

Sonita review: Afghan female rapper goes on unpredictable journey in triumphant documentary



Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghmi's absorbing portrait of a refugee in Iran is endlessly surprising and calls into question the role of a film-maker



Sonita imagines herself a superstar rapper – when not working, she spends her days superimposing her face on to magazine cutouts of Rihanna, or performing for the kids at the center. Photograph: Everett/Rex/Shutterstock

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The documentary film-maker [Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghmi](#) discovered a goldmine when she came across [Sonita](#), a beautiful but visibly dispirited 14-year-old undocumented Afghan refugee in Iran.

At the outset of their journey together, Sonita works in Tehran as a cleaner at a refugee center that doubles as a school, and lives with her sister and niece in a single tiny room. She imagines herself a superstar rapper – when not working, she spends her days superimposing her face on to magazine cutouts of Rihanna, or performing for the kids at the center.

She wants to follow in Rihanna’s footsteps, but as an artist she couldn’t be more different. Sonita doesn’t rap about love or fame – she raps defiantly about her experience as an Afghan teenager at odds with her sexist surroundings. She’s an activist, only she’s too young to really know it.

Sonita’s estranged mother makes a surprise visit from Afghanistan. It isn’t long before she makes her intentions known: she has re-entered her daughter’s life to bring her home and sell her as a bride, for \$9,000, so the family can buy Sonita’s brother a wife of his own.

Ghaemmaghmi briefly appears in the early passages, when Sonita, tired of answering questions, asks to hold the camera. The director plays a much more pivotal role as her documentary progresses, as she becomes inextricably woven into Sonita’s fight for freedom – after paying off her subject’s mother with \$2,000 to keep the girl in Iran. The film-maker crosses the line from observer to participant.



Ghaemmaghmi’s actions call into question the ever-evolving role of documentary film-maker – but given Sonita’s plight, it’s impossible not to sympathize with the director’s decision. Her protective instincts turn out to work in Sonita’s favor. Had they not, this would have been a very different documentary.

Probably because of the uplifting outcome, Ghaemmaghami chooses to keep the focus on Sonita's evolution as an artist. The approach works: to witness Sonita's rise from timid rapper to empowered activist over a three-year span is thrilling.

Whatever you make of Ghaemmaghami's actions, there's no denying the impact her friendship with Sonita had on the young woman's life – and the unyielding power of her documentary.