

Women Without Men

By Noel Murray · May 13, 2010 · 2:49PM

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Director: Shirin Neshat & Shoja Azari

Runtime: 99 minutes

Cast: Shabnam Tolouei, Orsolya Tóth, Arita Shahrzad, Pegah Ferydoni (In Fair subtitles)

Photographer and installation-artist Shirin Neshat spent six years making her feature-film debut *Women Without Men*, adapting Shahrnush Parsipur's novella about four Iranian women in 1953 who witness the country's transition from a democratically elected patriarchy to a more dictatorial one. Shabnam Tolouei plays a middle-class, middle-aged single woman fascinated by the protests in the streets and the reports of a Western-led coup, while Pegah Ferydoni plays Tolouei's best friend (who urges Tolouei to obey her conservative brother and be less of an iconoclast), Arita Shahrzad plays the well-off wife of a high-ranking official in the Shah's military, and Orsolya Tóth plays a prostitute slowly losing her mind. The movie moves fluidly back and forth between these women's stories, as well as between reality and a kind of dream-state, as all four find their way into a walled

orchard where they share fellowship and temporary refuge from the demands of men.

When Neshat and her writing/directing collaborator Shoja Azari focus on the narrative, *Women Without Men* doesn't have much to offer. The characters are too sketchy and emblematic, and while the specific historical context is unusual, the broader situations aren't; the generic chauvinist oppression dramatized here could've taken place just about anywhere and anytime. But *Women Without Men* works remarkably well when Neshat pushes the story aside in order to immerse viewers in single, surreal moments. The movie began life as a series of museum pieces, and it retains the transportive effect of a well-conceived exhibit. When Tóth dreams of customers with no mouths, or scrubs her bony body until it bleeds, the images are far more memorable than the plot surrounding them. Ditto when Neshat and Azari show their heroines buried under loose soil, or planting paper flowers, or when the film opens with a slow camera move through a crack in a wall surrounding a verdant garden. *Women Without Men* penetrates the most when it swerves around the rational and aims straight for the subconscious.