

Under the Shadow: A psychological horror film about 1980s wartime Iran

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12 November 2023

Under the Shadow is a 2016 horror film currently streaming on Netflix. It was the directorial debut of Iranian filmmaker Babak Anvari (born 1983 in Tehran). The film is set in 1988, in the closing years of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and focuses on the plight of Shideh (German-Iranian actress Narges Rashidi), a middle class housewife, and her young daughter, Dorsa (Avin Manshadi).

The film opens with images of the bloody Iran-Iraq war. Titles explain that the conflict is considered the longest conventional war of the 20th century. “Towards the end of the decade, Iraq launched a series of strategic bombings on Iranian cities. Iran retaliated in the same way. Lives were plunged into darkness where fear and anxiety thrived.” The war forms the backdrop for the gothic tale that unfolds.

The drama begins with Shideh pleading with an unnamed university official to be readmitted so she can resume her medical studies. We learn Shideh had been involved with “left-wing groups” ten years earlier, during the 1979 Iranian Revolution. She is told in no uncertain terms that she will never be allowed to resume studies and her youthful “mistakes have consequences.”

A window in the background reveals the city of Tehran. In the distance, a bomb explodes. The building shakes.

Rejected, Shideh returns home where her husband, Iraj (Bobby Naderi), a doctor himself, offers little comfort, telling the distressed Shideh that the rejection was “probably for the best,” before the house is plunged into total darkness. Another bombing raid has commenced.

We learn that Iraj has been drafted to serve as a medic at the Ilam front “where all the fighting is.” (Ilam, a western Iranian province bordering Iraq, was a

principal battleground in the Iran-Iraq conflict for years.)

Iraj suggests Shideh take Dorsa and leave the city to stay with family in the countryside. Shideh refuses, insisting that Iraj doubts her ability to take care of their child without him. He tells her not to take out her shortcomings on her family. Iraj leaves for the front.

After Iraj leaves, inexplicable incidents occur. A boy Dorsa’s age, who has been orphaned, tells the young girl that demons exist. Dorsa begins having nightmares. Angered, Shideh confronts her neighbor, a religious woman, and insists that the boy be kept away from Dorsa. We learn, in fact, that the boy is mute.

The characters’ equilibrium is finally destroyed when their apartment building is hit by a missile that fails to detonate. It pierces the roof, killing a member of the family upstairs. The event traumatizes Shideh even more, as she administers CPR to the man to no avail, suggesting “if I was a real doctor, he might still be alive.”

More occurrences. Dorsa’s doll goes missing, which the child blames on evil djinns (genies). It is eventually found, dismembered, among Shideh’s things. Shideh’s exercise VHS tape, which she turned to for stress relief, is found shredded.

As people flee from the neighborhood, seeking to escape the war, Shideh’s visions become increasingly more frightening.

The film is effective at imposing a feeling of isolation and anxiety. As people leave, social connections fray. The war itself, with its vast destruction of human life, is a real-life parallel to the psychological breakdown that occurs on screen. This sets the stage for the “supernatural” evil that takes hold.

The film is not uncritical of the authorities. In a telling scene set in the middle of the night, Shideh and

her daughter flee their apartment building, running from whatever is tormenting them. Shideh is stopped by members of Iran's morality police, who take her into custody and threaten her with "lashes" for leaving her home without a head covering!

Under the Shadow has been compared to the better-known *The Babadook* (2014, directed by Jennifer Kent). The strength and effectiveness of Anvari's film lie in its general social and historical context. The "evil" and associated horror of the film are functions of the human drama taking place. Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of the film is that such "evils" not only do occur, but do so at an escalating rate as capitalism threatens to plunge humanity once again into the worst barbarism of the 20th century and beyond.

There are shortcomings to *Under the Shadow*. While Anvari makes a serious effort to capture the social trauma inflicted on society by war, his placing such emphasis on Shideh's personal strivings seems a little inappropriate. Death and disaster swirl around her, but the film seems to suggest that her inner torment is driven in large measure by her dismay at not being able to make good on her professional career. That seems petty in the face of such tumultuous events.

Vast numbers perished in the Iran-Iraq War. The toll of Iranian and Iraqi military dead is estimated to be as high as half a million on each side, with another 100,000 civilians killed. So total casualties were somewhere between 1 and 2 million people, with some 95,000 of the victims of them children.

The so-called War of the Cities, a series of air raids on cities and major urban areas initiated by the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, produced terrible scenes of destruction. Iran retaliated in kind.

In thirty years of unending neocolonial warfare, the US has inflicted violence, death and devastation on country after country, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen and others. What other "horrors" does it threaten as its gigantic military machine rolls onward? Inevitably, one's mind is immediately drawn to the scenes of blood and death in Gaza, the product of US client state Israel and the murderous Israel Defense Force (IDF).

The strongest elements of *Under the Shadow* bring the human experiences of war into sharper relief. In our own times, this is a vital service.



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