



# Reviews

**Films about refugees and migration featured prominently, at the 49th Sydney Film Festival. And not one was about Australia. PETER WILLIAMSON saw eight films and was moved to consider the meaning of migration.**

Feature films:

**BARAN**

d. Majid Majidi (Iran 2001)

**BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM**

d. Gurinder Chadha  
(USA/UK/Germany 2002)

**BORDERS**

d. Mostéfa Djadjam (France 2001)

**Delbaran**

d. Abolfazi Jalili (Iran 2001)

**ESCAPE TO PARADISE**

d. Nino Jacusso (Switzerland 2001)

**L'AFRANCE**

d. Alain Gomis (France 2001)

**TAR ANGEL**

d. Denis Chouinard (Canada 2001)

Documentary:

**A WEDDING IN RAMALLAH**

d. Sherine Salam (Australia 2002)

There are times when one notices that the world is changing. From Canada to Iran, France to Australia, it is clear that film-makers are turning their attention to the waves of migration now building up around the world, and the efforts made to resist the tide.

Migration is a complex emotional and economic undertaking. It creates havoc with relationships and family ties, personal identity, political affiliations, language, finances and legal processes. Seeking a new life is seldom a straightforward move from one place to another. Fraught with uncertainties, people hesitate, come and go, hedge their bets and inevitably carry regrets.

Those seeking asylum, have no choice of going home. In Nino Jacusso's *Escape to Paradise*, a Kurdish family must make contingency plans to go into hiding in case their

application for asylum in Switzerland is rejected. The father, Sehmuz, has been tortured in Turkey and has taken his family on boats, trains and buses to get to Switzerland where he believes they will be safe. After initial processing which involves questioning, filling in forms, photographs, medicals, injections, fingerprints and hand scans, Sehmuz's daughter asks, "Are we in prison?"

In temporary housing with other asylum seekers Sehmuz meets countryman Aziz who starts to sow seeds of doubt in his mind. Preparing for their formal interview for refugee status is like preparing a defence for a trial. The scars on his body speak of Sehmuz's suffering at the hands of Turkish authorities, but Aziz tells him "You need proof". "I'm Kurdish", Sehmuz says, but it dawns on him that this is not enough.

He will need a plausible story, proof of what prison he was in, what dates, which cell?" Sehmuz does not know. "I was blindfolded". Aziz tells him that they will never believe him. He must get a better story. For a price, Aziz can arrange documents, certificates, and a story to guarantee a positive outcome.

As Sehmuz is stripped of his own story, he is also stripped of his money and his dignity by the forgers for whom Aziz is an agent. He must abandon himself, betray his wife and his children by selling the heirlooms, their wedding rings, all to concoct a lie. As the day of his interview with the authorities approaches, he realises that he must choose between placing his bets on a believable lie and defending his claim with an unprovable truth.

Identity is the central theme of *L'Afrance*. El Hadj is a Senegalese student in Paris, writing a radical

dissertation on the politics of his country's independence struggle. He is committed to returning to Senegal after graduation. "I have a life waiting for me over there", he says. He and his friends have sworn they would resist France and absorption into French bourgeois society. But Senegal is changing, too.

Failure to renew his French visa leads El Hadj's to face humiliating deportation. While trying to raise funds to pay for his own flight to Dakar (and thereby retain his dignity), he works on a building site, but a fellow Senegalese labourer tells him "You insult us by being here". El Hadj is an intellectual, a nationalist, and his own people expect more of him. His love affair with Myriam, a French woman, must be conducted in secret. For El Hadj it would be a betrayal to accept her love and stay in France.

In *Borders* we follow seven migrants who have engaged people smugglers to carry them from Senegal to Europe. They have vague expectations of being able to live and work in a land of plenty. One man wants to live in a "white country". Another says, "There are black people everywhere, nowadays". There is some awareness that what awaits them is, at best, menial work.

The travellers never know who will carry them beyond the section they are already on. Moving from canoe to the back of a ute, to the freezer compartment of a fish truck, to a bus and to fishing boat, the price increases as they progress. As one says: "Things have changed. Now slaves pay their own transportation".

