

Lebanese movie "Caramel" talks women, not war

Contributed by Reuters

In a cinema industry traditionally dominated by the theme of war, "Caramel", a film by Lebanese director Nadine Labaki, shies away from conflict and instead brings to light social dilemmas faced by Lebanese women.

"Caramel", or "Sukkar Banat" as the movie is titled in Arabic, revolves around the lives of five Lebanese women, each burdened with their own social and moral problems.

It is Labaki's first feature-length movie and was shown during the Cannes Film Festival in May. It has been showing in Lebanon to packed theatres, unusual in a country where audiences tend to prefer Hollywood blockbusters to Arabic films.

Most Lebanese films have tended to tackle themes revolving around the 1975-1990 civil war that destroyed much of the country's social fabric -- its social repercussions, sectarianism and post-war malaise.

But "Caramel" chooses to focus on modern social themes. Its main setting is a beauty salon in Beirut, where women talk frankly about men, sex, marriage and happiness. Their conversations are interspersed with touching and comical scenes. "Lebanon is not only burning buildings and people crying in the street. When you say Lebanon, especially to foreigners, that's the first thing they think of," Labaki said on Thursday.

"For me Lebanon is about other things ... we live love stories like any other person in any country all over the world," Labaki, 33, told Reuters at a 1930s house in Beirut.

"That's why I wanted to talk about an issue that has no relation to the war and which shows a new picture of Lebanon, specifically that it's a people with imagination, who love life, people with warmth, people with a sense of humour."

The movie's title is inspired by the mixture of sugar, water and lemon used by Arab women as a traditional depilation method, and also stars Labaki as Layale, a 30-year-old single Lebanese Christian who owns the salon and is involved with a married man.

TABOO ISSUES

The women face social issues that are quintessential in today's Lebanon, but which society marks as taboo. One character, Nisrine, is a Muslim woman about to get married, but her husband-to-be is unaware that she is not a virgin.

Rima's character is a tomboy who struggles with her feelings for an attractive female client, while Jamale goes out of her way to prove she is still young. Rose, a 65-year-old seamstress, sacrifices love to care for her elderly sister.

"These are stories that I've heard of, were inspired from people I know and people who told me their stories. The way in which the issues are tackled are not provocative," Labaki said.

"These are issues people are living, especially in Lebanon. The aim is not to give lessons, but to show things as they are."

Labaki first made her mark in 2000 directing music videos for young Lebanese pop stars.

Though the film is not intentionally political, it portrays the women, who are from a mixture of sects and backgrounds, as living in harmony -- a message one might see as trying to address the sensitive issue of sectarianism in Lebanon.

"Peaceful coexistence among the sects is apparent (in the movie) but it was unintentional. This is how I see Lebanon. We are a people from a number of sects who live together in a very natural way," Labaki said.

Yara Bayoumy