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Saudi Runaway

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Saudi Runaway

Abstract

This is a film review of *Saudi Runaway* (2020) directed by Susanne Regina Meures.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia, Patriarchy, Arranged Marriage, Asylum, Women's rights

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.



Saudi Runaway (2020), dir. Susanne Regina Meures

Each year, 1000 women escape Saudi Arabia and claim asylum in another country due to being forced into arranged marriages. Meures wanted to tell the story of one such woman from start to finish, documenting her escape. Through a confidential online chatroom, she found Muna, who was willing to film herself with two concealed cell phones and periodically upload the footage for Meures to edit. Muna documents her decision to leave, her father's physical abuse of her younger brother Zayd, and the plans for her arranged marriage. Her plan is to escape on her honeymoon in Abu Dhabi as she cannot escape directly from Saudi Arabia. She must take her passport from her husband's bag while he sleeps, get to the airport, and then eventually get to Germany to claim asylum. The fact that we are watching the actual footage from this story makes the suspense almost unbearable.

Muna makes her decision to leave not only because she was pressured into a marriage she did not want, but also because her father is a controlling figure who beats her brother and verbally

abuses her mother, and she has no power to stop him. She herself cannot go out without a man, cannot learn to drive, cannot renew her passport. Abusive fathers live in every society, but the laws of Saudi Arabia allow them to act unchallenged. When Zayd tells Muna to call the police to arrest their father, she patiently explains that the police are on the father's side. She hates to leave him and her mother, but feels she must not only for herself but for the women who she hopes will someday see her story.

Muna also documents the beauty of Islam, as she films the Kaaba in Mecca, and her family's traditions of fast breaking during Ramadan, and preparing for the wedding. She does not believe that Allah wants women to be second class citizens, and so recognizes that the will of men has made her society as it is. The faces of everyone but Muna are blurred, to protect their identity, and no last names are used—but we still get to know her family as real people caught in a real situation.

Her story was filmed just this past summer, and it is perhaps worth a spoiler to mention that Muna did achieve asylum in Germany: Meures mentioned at the screening that she would not have felt she could release the film, had she been unsuccessful. Adding to the happy ending is the fact that Muna's mother divorced her father and took the children, which Saudi Arabian law allowed her. She is also able to visit Muna in Germany. Meures said at the screening that she believes the real value of the film is having a woman tell her own story of escape, not having it told by others, and she empowered Muna as the camera operator and cinematographer to make her own decisions about what to film and how to do so. The result is a unique film and a powerful story of one courageous woman and her quest to challenge patriarchy.