No-one is a friend, or can be assumed to be. No-one knows whom to trust. Amma has been forced to prostitute herself, deserted by her husband who has taken her jewellery

Right:  
Keira Knightley and Parminder  
Nagra in *Bend it Like Beckham*



to secure his own passage. The travellers opt for trusting each other, but the nearer they get to Europe, the more the gloss fades. The group is reduced to betrayal and stealing from each other.

*Borders* portrays the people smugglers as uncaring and mercenary, but they still deliver the goods, literally. Whether carrying frozen fish, cement or people, it is just a service and they are just cargo.

One of the great motivations for migrants is that despite the hardship they expect to endure, they hope for a better life for their children. But as the children grow, they often identify more with the new country rather than the old. Jess, star of Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham*, has a football obsession which her Sikh parents cannot accept. Jess is English with a Sikh heritage, but her parents are Sikh with an English life. So the dislocation of migration is played out over at least a generation. Jess's parents fear that her playing football will jeopardise their reputation, as well as their daughters' marriage prospects.

Alienation of one's children is particularly painful in *Tar Angel*, a Canadian feature about an Algerian refugee family in Montréal. The father, Ahmed, is on the brink of becoming a Canadian citizen and expects his son, Hafid, gratefully to embrace the educational opportunities afforded by his new home. Hafid, however, embraces the freedom to engage in radical activism. Just as his father sees no bad in Canada, his son will see no good.

Migrants at first hope to take what is best in the new country while shunning what seems alien and unacceptable. To reach his son, Ahmed must delve into a side of Canadian life which he never thought existed. Both *Tar Angel* and *Beckham* require the parents to make concessions to the inevitable; accepting their new countries means

accepting their children as citizens in a different culture. Or conversely, on pain of alienation from their children, the migrants are dragged into full acceptance of the new culture.

Children play important roles in many of the films. The migration is experience is a family one, although experienced so differently by different generations. In a poignant scene, Sehmuz, the asylum-seeking patriarch in *Escape to Paradise*, is comforted by his children at his lowest moment. When his daughter must give up her grandmother's heirlooms, it is like a betrayal of three generations, but she casually tells her mother that she never liked the jewellery, anyway. Whether this is a careless throw-away comment by a teenager or a selfless lie to restore her parents pride, we do not know.

Kaim (in Abolfazi Jalali's *Delbaran*) is another child driven from home by violence. As an Afghan illegally residing (and working) in Iran he is in a precarious position. He has been taken under the wing by an elderly Iranian couple who have a truck stop in the desert outpost of Delbaran. This is a world of men; women and children play a minor role. Against a backdrop of barren desert and mountains, Kaim is placed at centre stage. As the war draws closer, Kaim is drawn into the world of men and guns.

Nationality is irrelevant to the truck drivers, hunters and traders passing through Delbaran. However, officialdom is always present. The state is personified by Mahadavi, the patrol officer, who is on the lookout for illegal Afghans who are smuggled through the truck stop. When a

wedding takes place between an Afghan man and an Iranian woman, Mahadavi is incensed. Unable to speak the groom's language, he asks the guests "Why is he marrying this Iranian woman?" The guests relay the question to the groom. "He says that he loves her". Even the most human interaction seems a challenge to the state and official bureaucracy.

Not surprisingly, bureaucracy and policing are themes which pervade almost all of the films. Another Iranian feature was *Baran*, also about Afghans' battle to live in Iran. Working in the most dangerous and poorly paid jobs, they are subject to arrest and arbitrary reductions to their wages. The film centres around Lateef, a young Iranian construction worker who becomes obsessed with Rahmat, an Afghan girl. Rahmat is forced to disguise herself as a boy in order to work on the construction site after her father has been injured in an accident. Lateef comes to understand the appalling conditions Rahmat's Hazara family must endure, but despite great sacrifice and their mutual attraction, Lateef cannot break through the cultural barrier that separates them. At their closest moment she covers her head with her burqa. Rahmat is lost to him.

