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salt of this sea

a film by **Annemarie JACIR**

ملح هذا البحر



Suheir HAMMAD Saleh BAKRI



SYNOPSIS Soraya, 28, born and raised in Brooklyn, decides to return to live in Palestine, the country her family was exiled from in 1948.

On arriving in Ramallah, Soraya tries to recover her grandparent's money, frozen in an account in Jaffa, but is refused by the bank. She meets Emad, a young Palestinian whose ambition, contrary to hers, is to leave forever.

Tired of the constraints that dictate their lives, Soraya and Emad know in order to be free, they must take things into their own hands, even it means breaking the law. In this quest for life, we follow their trail through remains of a lost Palestine.

Political background and historic events to understand the situation... Historic Palestine, under British mandate, was divided into two states by the United Nations in November 1947. The State of Israel was founded on May 15, 1948, while the Palestinian state never came into being: the West Bank and East Jerusalem were annexed by Jordan and Gaza came under Egyptian control. In the June 1967 war, Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, the latter being annexed to West Jerusalem and designated as the «eternal capital» of Israel. The Palestinian authority demands the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and in Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital. These three areas are considered as «occupied territories» by the United Nations. Today, the majority of Palestinians live in exile with the status of refugees (around 4.5 million people) - they are registered as such by the United Nations and are the inhabitants (or their descendants) who were hounded from their homes during the war of 1948-1949. They mainly live in three Arab countries: Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. A number of refugees live in the West Bank or Gaza. There are 1.2 million Palestinians living in Israel who hold Israeli citizenship. There are around 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza (including 1 million refugees) and 2.5 in the West Bank (700,000 of whom are refugees). The vast majority of them cannot travel to either Israel or Jerusalem. There are around 150,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem, most of whom have refused to take Israeli nationality but who have special identity cards.

INTERVIEW OF ANNEMARIE JACIR BY ALAIN GRESH

My first question concerns the shooting conditions in Palestine. In the film, we see checkpoints, the wall, barbed wire... How were you able to work?

ANNEMARIE JACIR: It was extremely difficult. For all the reasons inherent in film production around the world, plus all the other logistic reasons. The film is a road movie that takes place in the West Bank but also in historic Palestine (Israel) and it is very difficult to travel there. The crew was made up of Europeans and Palestinians. The main Palestinian actor, Saleh Bakri, was not allowed to go to Ramallah because he has Israeli nationality but the West Bank crew did not have the right to leave Ramallah. As a result, Saleh Bakri had to find a way to slip through to Ramallah and when the Israeli army came to check on the set, he had to hide.

The two main characters seem to have nothing in common. One was born in Palestine and has never left, the other grew up in Brooklyn. One dreams of leaving Palestine and the other of settling there...

Soraya and Emad grew up in totally different environments and contexts... All her life, like a Palestinian refugee, she has dreamed of Palestine. And he who has known the occupation and reality of Palestine all his life wants to leave... They meet up because, in Palestine, they are both on the fringes of society. They are refugees, on the inside and the outside.

During the first ten minutes of the film, we see Soraya arrive in Palestine with an American passport and, at customs, she is subjected to a form of violence that we feel very strongly... There too she perhaps has something in common with Emad...

At the airport, she expects to be treated like everyone else but,

once her Palestinian origins are discovered, she finds herself in a position different from others. Like many Palestinians, I discovered at the border that I was Palestinian.

In the nineties, there was a period of hope with the Palestinian authority... These days, you are passing through a much darker period.

That's true, Soraya is still full of hope when she arrives in Ramallah, when she sees the police officer, the Palestinian flag on the square... Because it's her first time in Ramallah. I remember, in the nineties, the first time I saw a man coming down the street with his son who was carrying a Palestinian flag... It was such a beautiful sight because the flag had been totally banned before then. Today, all that has vanished.

When she is refused the money that her grandparents left on a bank account in 1948, Soraya decides to steal it. Soraya and Emad become criminals.

But they are already treated like criminals! It's illegal for a Palestinian to go to Jerusalem, illegal to build a house, illegal to do all kinds of things... Basic things. So, when they take things in hand, they choose to become criminals. And that includes entering Israel illegally.

The second part of the film takes place in Israel. On the one hand, they are there illegally, yet on the other they seem almost free... Are the two countries that different after all?

During shooting, a lot of people would say to me, «I don't understand: where are we? Where are they in the film?» And, in a way, that's the whole interest of the film. The borders are so arbitrary and where

are these checkpoints really? There are 600 of them in the West Bank and they do not keep the Israelis and Palestinians apart, they separate the Palestinians from the Palestinians. The wall separates the Palestinians from the Palestinians. So yes, once they are in Israel, there are no more checkpoints, there are no more walls... And so yes, they are free... as long as they remain invisible.

