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## Fremont

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## Fremont

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Fremont* (2023), directed by Babak Jalali.

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### Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. 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 also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



**Fremont (2023), dir. Babak Jalali**

Donya is an Afghan refugee who was a translator for the US Army in Afghanistan, and had to escape when the Taliban returned to power, leaving family and friends behind. Her taciturn demeanor might suggest some PTSD, given the loss and trauma she has experienced—but mainly she appears isolated and lonely, with few friends and a mundane life and job, packaging fortune cookies at a small company that produces them for Chinese restaurants in Fremont, California. Nonetheless, she has trouble sleeping, which is why she seeks out a psychiatrist for prescription sleeping pills. He insists on talk therapy, however, which is difficult not only given her unwillingness to share but also due to the therapist's own awkwardness. His best idea is to read Jack London's *White Fang* to her, as he suggests that she is much like the eponymous dog-wolf, a courageous yet out of place immigrant in his world.

Her fortunes change, however (pun intended), when the fortune cookie writer at her company dies and the owner hires her as the new fortune writer. She can write whatever she

wishes, as long as the fortunes are neither too general or too specific, too short or too long—in other words, anodyne, and able to fit into the required one-line space on a tiny slip of paper. The owner does insist that she repeat “I love myself” out loud, because only someone with self-love can write good fortunes for others, in his opinion. Whether she really does is not totally clear.

Donya, normally so passive, uncharacteristically takes her destiny into her own hands when she writes “desperate for a dream” and her phone number in a fortune, and waits to see what fate may bring her. She imagines a blind date with the person who responds, and practices her prepared lines and smiling for the encounter. But things take an unexpected turn when the purported meet-up is not what she thinks it is, and there is no dream date at the other end. Serendipitously, however, she meets a shy mechanic on her journey to the meet-up, when she stops to check her oil. He also has a lonely existence, as the sole mechanic on duty at all times. They have a connection precisely because they both communicate minimally and yet with an awkward honesty, and they are both lacking any larger community to give them identity or purpose. One senses that this could be the human connection for which she has been longing.

Donya is played by real-life Afghan refugee Anaita Wali Zada, who conveys restraint but little emotion. The film does not dig very deep into the refugee experience, so that her story might have been that of any lonely young person. I would have liked more development of her own story, or a greater connection to the challenges she faced in leaving behind her family due to siding with the US Army in Afghanistan. But the film did not choose to tell that story, leaving audiences to wonder what is implied by this minimalist form of story-telling. It is suggestive of interesting ideas, but never quite clarifies what those might be.