WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

Artificial Eye presents

WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

Directed by Shirin Neshat

Starring
Pegah Ferydoni, Arita Shahrzad, Shabnam Tolouei, Orsi Tóth

Germany/Austria/France, 2009, 99 min., colour

In competition-
Venice Film Festival 2009

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An Artificial Eye Release

Images will be available on image.net

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CREW

Directed by Shirin Neshat

In collaboration with Shoja Azari
Inspired by the Novel Women Without Men by Shahrnush Parsipur

Scriptwriters Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari

Director of Photography Martin Gschlacht

Music Ryuichi Sakamoto
WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

Persian Music  
Abbas Bakhtiari

Voice over text,  
Additional text  
Steven Henry Madoff

Production Design  
Katharina Wöppermann

Set Design  
Shahram Karimi

Costume Design  
Thomas Olah

Make-up  
Heiko Schmidt
          Mina Ghoraishi

Sound  
Uve Haussig

Editing  
George Cragg
          Jay Rabinowitz
          Julia Wiedwald
          Patrick Lambertz
          Christof Schertenleib
          Sam Neave

Line Producers  
Peter Hermann
          Bruno Wagner
          Erwin M. Schmidt
          Isabell Wiegand

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CAST

Faezeh        Pegah Ferydoni

Fakhri        Arita Shahrzad

Munis         Shabnam Toulouei

Zarin         Orsi Tóth
WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

SYNOPSIS

Against the tumultuous backdrop of Iran's 1953 CIA-backed coup d’état, the destinies of four women converge in a beautiful orchard, where they find independence, solace and companionship.

Acclaimed photographer Shirin Neshat makes her directorial debut with this incisive and sumptuously filmed reflection on the pivotal moment in history that directly led to the Islamic revolution and the Iran we know today.

Women Without Men, an adaptation of Shahrnush Parsipur’s magic realist novel, is Iranian artist, Shirin Neshat’s, first feature length film. The story chronicles the intertwining lives of four Iranian women during the summer of 1953; a cataclysmic moment in Iranian history when an American led, British backed coup d’état brought down the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, and reinstalled the Shah to power. Over the course of several days four disparate women from Iranian society are brought together against the backdrop of political and social turmoil. Fakhri, a middle aged woman trapped in a loveless marriage must contend with her feelings for an old flame who has just returned from America and walked back into her life. Zarin, a young prostitute, tries to escape the devastating realization that she can no longer see the faces of men. Munis, a politically awakened young woman, must resist the seclusion imposed on her by her religiously traditional brother, while her friend Faezeh remains oblivious to the turmoil in the streets and longs only to marry Munis’ domineering brother. As the political turmoil swells in the streets of Tehran, each woman is liberated from her predicament.

Munis becomes an active part of the political struggle by plunging to her death. Fakhri frees herself from the chains of her stagnant marriage by leaving her husband and purchasing a mystical orchard in the outskirts of the city. Faezeh is taken to the orchard by Munis to face her own awakened self where Zarin has found solace in her communion with the land. But it is only a matter of time before the world outside the walls of the orchard seep into the lives of these four women as their country’s history takes a tragic turn.
WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

DIRECTOR’S NOTES

Women Without Men captures a pivotal moment in the summer 1953, when the hopes of a nation are crushed by foreign powers in a tragic blow that lead to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Thirty years later, as we look at the young men and women protesting in the streets of Iran in the face of ruthless brutality, we are reminded, once again, that this struggle is alive and well. I can only hope that Women Without Men, will make a small contribution to the vast narrative of Iran's contemporary history, in reminding us of the voice of a nation that was silenced in 1953 by powers both internal and external and that has risen again.
You weren’t born until 1957 but can you describe the impact of August 1953 on your immediate family?

By the time I was born, it became almost taboo to speak about the 1953 Coup openly, so I hardly remember even hearing my own family discussing their views and experiences. I found out later that several of my close relatives and friends were sympathizers of Dr. Mossadegh and ex-communists who didn’t dare talk about it. The reality was that immediately after the Coup, the Shah took full control of the country, including its army and had shifted the Iranian society from a once democratic society to a type of dictatorship, severely monitoring the people through his secret police called Savak. So it was very problematic to criticize the Shah even in social gatherings since Savak agents were known to be among civilians.