There are unbridgeable spaces between those who are legal and those who are not, and between those whose lives are centred in a single country and those whose lives are divided by borders and fences. Perhaps the most extraordinary film was *A Wedding in Ramallah*, Palestinian-Australian director Shirene Salam's documentary. Mariam is a Palestinian woman who agrees to an

arranged marriage with Bassam, a Palestinian man, exiled in the USA.

Life in Cleveland, Ohio is no bed of roses for Bassam, and he tells Mariam so; but she willingly joins him, spending her days bored and alone in their flat, both frightened and forbidden to go outside. She has no English, no friends, and Bassam works three jobs to make ends meet.

The film contrasts the isolation and loneliness of America with the warmth of family life, in Palestine, oppressed as the women are. Mariam's world first diminishes from a village where she knows everybody, to her in-law's house in Ramallah where she endures their watchful eyes, and finally to Bassam's Cleveland flat. There she watches endless television and the telephone is a lifeline to home.

America comes through as bleak, lonely and hostile, in contrast to Ramallah where tracers arc across the sky and the women keep low on the floor of their flat, for a fear of a bullet coming through the wall.

Bassam's colleague who fixes payphones with him, knows nothing of Palestine and clearly is interested in no more than a few jokes about Arab stereotypes. Moussa, Bassam's

older brother, also lives in America. He is a US citizen, but he cannot bring over his wife, Sinora, as he is paid cash in hand and therefore cannot sponsor her application. Sinora has waited in Ramallah for eight years hoping for a visa.

How clearly the film shows us that home is home, whether one can live there or not. We see how the men come to live with one foot in each world – a family in Palestine, a job in the USA. While Sinora dreams that one day she will go to live in America, Bassam dreams that one day he and Mariam will have enough money to go home.

Perhaps every migrant dreams of going home. As El Hadj (*L'Afrance*) says to his friend, "I'm tired of being a foreigner. I'm sick of being black". His friend, Demba, went back, but he was preyed upon: "I was eaten alive. They treated me kindly, like I was sick. Meanwhile they cleaned me out. In a month I was skint".

The West is inevitably mythologised in the developing countries. It represents freedom to Sehmuz, a font of culture and sophistication to Sinora, stuck in Ramallah, a dream of wealth and plenty to the hapless travellers in *Borders* and, to some like El Hadj,

it is the ultimate degrader and temptress.

Now educated and back home, El Hadj comes to realise that he will fit in nowhere. His father seems to understand. "Forty years ago", the old man says, "my father sent me to the city. He did not know what he was doing".

Excepting *A Wedding in Ramallah*, all the films are works of fiction, although most seemed more than real in their unsentimental looks at the lives of migrants from the developing countries. *Escape to Paradise* cleverly blurs fiction and reality by using Kurdish refugees to play the roles of the asylum seekers, and actual immigration officials to play the roles of those assessing the applications.

Migration is a transforming and heartbreaking experience. First migrants must reconcile reality with expectations; later they must reconcile memory with a home that is no longer what it used to be. Eventually, going home ceases to be an option. No wonder that migration is one of the emotional upheavals of a lifetime. ■

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# Reviews

Reviewed by David Bolton

## KANDAHAR

d. Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

The whole world now knows of the suffering of Afghanistan during 6 years of Taliban rule, though it seems no-one much cared prior to September 11 last year. The Taliban took power in 1996 after a vicious civil war, imposing a fanatical, punitive version of Islam to cleanse Afghanistan of the widespread lawlessness that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the subsequent years of internecine squabbling. In some ways they were welcomed for it, in the same way the victorious Khmer Rouge were hailed with relief as incorruptible bringers of peace in Cambodia in 1975. The Taliban brought peace, at first, but they also brought a programme of strict puritanical conformity. Thieves and adulterers were executed or amputated. Girls' education was put to a dead stop, women forced out of professions and modern clothes into the subservience of the burqa, men required to grow long beards. Western influences were exterminated; music outlawed; radios and TVs were smashed, or hidden; long tangles of video and audio tape were strewn from trees; even the flying of kites was banned. Dissidence was not tolerated.

