

PALESTINIAN GRIEF IN ART: A LOOK AT *FARHA*

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Farha (2022) is the story of a 14-year-old girl whose coming-of-age at the onset of Israel's occupation of Palestine in 1948 serves as a microcosm of the experiences of past generations. The main character, Farha, is played by actress Karam Taher and dreams of going to school in the city. She fights with her father to break the stereotypical gender roles that confine her home life. Farha's youthful activities help the viewer empathize with her. However, the lighthearted beginning of the film is juxtaposed with heavy undertones, eventually causing the viewer to mourn Farha's original life as the story delves further into the Palestinian *Nakba*. (*Nakba* is the Arabic word for "catastrophe" and is used to describe the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians when the Israeli state was forcibly established in 1948.) *Farha*'s director, Darin J. Sallam, does not explicitly reveal the political background to the viewer, but rather shows it through scenes of violence and anguish that build in a blur to the perspective of the titular character.

The cruelty of the film is hard to watch and the emotions

portrayed on Farha's face throughout are heartbreaking, yet this is what Sallam intended. Sallam, a Jordanian of Palestinian descent, remembers the *Nakba* through the words of her own family and friends.

In an interview with *Middle East Eye*, she stated, "Farha means joy. And Palestine was the joy that was stolen from the Palestinians. I knew this was the film I wanted to make as a feature."¹ She described how Farha's story is based on a woman her mother knew who had lived in a storage room during the *Nakba*. She later escaped to Syria and lived in anguish and fear. What we see through Farha's eyes, thus, is but a small look into the thousands of people murdered, displaced, and devastated by the *Nakba*. Many viewers relate to the emotional turmoil displayed in the film; hundreds of Palestinians, for example, have voiced how the film resonated with their painful personal stories.

"Farha was my grandma. She was all of our young, hopeful, ambitious grandmas whose life was shattered because of the *Nakba*. Every scene of *Farha* was a visual of the oral histories we've been told for generations,"

said Palestinian-American activist Rifqa Falaneh to the *Middle East Eye*.^{1,2} Falaneh is just one of the many people who have been deeply touched by Farha's profound duty to tell the Palestinian story.

Farha's naivety and loyalty to her father ultimately stop her from almost escaping with another Palestinian family when Israeli soldiers enter her village. Her father still chastises her for her recklessness, locking her in a cellar where she remains for most of the film. He tells her to wait for him, because he will return soon. Farha keeps herself busy by searching through storage in the cellar and catching rainwater in her hands. She does not speak for the majority of the film.

Cinematographically, there is a distinct tonal shift in the film, initially showing Farha and her friends dressed in vivid colors and reading in the sun, then transitioning to the dark and dreary room where Farha is confined. Sallam conveys the world to the audience through the eyes of Farha. As bombs shower down around her house, she is stuck waiting and hoping that one day her father will re-

turn so that she may escape. Yet the most poignant and heartbreaking part of the film comes as the audience adopts Farha's view through a thin crack in the storage wall.

A Palestinian family of two children and their parents enter her courtyard. Soon after, the mother gives birth to a baby boy on the tile. For a second, there is hope that Farha might leave the cellar when she asks the father of the family, Abu Mohammad, to let her out. However, the moment is cut short when an Israeli commander and a Palestinian informant enter the courtyard and search the house for weapons, finding Abu Muhammad's family hiding on the roof of the house. The soldiers shoot and kill the parents and two older children in broad daylight.

This juxtaposition between life—the birth of a beautiful baby—with death is handled with care by Sallam, featuring fast-paced shots that resonate with the viewer. Like Farha, the viewer is a helpless onlooker, breathlessly on edge that the soldiers might come close to the storage room and kill her next.

However, *Farha* still manages to show a picture of humanity even in war, as a young Israeli soldier cannot bring himself to kill the baby boy born in the courtyard. Sallam evokes the powerlessness of the viewer through Farha as she fervently tries to leave the storage

room, wanting to rescue the baby boy left on the floor. We witness her attempts to shoot open the door; her efforts are in vain when she finds the baby dead outside in the courtyard. Farha's despair is conveyed through the pacing of the shots and close-ups of the horror on her face as she and the viewer realize it is too late. In a rush of emotions, we become one with Farha: one with her despair and one with the entire community that aches for their lost family, aches for their pain.

Farha is a painful reminder of the past, but it does more than tell a story. The film acts as a tribute to Palestinian loss of life and land; the grief of the *Nakba* stays with the viewer long after the film ends. The film has faced an uphill battle, with Israeli Culture Minister Chilli Tropper going as far as to claim that the film depicted "false plots against IDF soldiers," as well as anger over the film's eligibility for the Oscars.³ As staunch criticism is thrown at the film, the director remains relentless in her pursuit to tell the truth and amplify Palestinian voices, and by extension, expose the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine and perpetuation of an apartheid regime. The movie itself is a wanton cry for peace, one that everyone should pay attention to.

Farha is streaming on Netflix in Arabic and Hebrew with English subtitles.

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