Regardless, a large student opposition group developed across the country against the Shah and his foreign allies, in particular the United States, which eventually led to the formation of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The framing of the story is a fundamental event in Middle Eastern politics — the first and last democratic period in Iran — yet it’s almost unheard of today. Why is August 1953 so unknown outside the Middle East?

I’m not sure why, but I sense that it’s only since Sept 11th that the American public has developed a genuine curiosity and interest in Islamic and Middle Eastern cultures and history. As far as I know, in the recent past very few scholars or the media have pointed back to the Coup of 1953 organized by the CIA, which was directly responsible for the formation of the Islamic Revolution. I happen to believe revisiting history will prove to be helpful so we can put certain facts straight; to comprehend the foundation behind the conflict between the West and Muslims; and to offer new perspectives, for example how Muslims
indeed have been a subject of the criminal behaviour of the great Western empires such as the United States and the British.

*What were your initial thoughts upon reading Parsipur's novella? Can you tell us how you first encountered the book and what made you want to turn it into a feature film?*

“Women Without Men” is quite a well-known book in Iran, and indeed Shahrnush Parsipur is one of the most celebrated living Iranian women authors. So from a young age I was familiar with her books, and mostly fascinated by her imagination and the surrealistic style of her writings which lends itself to a very visual film.

But it was not until 2002, when I felt the urge to make a feature film, and was looking for the right story that a scholar friend of mine, Professor Hamid Dabashi from Columbia University brought this novel back to my attention. I became quickly convinced that “Women Without Men” was the right story for me. It navigates between complex themes of socio-political, religious and historical realities of Iran; and yet profound personal, emotional, philosophical and universal subjects that transcend any notions of time and place.

Also I was captivated by the poetic nature of the novel, and the use of symbolism and metaphor; for example how the orchard where the women take refuge functions as a place of ‘exile,’ a subject so poignant and relevant to so many of us Iranians.

*Did you strike up a friendship with Parsipur? Can you tell us your working relationship with her and how her works in general have affected your own work as an artist?*

As soon as I decided to commit myself to this project, I started to look for her. I found out she was living in Northern California, so I went to meet her. Ever since that encounter, she has been a major force in my life; both for her writing and as
a woman who has endured pain more than anyone I know; years of imprisonment, separation from her child, poverty and illness. Yet Shahrnush remains as one the most positive and optimistic people I’ve ever met. It was particularly touching when she agreed to play a role in the film, and I think she did a great job as the ‘madam’ in the brothel in Zarin’s story.

_**How did you go about transforming the book into a film?**_

I knew that it was going to be a big challenge, mostly because in this particular story one must simultaneously follow five main characters, each character being totally unique in her nature, aspirations and representation of distinct social and economic class. Some characters were so surrealistic, that it gave a fairy tale quality to the narrative; for example Mahdokht, being the woman who could not cope with her humanity and eventually planted herself to be a tree. So at the end, we eliminated Mahdokht from our script. As you will see in the film, Munis and Zarin are quite magic in their nature while Faezeh and Fakhri remain very realistic.

Also, in Parsipur’s novel, the political material was only mentioned as a background to the women’s lives; but I decided to expand the narrative by emphasizing the historical, political crisis of the time, which was the American organized coup d’état that overthrew Dr. Mossadegh’s government. I went as far as shaping Munis, one of the main characters of the film, as a political activist. So through Munis, we follow the political development.

_**Obviously you were unable to film on location in Iran. Where did you film instead?**_

We shot the film in Casablanca, Morocco. Mainly because we found that Casablanca beautifully resembled Tehran in the 1950’s, and having worked in Morocco several times in the past, we had developed a great working relationship with the film industry and people of Morocco. So then it became the
How was your Women of Allah series of photographs perceived in Iran and how do you think your film will be embraced there?

The Women of Allah series was never publicly exhibited in Iran; and even its reproduction in prints caused a lot of controversy. Many of the officials found it subversive and criticized it, even if they couldn’t quite comprehend its meaning and conceptual orientation. I suspect Women Without Men would not be permitted to be screened in Iran, partially due to my own history as an artist but mostly due to the controversy over the novel which has been banned since it’s publication; and most obviously due to nudity that occasionally appears in the film.

