

The scene is a Tehran bus terminal. Men stand around, one of them holding green worry beads. Steam wisps out of a boiling kettle. A slosh of water hits the flagstone floor. Ordinary events and acts such as these are the stuff of Iraqi expatriate filmmaker Maysoon Pachachi's work.

In everyday life, in its simple pain and pleasures, there is something human that transcends national and cultural boundaries. It is that humanity that London-based, Washington-born Pachachi explores in her documentaries, including *Voices from Gaza*, about Palestinian life during the first year of the Intifada. Her latest work, *Iranian Journey*, was shown in Israel at the Human Rights International Film Festival in February, a joint effort between the Tel Aviv Cinematheque and Al-Quds University in Ramallah.

As the daughter of Iraqi dissidents and members of the country's former secular ruling elite, who herself hasn't been back to the country since 1968, Pachachi grew up with the same prejudices about the role of women in Islamic societies as most people in the West. And apart from Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, few countries evoke as much fear and outrage as does Iran for its treatment of women and its fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

Yet when the same fundamentalist regime granted her a visa and admitted her to the country, Pachachi was free to move unhindered around Iran for two weeks while she filmed the movements of a female bus driver. "They didn't ask us who we were going to interview or what we were going to ask them....It was remarkably free."

Massoumeh Soltan Baloghie, 52, is the only long-distance female bus driver in Iran and quite possibly the entire Muslim world. The film follows her from her home in Tehran to the southernmost tip of the country, Bandar Abbas, a journey of 800 miles that lasts 22 hours, during which the bus stopped only for gas and food.

A former nurse, Massoumeh is a strong, feisty mother of four, with an irrepressible sense of humor, who took over

her husband Muammar's run as a school-bus driver when he had a heart attack. Then it occurred to her that she could take passengers from city to city. Though her employer, Bus Company Coop No. 6, has 700 female employees, all the others are secretaries or bookkeepers. Massoumeh works six days a week and earns a modest \$30 a trip. Now that Muammar has recovered, he and Massoumeh try to work together, sharing the driving and longing to own their own bus.

"There is a real sense of hope, of things opening up," says Pachachi. "People are still bound in all sorts of ways in their everyday lives, but they've seen that they can...elect somebody [President Muhammad Khatami], that they can push the boundaries back bit by bit, especially women." Pachachi notes a number of "startling reversals in the most repressive legislation," having to do with divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

But the struggle doesn't involve confrontation. As *Iranian Journey* traversed the country, the film crew of nine dived and dipped into many lives in the towns along the way. Labbaf Taheren, for example, is the principal of an all-female medical school with 1,000 pupils on the outskirts of Qom. She is socially conservative, but still believes that society is impoverished if women have no rights, and that once they are educated there is no road back.

Women like Taheren and Massoumeh don't rock the boat; they gently push against the system. Pachachi became an expert looking for the small signs of defiance that distinguish the individual. Massoumeh wore a red plastic hair clip to hold her *hijab* together, perhaps a token reference to her youth in the '70s, when she had big hair, flared trousers, and serious shades. She showed Pachachi photos from her courting days, but as they reveal her with her hair uncovered, she wouldn't let them be filmed.

Iranian Journey has an episodic quality, as it weaves in and out of towns, of people's lives, never going directly from point A to point B. "I have a great deal of problem with narrative," Pachachi acknowledges. "I always have to excavate

the story from underneath the atmosphere. There is a kind of dialectical approach to the business of film editing. You put two shots together and they make something else, a meaning that isn't in either of those two shots by themselves. They may be contradictory, and out of that comes a meaning you can't resolve into a simple statement."

One man on the bus told the camera how proud he was to see Massoumeh driving, as if she were emblematic of a shift forward in the whole country, a sign of progress. Which may be so. "You got the feeling from most of the people we talked to that they were Khatami supporters," Pachachi says. "The struggle between the conservatives and the reformers was evident."

Then Pachachi tells the story of one of the producer's London-based friends, Iranian by birth, who had returned to Tehran to get married. As he and his fiancée sat on a park bench, a serious offense in itself, a policeman inquired if the couple were married. When they said no, he ordered the two to follow him to headquarters. The young woman, very petite and fragile, stood up and said that this kind of thing was finished, that the rules had changed. She asked the policeman to leave them alone, and off he went.

Pachachi understands such social tensions. "I feel like a person who is holding a lot of contradictory things together. The logo of my company is a bridge, and I feel like a person who lives on one. I don't belong anywhere, but everywhere will do. The bridge is a good vantage point from which to tell the people on one side of the river about the people on the other side."

In 1994, Pachachi produced and directed *Iraqi Women: Voices from Exile*, her response to the Gulf War. "I watched thousands of hours of media coverage, and you never saw anything about an ordinary Iraqi person. It was as if the country didn't have a population, it just had Saddam Hussein." About to travel to Israel for the film festival, she recalls an earlier trip as a "surreal experience": "I felt very uneasy, like I was on alien ground." Then she adds, looking to the other side of the bridge, "It must be the way Israelis feel when they go to Egypt."

—Heidi Kingstone, Jerusalem Report
(independent biweekly newsmagazine),
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An Iraqi expatriate filmmaker delves into Iranian women's lives.