When she is in Israel, Soraya goes to see the house in Jaffa that her grandfather left in 1948. And Emad returns to his family's village, Dawayma, which is now in ruins. At the end of the film, a few simple words refer to what happened in Dawayma in 1948.

I didn't feel that it was necessary to talk specifically about the Dawayma massacre. That's where Emad comes from and he carries the burden of this with him. When he and Soraya first meet, he says that he is from Dawayma, she understands, they don't talk about it but she knows what that means. And once they are in the village, the only «sign» of the massacre perhaps is the memorial that they decide to build. This is a private moment between them and I wanted it to remain very personal. But it's true that Dawayma was one of the major massacres, yet one of the least known, of 1948.

To get back to Soraya, in a way she has no reason to be in Palestine, apart from her need to remember. Before being a political problem the refugee problem is a humanitarian one, these people have a very strong bond with their land and above all with the fact that the massacres, ethnic cleansing, etc have never been recognized.

That is indeed the case with Soraya. She is an American citizen, she has never experienced the reality of life in Palestine. But she has experienced the reality of the majority of Palestinians, who live outside Palestine. Palestinians live all around the world. And then there is this lack of recognition of what has been done to them... leading to the altercation with Irit the Israeli artist who now lives in Soraya's grandfather's house. Irit is kind, that's not the problem. A lot of people think naively that the problem is that the Israelis and the Palestinians do not like each other and that this situation has lasted for centuries as if, genetically, we hated each other... But that's a way of avoiding the true problem. What Soraya needs at this point in the film is a form of elementary recognition that she has never received.

You have written somewhere that, in this political context where no one can see a solution, cinema can play a role or say something.

Cinema can do a great deal in Palestine. In many ways. There are so many stories, so many things. We have been reduced to invisibility all our lives, few people know that so many things have been banned, our books, our voices have been silenced, in the seventies and eighties, our writers and artists were murdered... So there's this imposed silence that has lasted and still lasts now, and the cinema is just a different way of expressing oneself. Each Palestinian film that is shot is a miracle for me.

Can you say a few words about your actors?

I have known Suheir Hammad for a long time because we used to read poetry together. Suheir is a poet. Her story resembles Soraya's: a family exiled in '48, birth in a refugee camp, a life among the immigrant working classes of Brooklyn and an identity still deeply rooted within her, along with other identities... When I told her about my idea for the film, she answered, «No way, I'm not an actress, I don't know how to do that, I couldn't ever be someone I'm not.» I persuaded her to read the screenplay. She read it and said, «Absolutely, that's me, I can do it, I won't have to pretend!» That's how Suheir was hired and she was amazing on the set.

And Saleh Bakri?

Saleh is a stage actor and the son of Mohammad Bakri, a star of Israeli, Palestinian and European cinema... Initially, I wasn't interested in him because I like to work with non-professional actors and people whose lives are close to the stories I'm telling... But I auditioned him and I immediately saw true depth in him. He has a sort of restrained sorrow and rage. I immediately sensed that Saleh was the ideal actor for the part.

Could you tell us about the title? It's very poetic...

I first chose the title in Arabic that we then translated as «Salt of This Sea». The film talks so much about the sea... about the character's relationship with it, about what the sea means to the Palestinians. We are a Mediterranean society so we live with the sea but, today, the sea is something that we can no longer reach. Some Palestinians have never seen the sea... For the refugees hounded out in 1948, the sea was the last thing they saw of Palestine. There's a book of memoirs written by Chafiq Al-Hout, a Palestinian exiled from Jaffa, where he speaks about this moment in 1948... They were on the boats and he was looking at Jaffa and the boat was moving further away... That's the first shot of my film.

BIOGRAPHY

Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir has been working in independent film since 1994 and has written, directed and produced a number of short films including «A post Oslo history» (1998), «The satellite shooters» (2001) and «Like twenty impossibles» (2003). She works as a freelance editor and cinematographer and also teaches. «Salt of this sea» is her first feature film. Jacir lives in Ramallah and is currently writing a feature, «When I saw you».



CAST

Suheir Hammad
Saleh Bakri
Riyad Ideis

Soraya
Emad
Marwan

CREW

Director & Screenplay
Producers
Coproducers

Annemarie Jacir
Jacques Bidou, Marianne Dumoulin
Annemarie Jacir, Pierre-Alain Meier, Joseph Rouschop,
Danny Glover & Joslyn Barnes, Sawsan Asfari & Maya Sanbar,
Bero Beyer, Philippe Berthet, Jaume Roures
Benoit Chamaillard (Afc)
Eric Vaucher & Peter Flamman
Michèle Hubinon
Kamran Rastegar

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