Can you tell us the general saturated look of the film, and what you intended by this? In particular the stark contrast between the sepia palette in the Tehran scenes versus the more colorful textures of the garden. What are you aiming for by using such a stark contrast between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ worlds?

The question of color or absence of color has always been tied to my concepts. For example in the Women of Allah series, I felt the severity of the subject; the portraits of revolutionary militant women lent themselves more to stark black and white imagery. Similarly, in the case of video installations such as Rapture or Turbulent where the narratives evolved around the notion of ‘opposites,’ so again the black and white helped me to exaggerate the dichotomy between the different genders in Islamic cultures. But in the case of the film Women Without Men, I thought it was interesting to have saturated color, mainly to pay tribute to the period that the film takes place; the 1950’s. However throughout the film, the scheme of color changes from, let’s say, the orchard which is quite colorful, to the scenes of street protests where I purposely drained the color, to give a sort of archival quality to the picture.
Can you discuss casting the film - did you use professional actresses, or did you cast unknowns?

The casting for the film was quite challenging as we knew from the start that it was not possible to cast Iranian actors living in Iran. So we were limited to the actors living in Europe. Then the problem became that most of second generation Iranians living abroad speak Farsi with an accent. So the process of casting took over one and a half years. We worked with a wonderful Austrian casting agency that travelled all across Europe to bring us some of the most talented Iranian actors. In the end, all our main actors had professional experience, and I invited my friend Arita Shahrzad (Fakhri) who is a painter and had collaborated with me on a short film and had been my favorite model for photography. Also, I should mention that Orsi Toth who played the role of Zarin, is a Hungarian actress, whom I came to know through her wonderful performance in the film called Delta.

You’re obviously enchanted with the visual image of the chador. Is this fascination purely cinematic or is there something deeper?

My interest in the veil, or the chador has both aesthetic and metaphoric reasons. The veil has always been a complex subject; some consider it as an ‘exotic’ emblem, some find it a symbol of ‘repression,’ while others find it a symbol of ‘liberation’. The veil seems to remain a Western controversy, while in fact the veil is what many Muslim women wear in the public domain, so it does not always have to be so politically loaded. In Women Without Men, since it takes place in the 1950’s, when the women actually had a ‘choice’ regarding the veil, we have women like Munis and Faezeh who are constantly veiled, then we have Fakhri who is Westernized and fashionable and not at all covered by it.

The Garden figures prominently both in Persian culture and your own upbringing.
What, for you, is the ultimate significance of the garden, in your culture, your work and in this film?

The concept of a garden has been central to the mystical literature in Persian and Islamic traditions, such as in the classic poetry of Hafez, Khayyam and Rumi where the garden is referred to as the space for ‘spiritual transcendence’. In Iranian culture, the garden has also been regarded in political terms, suggesting ideas of ‘exile,’ ‘independence’ and ‘freedom.’ I have made several video based works in which their concepts explore the symbolic value of the garden in the Islamic tradition. For example in my brief video installation Tooba, the core of the film was the tree of Tooba, a mythological tree that is regarded as a ‘sacred tree’, a ‘promised tree’ in paradise. I created an imaginary garden where the tree of Tooba stood at its center, while a group of people ran toward it to take refuge. Both in Tooba and in Women Without Men the garden is treated as a space of exile, refuge, oasis, where one can feel safe and secure.

SHIRIN NESHAT: AN INTERVIEW
Over the last 12 years, Iranian-born Shirin Neshat (b. 1957) has produced a series of lyrical video installations that touch on such issues as gender politics, cultural self-definition and the authority of religion. Drawing on the artist’s experiences as a Middle Eastern émigré as well as more universal themes of identity, desire and social isolation, these works have garnered many honors, including, in 1999, a Venice Biennale International Golden Lion prize. Since 2003, Neshat has been engaged in an ambitious two-part video/film project based on (and titled after) the 1989 novel “Women Without Men” by the Iranian writer Shahrnush Parsipur.

