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Yalda, A Night for Forgiveness

John C. Lyden

Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, johnclyden@gmail.com

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Yalda, A Night for Forgiveness

Abstract

This is a film review of *Yalda, A Night for Forgiveness* (2019) directed by Massoud Bakhshi.

Keywords

Diyya, Death Penalty, Iran, Forgiveness, Justice

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Yalda, A Night for Forgiveness (2019), dir. Massoud Bakhshi

Massoud Bakhshi's latest film unfolds in the studio of an imagined reality television show in Iran in which convicted killers have the opportunity to be forgiven on air by the next of kin of their victims. Iranian civil and religious law actually permits the punishment for murderers, which is usually death, to be reduced to a sentence in prison if the next of kin forgives them. In such cases, the next of kin will receive *diyya* or blood money paid to them. This film tells the fictional story of Maryam, who has been sentenced to death for the murder of her husband, even though she claims it was accidental. Her husband's daughter Mona has agreed to be on the program to consider forgiving Maryam.

Complicating the situation is the fact that Nasser Zia, the victim, was a 65-year-old man who arranged a temporary marriage—legal in Iran—with the relatively young Maryam. Mona is Nasser's adult child from his previous marriage, so she is considerably older than Maryam. Nasser has been unable to obtain a divorce from his ill wife, so he proposed to Maryam, but only on the

condition that it be temporary, and that there be no children—which would affect Mona’s inheritance. Maryam says she viewed Nasser as a father figure who had looked after their family for years, as her late father was Nasser’s driver, and Maryam was given a job at Nasser’s company as well, working with Mona. She was very happy in the marriage until she became pregnant, which angered Nasser and resulted in a fight between them and his accidental death. But had Maryam not panicked and run away, she would have been able to call an ambulance and so potentially save his life, which is the main reason she was charged with murder.

Although the censors in Iran approved this film so that it could be made and released, from an outside perspective it seems like an indictment of a ruthless and unjust system that gives power to some men and takes it away from women, pitting them against each other. Nasser desired Maryam, but was unwilling to give her the full privileges of marriage or children from him, and the law permitted him this. That she receives a death sentence for her actions also seems an excessive punishment for the young widow (although in Iran the death penalty exists not only for murder but also for homosexuality, prostitution, burglary, adultery, and blasphemy, among others). That Maryam and Mona are set against each other for financial and legal reasons only drives home the point that men have designed a system that disempowers women (as well as many men) who are then incentivized to battle each other for their rights. The television show reminded me of nothing so much as *The Hunger Games*, with the bizarre mixture of entertainment and violence in which the crowd ostensibly roots for the survival of participants even while they sanction the trivialization of their fate—enjoying the mixture of celebrity appearances, love songs, and lottery drawings that fill out the show.

I won’t reveal all the twists and turns in this story, which has a dramatic finish that is as surprising as it is powerful. Bakhshi may not have been allowed to provide as direct a critique of

Iranian society as he did in his earlier film *A Respectable Family* (2012), but it is there nonetheless. He was unable to travel to the United States for the Sundance Film Festival due to the current state of international politics, which only makes it more pressing that people see this film which humanizes the citizens of Iran and shows the challenges with which they live.