

Film Review: 'Those Who Remain'

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COURTESY OF DUBAI FILM FESTIVAL

An older man clings to his land in northern Lebanon, unwilling to allow it to become part of the country's fractious identity politics post-civil war.

There are so many documentaries from Lebanon about the civil war and its consequences that critiques inevitably end up bandying around the same words: scars, open wounds, futility, sadness. The accumulation of personal stories can sound generically similar, which is why it takes such an exceptional filmmaker as Eliane Raheb (“Sleepless Nights”) to offer fresh perspectives that restore the uniqueness of each experience while acting as a broader cry for reconciliation — even when the director herself obliquely questions whether rifts have become too great to heal. “Those Who Remain” movingly provides specificity with broader implications, focusing on a tenacious older man clinging to his family land in the north, where sectarianism has blotted out memories of a more amicable past. Winner of Dubai’s Special Jury Prize, the documentary deserves a bright festival future.

Raheb’s approach is all the more refreshing because she refuses to pretend that her presence doesn’t interfere: We hear her asking questions, and note her subjects’ awareness of the camera. Knowing that total objectivity is a lie (Lebanon’s unique history has taught at least that), she seeks a greater truth by skillfully revealing as much as possible, not just of her immediate subjects, but of their environment, without feigning either omniscience or invisibility. “Those Who Remain,” by its very title, is about the land, in this case in Lebanon’s northern Akkar District, adjoining Syria and composed of Christian, Shia, and Sunni towns.

Raheb immediately introduces her main subject, Haykal Mikhael, but only gradually adds pieces to the puzzle. A Christian with longstanding ties to the terrain, he has a sheep farm and apple orchards and is personally building, stone by stone, a large house with restaurant for himself and his family. Yet his wife left him (for reasons never said), taking their four children, so the new house becomes a tangible symbol of hope’s determination against all probability. In their absence, what remains is a sense of emptiness that elides with the general state of loss suffusing the territory.

At a glance, the Akkar District appears to be an idyllic locale, boasting Lebanon's largest and most pristine forest. Wooded slopes are dotted with towns and villages, which Raheb films year-round, capturing fields of wildflowers in spring and snow-covered valleys in winter. However, as Mikhael points out, each community has become increasingly partisan: Sunni villages remain Sunni, Maronite Christians oppose sales to "outsiders," and the memory of a time when Muslim neighbors protected the monastery in Kobayati (aka Al-Qoubaiyat) is practically forgotten.

Of course, this collective amnesia has its origins (or better, its accelerant) in the civil war. Mikhael's role is unambiguous; although the full meaning of his affiliations will be clearest to locals who retain definite associations with his Tanzim militia as well as the people mentioned, such as notorious commander Elie Hobeika. However, Raheb isn't interested here in exactly what he did as a soldier, but what he took away from the experience, and as Mikhael says, the war taught no lessons. The land is the only constant, yet his struggle to keep it non-partisan stands in contrast with those who use it to deny other communities ownership. Property becomes a tool for exclusion rather than a source of nurture, even among friends — Mikhael was involved in a lawsuit with his chum from childhood, Antoine Daher, and although the friendship seems to remain, the contested land lies fallow, sacrificed to selfishness and a self-defeating idea of punishment.

Unquestionably, "Those Who Remain" is a melancholy assessment of Lebanon's future, despite frequent moments of warmth. Mikhael's resourcefulness is a reminder that the fruits of the earth can sustain hope as much as stomachs; yet it would be interesting to see Raheb make a companion piece, focusing on the neighborhood's younger generation irrevocably shaped by the civil war's aftermath. Will they remain? Will Maronites continue to feel squeezed out, and how will the chaos in Syria impact the province? The documentary doesn't provide direct answers, yet what's implied doesn't leave room for much optimism outside of individual resolve, and nature's ability to heal itself.

Raheb's insistence on not disguising her presence (though she's only heard and not seen) acts as an effective counterpoint to fly-on-the-wall style documentaries, contradicting the notion that "truth" can be found only through one form. Her studied eye for handsome, meaningful compositions always

overcomes occasional rough camerawork.

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Reviewed at Dubai Film Festival (Muhr Feature), Dec. 10, 2016. Running time: **95 MIN.** (Original title: "Mayyel ya Ghzayyel")

Production

(Documentary — Lebanon-U.A.E.) An Itar Productions, Dubai Film Market Enjazaz production. Producer: Eliane Raheb.

Crew

Director, writer: Eliane Raheb. Camera (color): Jocelyne Abi Gebrayel. Editor: Raheb.

With

Haykal Mikhael, Ruwaida Al Assaad, Antoine Daher.

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