The project’s five individual videos—Mahdokht (2004), Zarin (2005), Munis (2008), Faezeh (2008) and Farokh Legha (2008)—each of which center on one of the female characters in the novel, have recently been brought together into a single multi-room installation. First shown in 2008 at the ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum in Denmark, the composite work travelled to Faurschou Beijing Gallery in China and the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens. It will go on view at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm this fall, with other venues pending. In addition, four of the videos were screened at last year’s “Prospect.1 New Orleans” Biennial.

While making the videos (largely sponsored by Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris), Neshat also worked on a soon-to-be-released feature film. The movie, which spins off from both the novel and the videos, features a dreamlike narrative that interweaves the women’s personal stories with the political upheavals of 1953 Tehran, the setting for Parsipur’s book. (Alarmed by the nationalization of Iran’s oil fields, British and American operatives that year abetted a coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, reinstating the Shah.) To create the videos and the film, Neshat worked closely with her long-time collaborator, Shoja Azari, who co-authored the final script. The film version, shot in Casablanca in the Farsi language, primarily
uses Iranian actors who live in Europe. It also includes a voiceover written by poet and art critic Steven Henry Madoff. Over a series of weeks, I spoke with Neshat about the genesis of the “Women Without Men” project. We discussed its meaning to her, the challenge of translating Parsipur’s novel into moving images, the tricky task of balancing its poetic and political elements, and the differing demands of video and film.

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**Eleanor Heartney:** *The film and the installations tell the story in radically different ways.*

**SN:** Yes, they are very different kinds of constructions. The logic behind the editing of the video installations was to create a group of five nonlinear narratives, giving a glimpse into the nature of each of the five characters, as opposed to telling their entire stories. The idea was that the viewer would walk from room to room and, at the end, be able to put the story together. So in reality the viewer becomes the editor. The logic for the movie version was to make a straight narrative, a more or less conventional film, while relying on my visual aesthetics. The main challenge was how to fuse my artistic vocabulary with cinematic language. I realized that I had underestimated the difficulties of pacing, story development, dialogue and many other related issues. In a film, you must never lose the thread of the story, and at times beautiful imagery has to be discarded as too distracting. The issues of comprehension and clarity are very important, whereas in art practice, enigma and abstraction are encouraged. In the end, I learned that the fundamental difference between cinema and art is the question of character development. In all my past work, such as the videos Rapture [1999] and Passage [2001], I had treated people sculpturally, devoid of any character or identity. They were simply iconic figures. But with this film, I had to learn how to build characters, how to enter their inner worlds, their mindsets. This was an entirely new experience for me. I began to appreciate directors like Bergman, who could keep you pinned in your seat, sometimes spending two
WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

hours merely with two characters in one room.

**EH:** *It can be argued that Parsipur, living in Iran, had to deal rather obliquely with her concerns about women’s roles and the place of religion. You, however, could have made a more overtly political film.*

*Why did you retain so many fantastical elements?*

**SN:** In cultures where citizens struggle with heavy social control, magic realism is a natural tendency. For Iranians, who have endured one dictatorship after another, poetic-metaphoric language is a way to express all that is not allowed in reality. Of course, these days, the government has a good grasp of subversive art and literature. So even though it takes place in 1953, Parsipur’s novel is considered highly problematic by the current Islamic government, which is sensitive to the book’s religious and sexual overtones. Personally, magic realism seems to suit me well, because I feel most comfortable with surrealism—not only as a strategy to avoid the obvious but as a means to make art that transcends the specificities of time and place.

Eleanor Heartney,
published *Art & Today* (Phaidon, 2008).

**POLITICAL & HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**
In the summer of 1953, the British and American governments initiated a joint Anglo American coup to overthrow the first democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh and his government.

A powerful figure of tremendous stature in the history of modern Iran, Dr. Mossadegh was highly popular for his honesty, integrity, and sincerity but most of all he was admired for nationalizing Iranian oil and therefore taking it out of British control in 1951.

**Background**

Although Iran never was officially part of the Commonwealth, its rulers were dependent on British backing and financing. Mossadegh was to become the first Iranian leader who challenged the status quo and openly confronted the British by claiming that Iran’s only natural asset – petroleum - should be the source of work and prosperity of the population of Iran.

