



February 2021

Sabaya

Jodi McDavid
jodi@fiddleconsult.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Recommended Citation

McDavid, Jodi (2021) "Sabaya," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss1/13>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Sabaya

Abstract

This is a film review of Sabaya (2021), directed by Hogir Hirori.

Keywords

ISIS, sex trafficking, slavery, genocide, Yazidi

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Author Notes

Jodi McDavid is an instructor in Folklore and Gender & Women's Studies at Cape Breton University. She earned her BA at St. Thomas University (New Brunswick) and her MA and PhD from Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her PhD dissertation was on anticlericalism in folk and popular culture. Her current research interests include vernacular religion, the folklore and folklife of children and adolescents, and gender and women's studies.



Sabaya (2021), dir. Hogir Hirori

Sabaya is the name captors use for Yazidi women. While watching this film I was reminded of the conflict in Bosnia and Serbia because a consequence of the war was genocide, not just in the eradication of people of a separate ethno-cultural or religious group, but through rape and impregnation by captors. Rape was a tool of the Serbian forces who targeted violence against women for the purpose of destroying a woman, a people, a culture, and a religion.

On the world stage, the attack on the Yazidis in Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is known, but not as central as it should be to our understanding of what is happening or has happened in the world. Perhaps it is because we refuse to face atrocities, or perhaps distance allows us to ignore things we do not have the emotional wherewithal to face. It may also be because we believe ISIS does “bad things,” and are not surprised when we hear they continue to do more. Perhaps we are more concerned about how ISIS has directly impacted North America. As North

Americans, we are often oblivious to the various ethnic minorities that live throughout the world, and the various places where land is contested and minorities are persecuted to this extent.

The lack of awareness most North Americans seem to have about the plight of Yazidi women may also be because we don't understand their faith. Yazidis have an ancient monotheistic religion which has ethno-cultural elements as well. The core belief is that God gave the earth to a fallen angel to care for, which Islamism has cast as "devil worship" due to Satan being described as a fallen angel. Yazidis believe in monogamy and marry within their culture or must leave the group.

The women stolen by ISIS at the center of this film are young girls and married women, held in camps, forced to "marry" their captors, and frequently moved from man to man as sex slaves. The people working to rescue these women do so at great expense. It is risky, all consuming, and personal. Some Yazidi women go undercover in the camp, many of them those that had previously been rescued; I suspect they also see abuse and atrocities and risk "remarriage" to ISIS in doing so, although this was not explored in the film. An organization is doing its best to find the women whose families have reported them missing, but these camps are full of women. I wonder what happens to the women who are there who are not Yazidi, or the women who due to war, have no one left to go looking for them.

The film was eye opening, but it required additional context for better understanding of the situation. The Al-Hol Refugee Camp, for example, is a place where these women are held, and a refugee camp itself may be a humanitarian effort but in this camp young children are radicalized, and Yazidi women are pressured and threatened with violence if they do not convert. The Al-Hol camp is under control by the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are backed by the United States. A significant portion of these Forces are Kurdish, whose history with the Yazidis is also complicated.

The film primarily focusses on the man at the head of the Yazidi Home Center, which helps to provide some structure to the film. In this way, it also reminds me of *E-team*, a documentary film I reviewed in 2014, about a couple who investigated genocide. The film does discuss sexual violence, but I feel it would still be appropriate for university class viewing, especially in gender and women's studies, political science, and religious studies classes. It would be a good film to show to prompt students to do their own research and encourage them to discuss the complexity of the situation in Iraq. Sabaya won Sundance's Directing Award: World Cinema Documentary.