Against this background, Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Gabbeh) has crafted a small, near-documentary story. Nafas, an Afghan-born Canadian journalist who had fled years before, receives a letter from her younger sister, maimed by a landmine and left

behind in Kandahar, at the heart of Taliban rule. Despairing, she has vowed to end her life on the last eclipse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, preferring death to oppression and misery. Sneaking across the border with Iran, Nafas seeks to travel alone to Kandahar and rescue her sister, donning the mandatory all-covering burqa and crossing the land incognito in a country where women are forbidden to travel alone. Along the way, through her eyes we witness sights of astonishing cruelty and absurdity, but also images of poetic beauty. In a madrassah a young boy who cannot properly recite the Koran is scolded by his teacher while another boy receives praise for knowing how to operate a Kalashnikov. Falling sick, Nafas visits a local doctor who can only examine her while sitting on opposite sides of a partition: his questions are relayed to her via a third party. Everywhere, masses of women in vivid hued burqas travel and work in silent groups against the stark backdrop of Afghanistan's breathtaking beauty. Dozens of one-legged men mill around a medical outpost run by the Red Cross, hobbling towards artificial legs parachuted from aeroplanes. I doubt this ever happened, but it is an image of true pathos.

Kandahar was made well before the flight of the Taliban late last year. Makhmalbaf himself knows something about oppressive regimes,

having spent time imprisoned by the ayatollahs and submitting his work to vetting and censorship by them. Consequently, Kandahar comes across at times as blunt and overly didactic. The actors are mostly untrained – and those are real amputees, real landmine victims – which makes for a documentary realism but also awkwardness when combined with an unsubtle script. Yet it is impassioned, full of fury at the injustice and compassion for those under the yoke. Chief among these is not the women but a lonely young boy, Khak, an urchin who acts for a time as Nafas' guide, and whose boyish artlessness induces both suspicion at his motives and pity for his wretchedness. There are others: the one-armed shyster, his forearm a stump, who was probably a punished thief, or the husband who comes to the Red Cross in quest of artificial legs for his wife. Still, the most striking images, and the fuel of Kandahar's fury and sadness, remain with the women; half the population in eclipse, strung across the grandeur of the landscape in burqas of all hues – reds, turquoise, yellows, blues – for all their beauty nothing more than an anonymous collection of brightly coloured objects. ■





# Reviews

Reviewed by David Findlay

## THE PICKUP

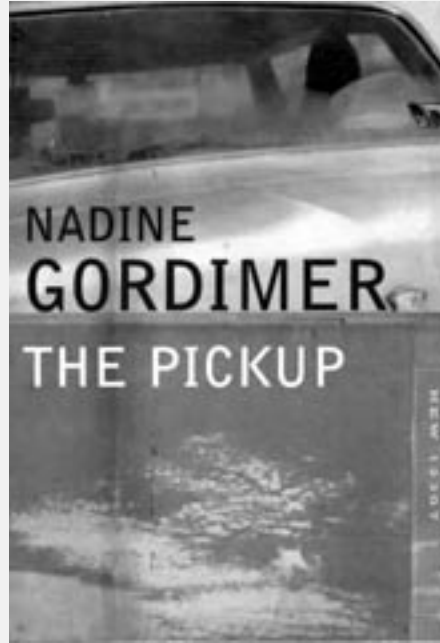
Nadine Gordimer  
(Bloomsbury, 2001, \$29.95)

As a long time fan of Gordimer's writings I must admit to being disappointed and somewhat disconcerted by this novel.

Gordimer justifiably won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. Arguably she should have won it some years earlier but I suspect the committee for "political" reasons couldn't give a white South African writer the prize until after the demise of Apartheid. In her over 25 books she has been not only a scathing critic of this racist regime but also a sardonic observer of the foibles and contradictions of the, mainly white and middle class, liberals of that country. Gordimer has never been an easy read, she makes you work but the work is rewarding.

