

40 Days of Silence

SAODAT ISMAILOVA

2014

For a film about silence, ironically Saodat Ismailova's piece is incredibly loud. Focusing on the tension between emptiness and action, strangely the dislocated space between the two becomes full of sound and texture. Dialogue is replaced by diegetic sounds, which become larger than expected, totally filling the soundtrack. When people are quiet, it seems they hear the low hum of background noise clearly: the slow screech of a train in the background, the scraping of a knife against bread and the near constant bleats of livestock. When people do speak it is often distorted, heard through a doorway, made strange and muffled by distance and barriers. Or it is a voice on a radio heard through crackling interference. Sometimes sound and image aren't organically connected. The radio broadcast of a woman's tragic tale is heard over shots of the snowy mountains and the sound of wind is added as another layer. In a scene shortly after a woman is shot with the thudding sound of a heartbeat over her mostly eclipsed image, suddenly the sound of her sobs begin to take over the soundscape. Initially the noises of despair work in tandem with the heartbeat, until eventually they take over the soundscape entirely.

40 Days of Silence is devoid of masculine presence. The film is set in a rural, mountainous village in Tajikistan. Four generations of women come together under this roof, however their lives are touched by the actions or indeed absence of men. A strange cyclical history that repeats itself throughout the four generations is represented. The cycle is a mixture of independence and modernity, turning to dependence and cruelty and ultimately to tradition and new life. Amidst the stunning countryside, gorgeous and vibrant traditional patterns, there is a muted sadness brought out by Ismailova's directorial choices. Ismailova's cinematic palette has been compared to the great Andrei Tarkovsky and James Benning. Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska for Eurasianet described the Uzbek director as having transplanted, 'Their moody, slow-burning gaze to a Central Asian setting.' This effect is made all the more striking by the regional landscapes architecture, patterns and colours being so different from western styles. Seeing these vibrant scenes through a muted, melancholic lens gives a new visual perspective on the Central Asian region, and places

Ismailova on the vanguard of defining a new cinematic language for a region underrepresented in film.

One of the major themes in 40 Days of Silence is spirituality, this deep connection with tradition and the intangible is displayed as being so much more accessible from the remote village. The grandmother, at a religious ceremony, tells her granddaughter Bibichka, 'Never leave the village again, your happiness is here.' In this shot, all of the women are seated on the floor, around a smorgasbord of food. Their ages and expressions range far, from old to young, happy to stoic. Bibichka's mother, however, desperately wants to leave the village. There is a man in the picture, only ever mentioned, and she longs to go to the city to join him. But the city is seen less a place of opportunity and more a place of moral decay by the older generation.

The alternate name for 40 Days of Silence is 'Chilla', which is the spiritual practice of penance and solitude in Sufism. When Bibichka undergoes her forty days of prayer, silence and solitude, she retreats to her grandmother's home. This ties the grandmother's rural and traditional lifestyle with a great spiritual wealth. However, Chilla is also a penance, and it becomes gradually clear what Bibichka's self imposed penance is for. But the message is not some distorted didactic on modernity, the city and sin, but rather a conversation about the organic cycles of human life and experience. In this case, a dialogue, or lack thereof, centred around issues of womanhood and femininity in a patriarchal culture. In many ways, Ismailova's film makes Islam and Sufism synonymous with women's issues; returning that same grace, dignity and spirituality to often overlooked or disregarded lives.

Ismailova has said categorically that she is not a feminist, having found the term to not adequately answer the cultural issues faced by Central Asian and Muslim women. However, self subscription aside, her works focus on returning individuality to women from her region. Women who are othered and misunderstood by patriarchal structures and Western ignorance gain a grace and representation through her sorely needed artistry.