to keep themselves alive. Every family in the village she was from lived in real poverty, they couldn't even afford bread. Before the so-called Peace Process they used to go to Israel to work, now they can't even go to Ramallah to work.

RP: Some of the most moving parts of the film were about Bassam and Mariam's life in the US. Can you speak about this?

SS: I came to Australia as an immigrant and understood this loneliness very well. I found it difficult to deal with the way life was compartmentalised and the constant pressure to behave in a certain way or be ostracised. Bassam's experiences are just typical of many immigrants around the world. This is how they live. How do you survive a situation when you are torn away from your country, home and family and adjust to a place that offers material support, but nothing else?

RP: And this material support is constantly declining.

SS: Yes. Bassam was working two jobs, and now three, just to survive. This is the existence of so many people.

Some audiences wanted to know why Mariam wasn't learning English in the US and why they weren't involved in their neighbourhood or with friends in the US and so on. I couldn't believe some of these comments or at least the lack of appreciation or comprehension of what it must be like to be in Mariam and Bassam's shoes.

The most important thing is to have a clearer idea of the bigger picture and not just pigeonhole people into stereotypes. What's the point of making films if you don't actually examine the world? How does this help anyone? Mariam and Sinora are strong, stoic, feisty women, their spirits are not crushed, and they have a tremendous sense of humour. The arranged marriage issue doesn't mean they're tied completely. Bassam and many other men like him working around the clock to support their

families are just as much oppressed.

RP: Why did the Israeli authorities jail Bassam?

SS: I don't know the exact details and didn't really want to focus on this issue in the film. He was part of a Palestinian national youth folk choir and the Israeli government was trying to suppress this and later he was accused of being a member of the Fatah youth organisation. He eventually got a lawyer but the Israelis called in Palestinian collaborators as witnesses and accused him of all sorts of things. He was tortured in prison, including being punched and kicked in the testicles a lot—this is why he became infertile. This was not an isolated case.

RP: The film ends with some short credits about what has happened to Bassam and Mariam since September 11. What is their situation now?

SS: The vilification is enormous. Mariam always used to wear a headscarf when she went outside in the US. This is something she feels comfortable with but the last time I visited she wouldn't wear it because she was too frightened. Bassam is scared for her to wear it.

They were kicked out of their apartment by their landlady who had told Bassam the week prior to September 11 that they were the best tenants she'd ever had. Like most immigrants, he always paid on time and the house was spotless. A week later she told them they had to leave. There is so much pressure on them and they feel so vulnerable living in this so-called democracy. They now have American flags in their car and outside the house.

There is all this talk about tyrannical regimes in the Middle East and around the world but look out if you express your opinions too loudly in the US. I have many disaffected friends in New York, liberal educated people who have been ostracised because they dared to raise the question at dinner parties: why do you think September 11 happened?

RP: What has happened to their families in Ramallah?

SS: For the family, it is a nightmare. Their neighbourhood is next door to a Jewish settlement where an IDF [Israeli Defence Force] unit is based. There is shelling all the time and there are curfews. At the moment, on average they are allowed out once every three days for a few hours to get supplies. They are prisoners in their own town. Mariam's brother was put in jail after his recent wedding—20 soldiers came to get him. The family doesn't know where he is or how long he will be there.

The family told me that when the Israelis invaded Ramallah they called on all the Palestinian men to come out of their homes and to go to the local schoolyard. They tied their hands and put them into separate queues—one for Christians, one for Muslims. The Muslims, including Bassam's brothers Moussa and Hussein, were taken off to an unknown destination. Moussa was let out because he had an American passport and Hussein about six weeks later.

In some ways, it now feels strange because I set out to make a film about the everyday life of ordinary Palestinians and yet now there is virtually no normal life to be spoken of for them. Their lives are a complete hell.

Prior to the Gulf War, Palestinians could get regular work in Israel or were working in Kuwait and sending remittances back to their families. After the Peace Process most Palestinians were stopped from going in and the Israelis started importing cheaper labour from Romania and Thailand.

I was there when all the international aid money was supposed to be coming in to the Palestinians. In fact, much of it was going to European consultants who were writing reports based on "no-needs" assessments or flashy projects that would do little to improve the conditions of the Palestinians.

The latest incursions by the Israelis have completely destroyed the infrastructure built up over previous years. Many people worked for the Palestinian Authority but this has now been demolished and there is no work for anybody. Before the so-called Peace Process there were NGOs which would provide some sort of social welfare assistance to the poor. There is nothing left to provide work or help the people.

RP: How and why did you become a filmmaker?

SS: I didn't start out with the aim of making documentaries and never studied filmmaking, but I began working for ABC-TV News and Current Affairs and it kind of happened naturally. I was frustrated by the limited television news framework and kept pushing for more in-depth material. The journalism I was interested in was kind of anthropological—looking at life and human stories. But journalists are taught that everything must be put into clearly labelled boxes. You have to present one side of the case and then the other, with no room for grey areas, and you are confined according to whatever makes the headlines for the day.

Starting out as a freelance journalist in Cairo I was very fortunate to meet some of the best journalists in the world who taught me that the superior journalists are those who are passionate and involved. When I came back to Australia and began working for the ABC I was constantly told that the best journalism was objective. This didn't ring true because if you're passionate about an injustice then you are going to investigate, to probe and to argue a case.

There is also real pressure in the mainstream media to conform and to not rock the boat. As soon as you try and go beyond the headlines and investigate the reality, you are labelled as subjective or too emotional. I find this atmosphere depressing because it stultifies any creative spirit.



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