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Discussion on Ethnic Cinema Evokes Mixed Reactions

The Open Forum on the subject 'Cinema from Ethnic Societies' held at the A.K.Hameed Pavilion at the New Theatre premises today (10th December) brought out mixed opinions from the panelists. The panel members included, Jafar Panahi from Iran and Jury Chairman, Dimitris Apostolou, Director of 'In the Shadows' from Greece, Gonul Domez Colin, Turkish writer and critique and Nedzad Begovic, Actor/Director of "Totally Personal" from Bosnia-Herzegovania.

Opening the discussions, Gonul Domez Colin described the situation in Turkey and Turkish cinema. There are around 17 million Kurds in Turkey, who could be described as ethnic. The Greeks, Armenians and Jews (most of whom are leaving) constitute the minorities. While the minorities can open their schools, ethnic Kurds cannot open their schools. Till a few years back, Kurds were forbidden from speaking their own language. Turkish cinema has for long ignored the issues of the minorities and the Kurds. Turkish cinema had really no place from the ethnic groups, the Kurds. Filmmakers had to code messages because they could not convey their messages directly, she said. Kurds were relegated to the background and were represented as Turks from the mountains. The situation has now changed for the better, with the opening of a Cultural Centre where young people can make documentaries, short films and can present their culture through films. She also acknowledged the role of Greeks, Armenians and Jews to Turkish cinema, especially women from these parts who filled in women characters in a country which forbid women.

Dimitris Apostolou, Director, 'In the Shadows' said, "he was not sure if there is anything called Greek ethnic cinema". Characterising his film as having ethnic content, he described the story of the film. His film is set in the 1950s, which has been a hard time for the Greeks and travels through the eyes of a young man who has had no dreams. The protagonist is inspired by the travelling shadow theatre and begins to have dreams. His intent through the film was to bring out the fact that everyone had



a right to dream. Adding to the dialogue, Gonul Domez Colin spoke about the exchange of Turks from Greece to Turkey and vice versa. While this was a success on paper, it caused much pain and miseries to the families, who lost their homes in the process of migration. Dimitris Apostolou added that there was however no hostility between the families who lived as neighbours.

Nedžad Begovic, the actor/director of 'Totally Personal' from Bosnia-Herzegovania spoke of the horrible period of aggression in Bosnia-Herzegovania during 1992 - 1995. Bosnia-Herzegovania consists of a mixed society, with Muslims, Orthodoxs, Catholics and minorities. "Our value reflects mixed society and films and our perspective protects mixed society. We are not comfortable with divisions". He said that the Serajov Group of Authors (SAGA) was started with a intent to bring out the conditions during the period of aggression. The collaborating filmmakers made 50-60 films in barely subsistence conditions. These films were screened in over 250 cities of the world, he said with a tinge of pride in his voice.

The floor was then open to questions. A member from the audience wanted to know if cinema is a medium to convey social messages or is it a medium of humour. In response to this, Dimitris Apostolou said that cinema is a reflection of ideas. The idea might stem from anything, including an irking thought or what one has heard, saw or read and which strikes interest. Nedžad Begovic shared similar thoughts and noted, "My experience has been that people understood artists more than politicians". Speaking of his experience in his first film he said, "I was filming in a war situation. I was not sure if I would survive but the thought that bothered me was that the film project would be killed if I am no more. As artists we cannot change the world but we can touch somebody. Our work is just a small part of a large mission".

Jafar Panahi, who joined in late, said he gets his ideas from social themes and from the place he lives. "I see my people, their lives and understand the themes and problems. It is important for a filmmaker to keep one's eyes and senses open to find ideas". When he was asked as to why he was not leaving Iran in spite of so much pressure, he narrated the incident in 2003 when he was interrogated by the Government. He was asked as to why he was not fleeing the country. He said that it was the policy of the Government (Iranian) so that open minds

would leave the country. "I am doing what I feel is the best and the most sincere way of serving my society".

Jafar Panahi's Experiences

Jafar Panahi said that he made his film "Offside" based on his daughter's entry into a football stadium. In Iran, women are forbidden from watching football match in the stadium. His daughter expressed his interest to watch a match and remained insistent even after Panahi explained to her that it was not possible. Panahi agreed to take her along on the condition that she should return back if she is not let in. At the stadium, Panahi pleaded that his daughter be let in, but the authorities did not recede. He asked his daughter to return back and proceeded to the stadium to watch the match. Within ten minutes, he heard his daughter call 'Papa' from a seat behind his. Panahi was perplexed and wanted to know how she got in. His daughter refused to tell him and said, "Women would find a way". His film "Offside" is based on this incident and explains the processes by which a woman can watch a football in a stadium.

Panahi also narrated another incident which transpired earlier in the evening today. His daughter called him from Teheran and was crying. The reason, she was under detention for the past 10 hours for not wearing a long enough skirt. He questioned the participants as to if he should rush back leaving his duty to be with his daughter? Or carry it in his mind and portray to a larger world through the medium of films?