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Joonam

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Joonam* (2023), directed by Sierra Urich.

Keywords

Iranian Revolution, Immigration, Persia, Farsi

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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).



Joonam (2023), dir. Sierra Urich

Filmmaker Sierra Urich was born from an Iranian mother and an American father, grew up in the United States, and knows very little Farsi. But she has a desire to know more about her family history, so she invites her 88-year-old grandmother, Behjat, to her parents' home in Vermont to be interviewed. Sierra's mother Mitra can translate, as Behjat still knows very little English. What ensues is a journey of self discovery for all of them, and Urich chronicles the process of making the documentary itself as much if not more than the family histories disclosed. We are able to see a family arguing, crying, and laughing together as they recount sometimes painful experiences of loss while negotiating their own relationships.

The real star of the film is Behjat, who died in 2022 at the age of 90; the film is dedicated to her memory. Behjat was a spunky and hilarious character, and the film's audience is instantly aware of this as we can see the subtitles translating her remarks even before Sierra knows what she is saying. Much of the humor of the film comes from the asides in Farsi between Mitra and

Behjat that Sierra would miss until she saw the full translation, long after the filming. Towards the end, she remarks that she now knows her grandmother much better, and her mother as well, as their personal character is revealed as well as some of the details of their past. Not everything can be discussed, and not everything needs to be: Mitra insists that Sierra leave out the details of Behjat's grandfather's murder by an extremist, both because she finds it too upsetting and because she believes that Sierra may be in danger if she includes this story in her film. Mitra carries a great deal of trauma, as she left Iran as a college student to study in the United States just as the Iranian revolution was beginning in 1979, and she was unable to return home or to see her parents for sixteen years. She finally was able to bring them to the United States in 1995, and the film includes poignant home video of their reunion as their flight arrives. Urich has included a great deal of these home movies, whether those made by herself as a child or teenager, or older films or photos from when her family was in Iran and her mother was young. Archival footage of pre-revolutionary Iran as well as more recent footage is also included to give historical context for the events they are considering, but Urich wisely avoids including narrative explanation of such scenes, usually preferring to add a beautiful and poignant musical soundtrack. Urich wants to visit Iran but knows she cannot at present, especially given the recent unrest and protests against the government. Her mother fears for her daughter, but Sierra just wants to understand her history, and longs to know Farsi better. Throughout the film, she takes virtual lessons with first one teacher and then another, and when the latter travels to Iran, Sierra is able to walk virtually through the streets and her emotional reaction is palpable. She has no qualms about including footage that shows her vulnerability in this way, as well as that of her mother and grandmother, and this is the real beauty in the film.

For all that she has seen, Behjat has a less fearful attitude than Mitra, as she focuses on the details of her wedding and the sense of liberation it provided to her. This may seem counterintuitive when one thinks of a 15-year-old Iranian girl getting married in 1947, but to her it meant that she was an adult and could live her own life. She mourns her husband and seems to only have the best memories of her marriage. It is always astounding and impressive to hear the stories of immigrants who, though they have experienced trauma and loss, choose to focus on their experiences of joy with love and gratitude. This film is a love poem to strong women, to family, and to love shared across generations that transcends diverse language, history, and culture to provide identity and unity.