

# “Afghan Women” Documentaries: The Political Economy of Giving and Taking Voice

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## Abstract

Given the long history in the mainstream and popular media as well as in academia of marginalised people being unable to tell their own stories, and of subaltern groups traditionally being positioned as the subjects of films in which white and/or privileged cosmopolitan filmmakers and researchers drive the narrative, in this article I explore documentary and fiction films about and by Afghan women in Afghanistan and in the diaspora, to consider the hierarchies of power involved with giving and taking voice, and to ask whose perspective these films privilege, why and to what effect. Specifically, I will focus on the prolific “saving Afghan women” films that emerged in the pre- and post-9/11 moment to justify the US war in Afghanistan and compare them with more agentic films, including my own, produced during the twenty-year US “Forever War” in Afghanistan. I argue that we need to critically analyse films that are hailed as collaborative and participatory for including Afghan women in producing the representation of their own lives and narratives, as sometimes these films extend hegemonic power and further disempower Afghan women.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, women, documentaries, white saviourism, paternalism, agency, collaborative films, censorship, knowledge production

In the War on Terror era, postcolonial scholars have shown how key geopolitical crises activate imperial state apparatuses, including the media, to mobilise humanitarian and human rights discourses in ways that ultimately serve the interests of empire. For example, US government support for both Afghan women’s rights in the early 2000s and Iranian protesters in the 2020s was conditional: it intensified when the movements’ leaders and messaging aligned

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with US foreign policy and receded sharply once they no longer did. This pattern was clearly evident in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, when political interest, international support and media attention quickly shifted away from Afghan women (Bajoghli / Osman 2024). In this article I will analyse the “saving Afghan women” documentary and fiction films that emerged in the pre- and post-9/11 years to justify the US war in Afghanistan and compare them with more agentic films, in order to reveal how imperial and media industry hierarchies of power delimit the agency of Afghan women and disempower them. I will do so by tracking imperial geopolitics and ideology as they intersect with knowledge and media production, interrogating claims of authenticity, collaboration and participation between filmmakers and their Afghan women subjects and highlighting whose perspectives these films privilege and to what effect.

Since the events of 9/11 and the start of the War on Terror, Afghan women have come under the spotlight of Western popular culture and academic discourse, as evidenced by the proliferation of films, television programmes, documentaries, books and news reports depicting their suffering under “repressive Islamic regimes”. Some scholars have embraced simplified narratives; others have critiqued their flattening effects and the persistent portrayal of Afghan women as passive victims (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013; Hirschkind / Mahmood 2002; Maley 1996). Building on this work, I have argued that a process of “spectacling” has often transformed Afghan women into “Afghan Women” – a singular, decontextualised trope that reinforces post-9/11 stereotypes of Muslim womanhood (Osman 2005, 2014). As an Afghan-American woman, media scholar and filmmaker, I have also been shaped by the political economy of representation I analyse here: one defined by the partial and often performative inclusion available to marginalised and Third World media makers and by the uneven circulation of our work.

The early post-9/11 media landscape illustrates these dynamics vividly. Films such as *Behind the Veil* (Wolf 2001), *Beneath the Veil* (Harrison 2001), *Kandahar* (Makhmalbaf 2001)<sup>1</sup> and *Osama* (Barmak 2004) positioned Afghan women and girls at the centre of their narratives while frequently relying on classic orientalist tropes, including what Ella Shohat and Bob Stam term the “rape and rescue fantasy” (2014: 141). Although directed and produced by men, these films utilise first- and second-person narration by Afghan women and women in the diaspora to create a sense of intimacy and authenticity with audiences.

Other projects offered more agentic representations. Nelofer Pazira’s co-directed film *Return to Kandahar* (Jay / Pazira 2003), for example, documents her search for her friend in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Eva Mulvad’s *Ene-*

1 Since Makhmalbaf’s 2001 feature film *Kandahar*, multiple films also named after the historic city of Kandahar have emerged, including the 2023 Hollywood film starring Gerald Butler, who has made his career in the prolific, problematic and very lucrative War on Terror film industry.

*mies of Happiness* (2006) follows the Afghan activist Malalai Joya’s successful campaign for parliament. My own film *Postcards from Tora Bora* (Dolak / Osman 2007) features my return trip to Kabul. More recently, Tamana Ayazi and Marcel Mettelsiefen’s *In Her Hands* (2022) follows the trials and tribulations of Zarifa Ghafari, the brave, young new mayor of Maidan Shahr, the capital city of Maidan Wardak province, in the lead-up to the Taliban takeover of the country. Roya Sadat’s *The Sharp Edge of Peace* (2024) focuses on four prominent Afghan women leaders – Fatima Gailani, Fawzia Koofi, Habiba Sarabi and Sharifa Zurmati – who bravely attempted to negotiate with the Taliban to forge a road to peace that includes women’s rights. Yet these films, too, have had to navigate the structural constraints of global documentary production.