British officials refused to cooperate with the new Iranian government and the biggest refinery in the world stopped operating. At that time 60% of the petrol consumed in the Western world came from Iran and thus the consequences of the conflict had far wider-reaching effects than those immediately involved. Also, the war in Korea had sparked a new suspicion of Communism and Western powers feared the intervention of Iran’s neighboring country, the Soviet Union.

American President Harry Truman tried to intermediate between the British and Mossadegh but due to the unwillingness of the British to compromise on any point of the agenda, no agreement could be found. In 1952 the British plotted to overthrow Mossadegh and his cabinet but the attempt failed and Mossadegh cut off diplomatic ties with the British government and ordered the deportation of all British citizens from Iran. Infuriated by this initiative, the British tried to regain
their control of Iranian petrol by blocking off the country’s oil export through military force and by preventing all Western countries from purchasing oil from Iran.

Toward the end of 1952, elections both in Britain and the US brought new players to power. Using the threat of the ‘spread of Communism’ Prime Minister Chruchill eventually succeeded in convincing President Eisenhower to carry out a coup in Iran. America, who up to then had never been involved in an overthrow of any foreign government, was to orchestrate the coup as British citizens were no longer allowed to enter Iran.

The plan for this coup d’état - called Operation AJAX - was carried out by Kermit Roosevelt, the CIA Agent in charge of the Middle East (a grandson of Theodore Roosevelt and a distant cousin of Franklin D. Roosevelt) in cooperation with the Shah and the Iranian military, led by General Zahedi.

In accordance with the plan, on August 16, 1953, the Shah violated the Constitution of Iran and dismissed Dr. Mossadegh and his nationalist cabinet without the parliament’s approval and appointed General Zahedi as the new Prime Minister. He ordered the Royal troops to occupy Mossadegh’s house and to hold him under house arrest until further instructions. But the supporters of Mossadegh prevented the coup’s success. The news was publicized and caused major dissatisfaction amongst the people throughout the country. In a matter of hours, massive rioting erupted in Iran in support of Mossadegh while the Shah and his wife fled to Italy. The people’s protest and demonstration continued for two days and led them to pull down the statues of the Shah and his father all over the country.

Only a few days later, on August 19th, 1953, a second attempt was made. On that day, a group of tanks led by General Zahedi moved through Tehran and surrounded Mossadegh’s residence again.
The forces behind the coup d'état managed to pull a large number of bribed hooligans into the streets to rally against Mossadegh. Americans paid several million dollars to high ranking generals, politicians, and newspaper owners to fabricate false information about Mossadegh and his cabinet. Finally, the army and police forces let the mob reach the Prime Minister’s residence and, after hours of bombarding and fighting a bloody battle with the small loyal group of Mossadegh’s guards, the mob entered his house and burnt it down. In a matter of hours, Mossadegh and his top cabinet leaders surrendered themselves to the now appointed Prime Minister, General Zahedi, and the Shah came back to Iran.

During Mossadegh’s trial in the Shah’s military court, he was falsely convicted of treason and sentenced to three years imprisonment. Thereafter he was transferred to his country house in Ahmad-Abad near Karadj where he lived under house arrest until his death in 1967 at the age of 85.

A consortium of British and American companies took over the refinery in Abadan. Annual payments were made to the Shah’s dictatorial government, but no Iranian auditor was ever allowed to inspect the books.

1953 and Mossadegh’s overthrow is a critical period in Iranian history which marks the first and last democratically elected government in Iran. During the brief period of Mossadegh’s rule, Iran was a free country in which democratic principles like freedom of expression and religion were respected. The reinstallation of the Shah to power meant a 25-year long cruel dictatorship for the people of Iran and total availability of Iranian oil reserves to the Western world at advantageous terms.

At the same time the illegitimate and bloody coup alienated a nationalist elite within Iran, which had looked to the United States as its ideological ally and its one reliable supporter. It paved the way for the incubation of extremist movements and marked the beginning of the deterioration of the relationship...
WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

between the United States, Iran and many other Middle Eastern countries.
WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.