Julie Summers a young affluent Jo'burger starts an affair with Abdu, a Muslim immigrant, after he has repaired her car. We quickly discover that Abdu is in South Africa illegally, he is what is dismissively known as an economic refugee - that is, he is not fleeing persecution but seeking a better standard of living. The first half of the novel covers Julie's and Abdu's relationship, as well as the reactions of Julie's friends at the bohemian El-Ay Cafe and her wealthy family to the coupling. Eventually the authorities catch up with Abdu, and after marrying Julie (largely at her insistence), they are repatriated to Abdu's unnamed homeland.

This is vintage Gordimer with flashes of her insightful and incisive style, her observations of the minutiae of "political" life, explicating political and social changes in the new South Africa. Apartheid or the memory of



it appears only in small background incidents.

There is, however, one narrative sideline that is quite jarring - the accusations of sexual harassment brought against her gynaecologist uncle. One can't help thinking this has been thrown in because of its topicality.

The second half of the novel sees Julie and Ibrahim ibn Musa, as Abdu's real name turns out to be, settling with Ibrahim's family in a small village at the edge of a desert somewhere in the Middle East. Ibrahim spends time applying, unsuccessfully, to various embassies (including the Australian) for an immigration visa. Julie though unable to speak the local language or accept the restraints on women in a traditional Muslim society manages to fall in love with the otherness of both the culture and the desert that surrounds her, just as one suspects she fell in love with the otherness/exoticness of Abdu/Ibrahim. (One needs to be wary of this perception of people as the "other". It can, as we have seen in John Conroy's and other reports, just as easily lead to torture and extermination as falling in love). Both principle characters seem to be seeking otherness - Ibrahim

the otherness of economic and social security in a liberal Western democracy; Julie the "other" as exotic and somehow more real than her privileged lifestyle. While Julie's romanticising might be legitimate characterisation I could not help feeling, given that Gordimer is nowhere near as analytical and critical as she is in the first half, that Gordimer shares Julie's romantic perceptions of the "other" cultural and landscape. While one can understand Ibrahim seeking "another country" I am unconvinced that a similar quest by Julie should be satisfied by living in poverty. It smacks of spiritual redemption of the most clichéd variety.

So it seems both characters are in the process of remaking themselves (in each others image?), both are unhappy with their birthplace. The title of the novel is ambiguous- who picks up whom, who is taking advantage of whom?

Gordimer's style might be described as ironic but not unsympathetic detachment, but this is not as evident in the second half of the book as it is in the first. This, I think, makes the desert section of the novel less convincing. Nevertheless, this book is worth reading for the portrait of "illegal aliens" or would-be migrants; the tribulations and frustrations they endure.

Gordimer gives us a convincing picture of what it is like to move to another country, another culture and language, with strange customs and expectations. However, *The Pickup* never quite gells. If its grasping after otherness, after the ineffable, finally defeats it, it remains an important novel - one that most writers would not have been embarrassed to have produced. ■

## GOOD TORTURE vs BAD TORTURE

Unspeakable acts, ordinary people:  
the dynamics of torture

John Conroy

(Vision paperbacks, 2001. \$29.95)

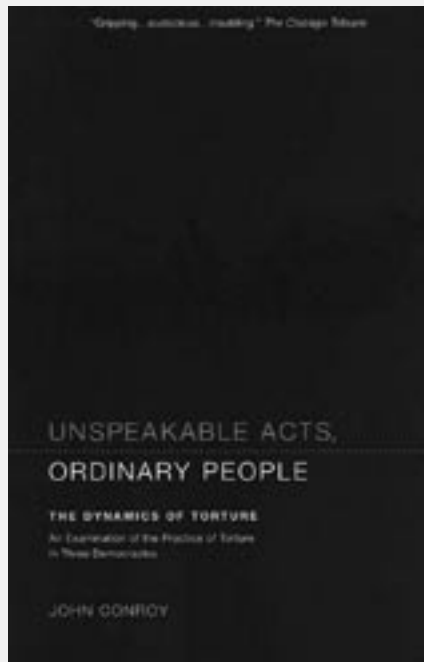
“There is little danger that the Western democracies will lose their way if they choose to inflict pain as one way of preserving order. Paralysis in the face of evil is the greater danger. Someday soon a terrorist will threaten tens of thousands of lives, and torture will be the only way to save them. We had better start thinking about this”

No this is not a quote from George W. Bush or Rumsfeld, they are the concluding remarks from an article in *Newsweek* (June 7, 1982) by a professor of philosophy (albeit at a Community College), Michael Levin, arguing that torture in the hands of liberal Western democracies can be a good thing.

