

Challenging Patriarchy

Grantee: Sara Ishaq

Project: "FatherLand" documentary film development

Story collected by Zena Takieddine, July 20th 2012



I am half Yemeni and half Scottish; I grew up in Yemen and moved to Scotland about ten years ago. I studied documentary filmmaking and did a few small projects; nothing too big, 4 or 5 minutes-long films. A few years ago, I started my Masters in film directing and just graduated last week. When I went back to Yemen last year I wanted to make a film about me and my father and the relationship between us. I didn't really expect it to turn into a big project. It was more of a personal thing I was going to do for a university project. I booked my flight in November and arrived there in February for what was supposed to be a quick family visit. But then, the very next day, the revolution broke out, February 18th the 'Friday of Anger'. Wow, what a coincidence for me to be there! Bit by bit, I found myself extending my stay and getting more involved in what was going on. Instead of two weeks, I stayed for four months and did some film coverage of the streets for BBC and Aljazeera. In the process, I also made a short film called 'Karama Has No Walls.' I carried my camera with me everywhere and, on returning to London, I realized I had some 35 hours of footage of interaction between me, my father and my grandfather, all filmed inside our home and all within the context of the revolution unfolding.

Going through these home footages, I realized there was really my own mini-revolution going on – it was a microcosm of the outside world. Initially, before the uprisings, I was going to Yemen to film my family and Yemeni culture and traditions because there was so much to share and so much heritage. But there were some other important dynamics at play. My dad is an Arabic professor and a father of 8 children; I am the eldest, at 28. Ever since I was 15, he has been desperately trying to marry me off. His insistence on this issue was one of the main reasons I decided I needed to leave Yemen when I was 18. Our arguments about marriage have been an ongoing issue my whole life. And now, coming for a family visit a decade later, I found out that my dad himself has decided to marry again – his fourth wife – a girl young enough to be his daughter. This is totally acceptable in our culture, but definitely old-fashioned, and now there's a big gossip controversy about which of his wives should have the place of honor as the hostess inviting the guests!

Anyways, back to my initial trip in 2011. When I arrived, I informed my family that I wanted to make a film about Yemeni culture, which is closed and conservative. They couldn't really take me seriously. I was a teenager when I left home and they had no idea what I had been learning and studying in the meantime. Still, I found that my dad loved the camera. Every time I took it out, he would talk openly and explain himself and have a really animated conversation even about the most difficult issues between us. I think it was because he was addressing the camera lens as if it were an objective party and not me his daughter. For my whole life, these issues that upset me were difficult to talk about – namely him trying to get me to marry a much older man. But as soon as I turned on the camera, we could have an open conversation.

At the same time as filming life at home, I was also going down to the demonstrations to film the streets. When my grandfather overheard me talking about being out in the streets on my own, he went mad. For two reasons I think. One, he was afraid for me and Two, it is improper for a woman to be out in public amidst crowds of strange men - what would the neighbors say? My film about my relationship with my father, "Fatherland", is in some ways more challenging to make than my film about the revolution in the street because it is so much more subjective and personal.

At one point, my uncle was asking me to leave, to go back to the UK, and telling me I had no right to be in Yemen. I responded that I had every right to be here. When he found out I had extended my ticket to stay another month, he got really angry: "Why did you do that? You should have left the country! You have no business being here." The men in my family were really disapproving of me because I was breaking traditional rules, just by being on my own a lot and by hanging out with non-family men in order to get my filming done. When I would arrive home late my granddad wouldn't talk to me. When former president of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh made a public statement denouncing all the women that were participating in the public protests as 'street women' meaning they were prostitutes because they mingled with men, it became a nightmare at home. The

statement felt directly pointed at me and it validated my granddad's biggest fears and huge disapproval. Saleh's statement also outraged thousands of Yemeni women, as we know in the female-dominant march that happened the next day.

But when my family started seeing that footage I had taken was appearing on news channels, they realized that what I was doing was actually helping *them*. They could see that my work had a positive impact on the Yemeni people's cause. This really changed everything. The camera empowered me and validated me in their eyes. It also empowered them, as my family became even more involved in participating in the uprisings and the revolution.

Because I was one of the first women to take to the streets, it was difficult for my family to accept at first. But gradually, as more and more women started to participate, the changing role of women was not only more acceptable but also a cause of its own. My aunt, who has been eager to go out and see what was happening in the public square, was finally given permission by her husband to go with me. Being an unmarried 28 years old, I am already outside the norm of Yemeni culture, and somehow the rules didn't apply to me as much, so it was ok. When we approached the public square, we realized we needed to be on the other side to get a good angle to shoot. Coming closer and with a sense of purpose, the crowd of men spontaneously cleared a path for us right in the middle of it all. It was like parting the Red Sea.

Last weekend, my 'Karama' film was translated into Arabic and I was featured on cable TV. The reaction back home was incredible. None of them had really understood what I was doing until then. How often my granddad would get upset, tell me that my place was at home and give me 7 pm curfews which I would have to break to get my work done! Realizing that I actually did make a film and that it was getting recognition, they also realized that everything in Yemen is changing, including our family rules.

'FatherLand' is about this rising challenge to patriarchal society from my own family experience. I am trying to be who I am, in Yemen, in the safe and loving but traditional environment of my granddad's home, and it is an ongoing struggle. AFAC's funding and support in the development of my film has extra value for being an Arab-based fund - more proof that there's a changing attitude towards culture from inside the Arab world. My film is about the role of women changing and I am a living example. There is chaos in the outside world and there is safety at home. Still, I also need to challenge the inner order of the home to make a place for myself.

I don't think I would have been able to succeed in making any film if it weren't for the context of the revolution. It made it possible for me to stay out late, to spend time with men on the scene and to be part of what's happening in a way that was never possible before. Women are now leading the activism. Some men are also taking up the cause of women's rights. I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time, starting a film about traditional family life right when the revolution broke out. 'Fatherland' is a personal window on what a patriarchal society looks like and how it struggles to be more open and free, while the whole country is moving in the same direction.

