

## For a Place Under the Heavens

Documentary Film. Directed by Sabiha Sumar. 2003. VHS, color (53 min.).  
Distributed by Women Make Movies.

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Does half the nation benefit from being covered in layers of cloth? Or, does the other half benefit? Or, is it a small court of rulers who benefit at the expense of both?

These unanswered questions conclude Sabiha Sumar's personal documentary on the impact of religiosity on women's status in contemporary Pakistan. *For a Place under the Heavens* interrogates the condition of women in a nation-state that has slowly incorporated religion into its everyday political and ideological practices. As Sumar eloquently argues, the change from secular to religious state has affected women in particular, who are located at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, patriarchy and feminism.

The women interviewed and portrayed in this documentary cover the wide spectrum of these binaries and discuss their condition from different viewpoints. Modern but religious women like Razia see the *hijab* (the Islamic veil) as a necessary accoutrement to any woman's femininity, thus not clashing with the latest fashion trends or brand jewels. Other women, like Sumar's childhood friends, bespeak the erosion of women's rights they have witnessed in the last two decades. The radicalization of religion expressed in the choice to wear the *hijab* is seen by this group of women as a direct consequence of a nation-state that has rejected the separation between state and religion. This separation was indeed at the heart of Pakistan's 1947 constitution and outlined the

socio-political environment in which the first generation of Pakistanis grew up. The Islamic laws introduced in the 1970s gradually directed the second generation towards more rigid religious practices that were utterly uncommon in previous years. Hence, women belonging to different generations found themselves caught between two opposed realities. On her way to interview a young model, Sumar expresses this tension as follows: "I grew up in a schizophrenic society suspended precariously between Islamic ideology and secularism."

It is precisely this in-betweenness, polarized at the two extremes of fundamentalism and excessive commercialism that *For a Place Under the Heavens* aims at eliciting. Sumar's documentary uses different sources to highlight the struggle of women in today's Pakistan: from interviews with secular and religious women and Islamic scholars, to personal reflections and private footage of her own family. Her family provides the framework that structures her work: the documentary opens with personal images of an old Pakistan, where dancing and music were common forms of entertainment for her parents and relatives. These images of a comfortable existence are juxtaposed to present-day visions of veiled young women on the seashore, contemplating the future in a changing society. The visual recurrence of family footage is constant until the end, when clips of her daughter's birthday recapture the meaning of change in contemporary Pakistan. The games played at the birthday party are the same as those of the previous generation; yet the context in which young girls happen to play these games has changed dramatically and will inevitably influence the future of girls like Sumar's daughter, to whom the documentary is dedicated.

The richness of *For a Place under the Heavens* lies in its ability to amalgam private images of the director's past with current reflections on women's status and historical overviews of the changes that have affected the role of women in Pakistan. The result is a visually delicate and intense journey through the complex layers of a Muslim society in the 21st century, trapped between oxymoronic pairs that seem to find little balance with respect to women. The ultimate expression of this imbalance is the interview with a fundamentalist young woman, who encourages her toddler to become a martyr by sacrificing his life for God's cause. "God is good and has a lot of toffee. You like toffee, don't you?" The sweetness in this mother's voice is awkwardly counterbalanced by the tragic meaning of her utterance. The individual body has become an instrument to serve religious ideology, and women have become key to the use of this tool.

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