I wonder if John Conroy was aware of this article when he wrote the book under review- I suspect not. I'm sure he, and anyone reading this book, would not have been swayed by the argument.

Conroy looks briefly at the history and methods of torture - up until the Enlightenment, the West had a long and extensive use of torture in the pursuit of “justice”. He then examines 3 recent episodes. They are not from Asia, Latin America or Africa as might be expected but from 3 “liberal Western democracies” - United Kingdom, Israel and United States. Tellingly, these human rights violations were carried out by in 2 occupying armies (Israel and U.K.), and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> case by a White police department on Black suspects (U.S.A.). The occasions were:

- Belfast, 1971, where suspected IRA “sympathisers” were rounded up, and without being charged, were subject to strong and prolonged physical and psychological torment. None of the “suspects” was ever charged with terrorism. Conroy suggests that the exercise was partly to refine the torment techniques.



- The West Bank, 1988, where Palestinians were randomly rounded up at night from their villages, taken into the desert and beaten and in many cases their arms and legs were broken. This with the, at least tacit, approval of the then Defence Minister Yithak Rabin who wanted the Intafada suppressed with “force, might and beatings”

- Chicago, 1982., where White police carried out electrical and other types of torture on Black suspects

Clearly and plainly Conroy describes the torture methods, the physical and psychological sequelae of each of the tortures, the torture survivors’ attempts to gain justice or at least bring the torture to public notice, the governmental denials and subsequent denouncing of survivors as thugs, murderers, terrorists, etc.

Justice is achieved only in the Israeli case, and then only in part. Middle ranking officers, and ironically those that had qualms about what they were doing, were charged and convicted. Israel has a law that states if you are ordered to carry out actions that are a violation of human rights, then you must disobey that order. Tell that to an 18 year old conscript in a semi-war situation!

In the Chicago case the attempt to prosecute the main offender resulted in a closing of ranks of police and politicians - no convictions were made. The only charges arising from the Northern Ireland episode were

unsuccessfully bought against the British government in the European Court. They were accused of torture and human rights violations.

Conroy doesn’t limit himself to documenting the tortures, their effects on the survivors, and official denials; he also looks at the long-term psychosocial consequence for not only the survivors but also the perpetrators. The torturers he interviews are, as we have seen in various documentaries, either untroubled by what they have done, or have come to the sudden realisation of what they were doing and simply walked away. Most of the survivors at some stage during the torture thought “...how can anyone do this to another human being?”; happily a percentage of torturers, when they have allowed themselves to see the tortured as human have had the same thought and given up the torture.

Perhaps the least convincing chapter in this book is the one attempting to explain why/how people can torture others. He Conroy quotes the over extrapolated experiments of Milgram on obedience and harming others, as well as the writings of Mika Haritos-Fatouros on torturers under the Greek junta in the 1960s and 70s. Neither sets of writing explain, to my satisfaction, how men (and women) can torture others.

We are left still wondering how much of people’s ability to torture is in the training they receive, and how much is personality-based. The suggestion that torturers can do what they do because they see the tortured as “The Other” is touched on a number of times but not explored in detail.

However, this is an important book in that it alerts the general public to the gross human rights violations that are being carried out by our governments in the name of our freedom. It is an excellent introduction to all aspects of torture - its history, methodology, purpose, and consequences, both personal and societal. It will, and should, make you very angry. The book has been widely available in Australia. Or you might look for it at your local public library. If they don’t hold it you can request they acquire a copy. ■