

Honeyland

Tamara Kotevska, Ljubomir Stefanov, 2018

Screenwriters: Tamara Kotevska, Ljubomir Stefanov

Place: North Macedonia

Studios: Trice Films, Apolo Media

Length: 87 minutes

Language: Balkan Gagauz Turkish

Alex Figurski, University College London.

Honeyland is a film from the countryside gone global. Set in the rural Balkans, a woman tending to wild bees has her way of life disrupted by rowdy new neighbours, bringing with them the demands of modernity and need for greater yields. And so this uniquely North Macedonian documentary – featuring a variety of cultural references and showcasing the country’s glorious stone-washed landscapes – carries an ecological message of worldwide relevance: Is our consumerism destroying the planet?

The protagonist is Hatidže Muratova, a lone beekeeper in the near-abandoned village of Bekirlija. She is completely at one with her surroundings. She hikes up and down steep mountains, facing wild bees with minimal protective gear. She harvests the honey using wisdom passed on by previous generations and keeps her hive well-fed: “half for them, half for me”. Every so often, she travels to Skopje, the capital, to sell her produce directly to the market stall vendors, bringing back bananas and chestnut-coloured hair dye.

Her quiet life is disturbed when a large family moves in next door, with the intention of earning extra income by producing their own honey. However, without Hatidže’s local knowledge and driven by consumer demand for ever increasing quantities of honey, they pay little attention to the damage they are doing to the beehive and the environment around them.

Contrasting the lives of Hatidže and the family next door, *Honeyland* is a film about a traditional way of life which we may feel we can never go back to and, on the other hand, a mass consumption culture which cannot be sustainable for long.

The film’s directors, Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, stumbled across Hatidže by accident. Their project began life as a Swiss-funded documentary on North Macedonia’s Bregalnica River, but soon shifted focus when they got to know Hatidže along the way. Shot only by candlelight in the evenings, *Honeyland* benefits greatly from the intimacy of its access to the protagonist’s personal life, following her hopes and fears, and ups and downs.

Hatidže's story is not the only one of the film, though, and there is a human side to her neighbours' destructive impact. They are not bad people, and, in many ways, the audience is encouraged to empathise with them as well as Hatidže. All seven children contribute in one way or another, tending to livestock and carrying out difficult chores. The entire project is led by their father's desire to earn money for their education. The film thus captures the complexity of the situation. It is not a case of Hatidže being 'right' and her neighbours being 'wrong', instead, there are competing considerations to be balanced. At one point, Hatidže confesses her life might have been better if she had moved to another town and set up a family herself.

At the same time, the film is hinting that exploitation of the natural environment cannot continue forever. It highlights the unsustainability of our food production practices, a lesser-popularised aspect of the ecological crisis. In Europe, about a third of bee and butterfly populations are declining. According to experts, one cause is intensive agricultural management. Hatidže's neighbours overwork their bees, do not feed them enough, and cut down trees in search of new hives. But a higher yield in the present may come at the cost of any future yield at all.

As for Hatidže, the film's success has completely changed her life. She travelled to the Oscars ceremony in 2020 and has become a national celebrity. Yet she still spends the bee season in her old village, where it all started. That is because there is plenty about these loyal bees which makes them necessary to preserve, and that is the challenge the world faces.