

On “The Death of a Princess”*

In the beginning was the event: one afternoon, in a parking lot in Saudi Arabia, a woman covered in black veil was shot and killed and a man was beheaded. They were Arab and Muslim and they were executed by the Saudi state for their alleged crime of adultery. The execution was witnessed by several hundred people, including a British citizen who managed to take some pictures.

Then came the Western press: with bold headlines (Head Chopped Off. Princess Executed For Love) they splashed those pictures across the front pages of their newspapers - grist to the mills of our prurient appetites and romantic fantasy. The sensation did not last very long. Most people soon went on to other things, except for one person, Antony Thomas, a film director.

Thomas became fascinated with one question: why did the princess die? Did she choose to die when she had every opportunity to save herself? He wanted to understand the human being inside that anonymous black veil. Thomas went to the places allegedly visited by the princess and talked with anyone who claimed to have known her or her people. Soon he discovered that, as usual, Reality was an elusive thing. That there were many ‘realities’, each valid in its own way. That witnesses tended to describe what they thought should have happened and explain what they felt should be right. At the end, Thomas knows that he knows nothing, that he still does not know what the event ‘means’. Much to his credit, he decides to offer to us, the peeping toms, not his version of the event but only a version of his own progress from nothing to nothing.

The analogy that immediately comes to mind is Akutagawa’s *Rashomon*. ‘The Death of a Princess’ is in many ways like that Japanese classic, but there is also a major difference: it offers no reconstructions from the points of view of the two protagonists. Its irony is pointedly directed at the ‘audience’, i.e. the people who appear in the film to offer explanations of the event, and the people who are watching the film and seeing in it what they want to see.

It is sad that so much controversy developed about the film before it was even shown. ‘The Death of a Princess’ is neither anti-Islam nor anti-Arab. On the contrary, it is on the whole quite sensitive and sympathetic. The prime evidence of that being its depiction of diversity, its willingness to see that the Arab/Islamic world is not monolithic. It is this last which is not acceptable to most of its detractor, for they would like to think that the Islamic world is totally homogenous in act and belief and that they represent the ‘true’ Islam. And it is this same fact which is ignored by those who see in this film a confirmation of their prejudices against the Arabs and Islam.

The detractors accuse the director of being a stooge of the Zionists, but ignore the comments of the Palestinians in the film. They charge him with being against Islam, but

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pay no attention to the remarks of the lady teacher in Saudi Arabia. They think that the film is against Saudi Arabia, but do not pause to make a distinction between the Saudi people and their present rulers. They overlook the fact that the film also makes some telling comments regarding the crisis of values generated by the present, unparalleled accumulation of wealth in that region. As for those in the West who see in the film a proof of the veracity of their prejudices, they conveniently disregard those many segments which refer to the role of the imperialist/capitalist powers of the West in the present existential crisis in the Arab world.

To say all this does not imply that the film does not have its faults. There are some problems inherent to the genre itself, not to say the medium. The film calls itself a dramatization, and distinguishes itself from a news program. But a 'docu-drama' is a neat way of having your cake and eating it too. The references to actual dates, events, and persons give one's statements a gloss of veracity despite all disclaimers to the contrary. And yet, by calling them mere dramatizations, one reserves for himself a nice loophole. Take, for example, the two most heat-generating issues mentioned in the film: that three hundred rebelling airmen were allegedly dropped to death from airplanes, and that the women of the royal harem allegedly go in their chauffeur-driven limousines for quick anonymous sex in the desert. No doubt these allegations were made to the director by his Arab informants but they were not matters of interpretation and, as such, should have been dealt with more carefully. We are told that no Saudi official was willing to talk about the death of the princess, but was anyone asked about the above two allegations? I sympathize with the Arab/Islamic anger in that regard, but the anger would draw more sympathy if it had also been aroused against those Arab males who go abroad to philander and whose exploits get much titillating coverage in the Western media. The director also failed to include an explanation which was offered by some Muslims in the discussions that followed the movie: that the princess may have chosen death as a way to regain her honour and salvation as a Muslim.

Be that as it may, there is a larger, extremely important issue which should not be glossed over in our engagement with this particular film. The Western media, particularly the American, must take cognizance of its failure to do even the minimum of justice to the Islamic societies in general and the Arab world in particular. When did the PBS show a film from any of the Arab countries or from Iran? How many persons from that part of the world have appeared on Dick Cavett's show? What American TV company has done any program on the plight of the Palestinians? What show sympathetic to the Arabs has ever appeared on prime time TV? Those cartoonists and columnists who now depict the Arabs as money-grabbing and blood-thirsty, how did they treat them when gasoline was only 17 cents a gallon? The champions of the freedom of expression should also accept the responsibilities that go with it. I commend the PBS for showing 'The Death of a Princess', but it should now go on to show some less controversial films dealing with Islam and Arabs. How about dramatizing some Arabic short stories? Or producing a film based on some Palestinian novel? Or a festival of films from Iran? Or a showing of the films on Islam made by the World Festival of Islam four years ago?

I would also urge the self-declared defenders of Islam and the Arabs to recognize the heterogeneity within themselves, to distinguish between the normative and the actual, and to learn to tolerate as well as generate criticism. For God does not change the condition of those who do not change from within themselves.

Addendum

(June 2005)

Tuesday night, the PBS showed a movie in its 'Frontline' program for the second time after 25 years. 'The Death of a Princess' had raised quite a bit of controversy when it was first shown in 1980. The Saudis had protested loudly and the PBS had to defend itself vigorously. But that was immediately after the 'Islamic' revolution in Iran in 1979, and the U.S. government was then resolutely courting the Saudis - just as the Saudis were courting the U.S.A., scared as they were of a similar revolution in their kingdom. I wrote at the time a review that appeared in a Canadian bi-weekly, *Crescent International*, published by some Muslims there. (I hear that it still comes out.) Watching the movie again, I still found it quite interesting. A couple of things, however, struck me as more notable within the present context.

One, that there was not in the film much talk of Islam in general, nor of the Arabs as a group. It carefully distinguished the two from the specificities of the Saudi rulers and the kingdom's political culture. The film gave voice to a range of internal critiques - something that is sadly so rare to find on American TV now. But then the film was made by a British journalist in the first place.

Two, that it contained a 'thick' narrative within its Rashomon-like structure. Many voices, many nuances. Contemporary details. And a richer contextualization than one can hope to find in a film of that nature today. One gets to meet a British worker making good money in Saudi Arabia, a British nanny who found in the Saudi royalty the only family she ever had, a Palestinian refugee in Beirut who thinks the princess chose to die because, like the Palestinians, she was not allowed to do anything—"the princess wanted to be"—and a Saudi teacher who, after studying in the United States, chose to go back and work in her homeland and who tells the British journalist, 'This regime is your responsibility.'

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, this time around the film did not draw much attention from the press and the Muslim/Arab groups.

For more on the film see: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/princess/>