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A Nurse as Silent as She Is Graceful

By Karen Durbin

In "The Sea Inside," Mabel Rivera's character, Manuela, doesn't say a lot, yet she's among the movie's most powerful presences. She's the sister-in-law and chief caretaker of Ram (Javier Bardem), a writer and former seaman who, paralyzed after a dive, has lived for 26 years on his brother's farm near the Galician coast in northwest Spain. When he sues the Spanish government for the right to die, their daily lives are thrown open to the larger world. Written and directed by Alejandro Amenábar and based on a case that played out in the 1990's, "The Sea Inside" (Dec. 17) treats the issue of assisted suicide intelligently. But the movie is really a meditation on love -- its many forms, its obligations and selfish demands, and its generosity.

Women fall for the wry, incisive Ram -- including a suave lawyer who works on his case and a single mother

convinced she can make him want to live. Then there's Manuela. Tall and broad-shouldered, cheeks ruddy from the rugged climate, she's every inch a sturdy farm wife. But Ms. Rivera also gives Manuela a quickness of eye and hand that makes you rethink the meaning of grace. Manuela isn't timid; she makes quick work of a critical, overbearing bishop and celebrity-hound admirers alike. But when Ram? seeks her advice on how best to address the judge, Ms. Rivera shows us her shock -- and shy pleasure -- at being asked such a serious question, and she answers with the hesitant, anxious solemnity of a child at a spelling bee. The point is that language isn't Manuela's medium; listening is. She has internalized the enormity of his helplessness, anticipating wants and attending to his physical needs with a deftness that mitigates humiliation. Ms. Rivera shows us love expressed not as feeling but as action: deep, unstinting acts of empathy and respect. Ms. Rivera has described Manuela as a surrounding presence in Ram? life, like the sea. Of those who love him, only she is prepared to swallow her anguish and let him sail away.