



Sonita Discussion Guide

Director: Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami

Year: 2015

Time: 91 min

You might know this director from:

This is the first feature-length film from this director.

FILM SUMMARY

Rap music has often provided a voice to the silenced, a channel to the powerless, a means of justice to the incapacitated. When young Sonita Alizadeh, an 18-year-old Afghani refugee living in Iran, made the conscious decision to create rap music over pop, she joined a tradition of millions who reach for rap when the going is rough and it's time to listen up. And the songs she began singing called attention to an inequality with which she was not willing to succumb - the long-practiced tradition of child marriage.

Life was already tough. Living in any space they could afford to inhabit, Sonita, her old sister, and young niece barely scraped by. Supporting her family with odd jobs, Sonita found schooling at a non-profit that protects child laborers, where Iranian director Maghami's cousin worked. Having witnessed the talent and courage of this young girl, Maghami's cousin urged her to meet Sonita. Here were the makings of a film.

Almost as soon as SONITA's storyline begins to unfold, the leading character turns the camera back on the director. An awkward sensation overrides the conscious mind of a documentary viewer. Where is this headed? How can this turn out unprejudiced? As Sonita begins asking the director for assistance, Maghami softly declares, "It's not right for me to interfere like this in your life."

The cinematic tale of this student, rapper, and pioneering feminist, SONITA is a heartfelt story of hope and transformation. By crossing the invisible line between director and subject, Maghami invites us to root for this young woman alongside her, to feel her defeats, her excitements, and ride the hopeful wave of change she is ushering in. The future of child marriage is placed on the chopping block, with Sonita rapping on over it.

FILM THEMES

As an accepted fact of life in Afghanistan, the tradition of child marriage continues largely untested, until 18-year-old Sonita arrives on the scene to rap her way out of the destiny of her family's will.

CHILD MARRIAGE, ALIVE AND WELL

In a large part of the world, the practice of forcing young girls into arranged marriages is running at full steam. Mentally and physically tortured, these girls are never offered a stab at creating a world of their own, treated as nothing more than cogs in the wheels of the patriarchal system. Sonita raps that her life is as valuable as a sheep's, only counted in terms of how much money she brings to her family. This deeply embedded injustice lies at the core of gender inequality the world over. Children who are forced to abandon their personal dreams and surrender to marriage are subjected to lives beneath the human potential.

THE FUEL OF DREAMS

Time and again, Sonita was deterred from pursuing her dream of becoming a famous rap musician. Not only did her family fiercely disapprove, the Iranian government forbid women from singing solo, countless music producers saw no potential, and her finances were hugely restrictive. But she burned for this dream, filling the scrapbook of her mind with the images of her potential life, aching for a way to tell the tale of all the injustices she witnessed through the channel of rap. "It's my dream to sing what's in my heart, to be heard by people everywhere," she declared. By feeding the flame of her desire with continued persistence and belief, her dream was realized and is being realized still.

FAMILY: PROTECTOR OR PREY

In ideal circumstances children are brought into the world, loved, nurtured, and encouraged to make the most of life by their families, in particular by parents. In the case of Sonita and a great majority of girls in Afghanistan, they are little more than family property however, treated as an expense until they literally prove their value in gold. Falling back on societal norms, families defend their cold-hearted decisions. "Happy or not, it's the tradition," Sonita's mother states. So many succumb to the cycle of acceptance, and the notion of family as nurturing protective agent couldn't be further from the truth.

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER: OBSERVER OR PARTICIPANT?

In order for a story to be told on film, there must be a filmmaker, a human being that in some way interacts with the film's subject. Opinion is divided on just how involved a filmmaker should be in the life of his/her subject and how ethical it is to capture injustices on film without intervening. When faced with the reality of Sonita's impending marriage, director Maghami is torn. The film's sound technician succinctly states, "You as a filmmaker should not interfere. You should back up and look at the bigger issues involved." Maghami could not, and the trajectory of Sonita's life was forever altered when she bought the young woman time. In the case of Sonita, and the instance of Maghami's directorial debut, involvement was of the essence.

"My future is bright. Don't worry about me."

Sonita Alizadeh

"Girls in Afghanistan don't sing. You must learn to cook and get married."

Sonita's mother

"Who I am, what I am, in which month I was born, where I was born, where I come from is all vital information. It helps us plan our future."

Ms. Poori, Sonita's teacher

FILM FACTS:

- SONITA had its global premiere at IDFA in late 2015, where it won the Audience Award. When it played at Sundance in January 2016, it won the Audience Award and World Cinema Grand Jury Award, with the jury stating, “This film really engaged us on an emotional level. It made us laugh. It made us cry. It spilled ground on its truly extraordinary central character. Its journey is fearless, inspirational and brave.”
- Director Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami was born in Tehran, Iran, where she studied filmmaking and animation. Prior to making SONITA, she released six short documentary films and wrote a book entitled “Animated Documentary, a New Way to Express.” Maghami’s cousin, a social worker at a non-profit for child laborers, told her about Sonita and insisted that Maghami meet her.
- Noorjahan Akbar, the woman who translated Sonita’s “Brides for Sale” lyrics into English, is herself a leading figure in the fight for women’s rights in Afghanistan, and was named by Forbes as a Top Woman Changing the World.
- While working as a janitor in Iran, Sonita wrote her first song about child labor, a subject she knew well. At the building she cleaned, there was a room where filmmakers edited wedding footage. By watching them work, Sonita learned about film editing and from there made her a music video for her song “Child Laborers.”
- Sonita’s mother was 13 when she was married.
- Child marriage is still common in the developing world, with nearly 39,000 girls under the age of 18 married every day and 1 in 9 girls forced into marriage before their 15th birthday. Around 700 million women today were married as children.
- The practice of child marriage does not restrict itself to certain cultures, religions, or ethnicities, and examples can be found on every continent. India and Bangladesh lead the world in number of child marriages, with Niger and Chad leading in percentage of girls married by the age of 18.
- For the past 30 years, the majority of the world’s refugees have come from Afghanistan, only to be surpassed by Syria in 2014. Many Afghani refugees flee to Iran – as of 2014 there were 950,000 registered Afghans in Iran, although the Iranian government claims around 3 million currently reside in the country.
- Sonita received a full scholarship to attend Wasatch Academy in Utah, a college preparatory school named after the area’s mountain range. 350 students attend the school, with international students from 38 countries making up 50% of the school’s population, and 90% of students residing in campus dormitories.
- In 2016, Iran was the world’s 17th most populous nation, with 78 million people, and has one of the world’s largest number of refugees, mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan. Around 5 million Iranians have emigrated since the 1979 Revolution.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Girls Not Brides is an umbrella organization of groups from around 70 countries, united in their goal to end child marriage and help girls reach their full potential. Learn more about their work. (www.girlsnotbrides.org)
2. CARE (www.care.org/work/womens-empowerment/child-marriage) is a global organization with many active campaigns fighting to end child marriage. Their website offers multiple ways to incite change.
3. Consider donating directly to Sonita to help her fulfill her dream: www.wmm.com/sonita/donatepage.htm
4. Visit the website of Free Women Writers (www.freewomenwriters.org), a collective of female writers who “aim to promote human rights, social justice, and egalitarianism using our pens,” particularly in Afghanistan.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.