By analysing the production, distribution and circulation of a subset of these films – alongside content and discourse analysis and sharing my autoethnographic insights – I highlight the perspectives these projects privilege and the hierarchies they reproduce. Despite lower barriers to production, the global film and documentary ecosystem continues to favour those with cosmopolitan privilege and narratives that conform to normative Western frames of the East.

I begin chronologically with *Beneath the Veil* (Harrison 2001), *Kandahar* (Makhmalbaf 2001) and *Osama* (Barmak 2004), all of which gained enormous visibility in the post-9/11 moment through theatrical releases and/or mainstream broadcast platforms. For instance, *Beneath the Veil*, which received little attention before 9/11, became CNN’s most-watched documentary afterwards, viewed by more than five million people, as its messaging dovetailed with State Department communications and the Bush administration’s justification for military intervention.<sup>2</sup> Similarly *Kandahar*, despite being directed by the prominent Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf and premiering at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival in May 2001, rose to global fame only after the 9/11 attacks, when it won many nominations and awards, was translated into different European languages and grossed millions of dollars.<sup>3</sup> *Osama*, which was produced in the aftermath of 9/11, became the highest-grossing Afghan film on the Western market, buoyed by global awards and the geopolitical resonance of its themes.<sup>4</sup> Taken together this confluence of money,

2 Cf. Bose 2020, Manchanda 2020, McLarney 2009, McMorris 2002.

3 For Mohsen Makhmalbaf, a prominent cosmopolitan Iranian filmmaker, the then-timely subject matter, which he takes on in *Kandahar*, is yet another marketable topic to add to his large repertoire of films aimed at Western and international audiences. He has made a number of films about Afghans and Afghanistan, a subject popular among a new wave of Iranian filmmakers, including his daughter, the filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf. Over his forty-year career, he has made twenty feature films, won fifty global film awards and served as a juror in more than fifteen major international film festivals.

4 *Osama* made almost four million dollars on a budget of less than \$50,000. Its profitability in theatrical and television releases was bolstered by the fact that its director Siddiq Barmak, an Afghan filmmaker relatively new to the international film world, won prestigious global film awards, including at the Golden Globes, Cannes and UNESCO.

critical acclaim, prestige, statist messaging and the films' embrace of orientalist tropes defined the political economy that shaped cinema on Afghanistan.

These films' widespread acclaim and commercial success created the impression that Afghan and regional filmmakers were finally gaining space to represent their own histories. Yet a closer analysis of their production contexts and narrative choices reveals a more complex reality – one in which global power hierarchies continue to shape which stories circulate, how they are framed and whose voices are amplified. In the second half of the paper I will also discuss more agentic films and how they differ in their approaches and their circulation or lack thereof. I hope that by raising questions about the imperialist status quo of the industry, along with showing alternative modes of production, I can open up space for more capacious feminist productions and opportunities for marginalised and subaltern Third World filmmakers.

### **The ideal native informant: In service of empire**

The success of these three films (*Beneath the Veil*, *Kandahar* and *Osama*) was predicated on their being framed – and marketed – as documentaries or films rooted in the real experiences of Afghan women and girls, often through the involvement of Afghan, diasporic or mixed nationality participants. Released and circulated in the lead-up to the US military operations in Afghanistan and in the early years of what came to be known as the US “Forever War” in Afghanistan, these films helped beat the drums of war and later justified its continuation. The Afghan or “half-ghan” participants functioned as “native informants” and what the Vietnamese filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991) calls the “ideal insider”, whose presence was necessary to “authenticate” the dominant US narratives about Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror. The symbolic utility of these insiders or insider/outsideers as well as their accounts and their stories served as on-the-ground evidence and data to substantiate the State Department's messaging and broader imperial logic. Minh-ha describes these dynamics in her critique of the deceptive representational practices through which Western media claims access to, and authority over, Third World subjects. She explains:

To authenticate a work, it becomes therefore most important to prove or make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image; hence, for example, the prominence of the string-of-interviews style and the talking-heads, oral-witnessing strategy in documentary film practices. This is often called “giving voice”, even though these “given” voices never truly form the Voice of the film, being mostly used as devices of legitimation whose random, conveniently given-as and taken-for-granted authority often serves as compensation for a filmic Lack (the lack of imagination or of believability, for example). Power creates its very constraints, for the Powerful is also necessarily defined by the Powerless. (Minh-ha 1991: 24)

As I demonstrate in my analysis below, most of the “saving Afghan women” films use these cinematic “giving voice” strategies to “give voice” to Afghan women, while the very nature of their narratives and other production techniques withhold agency and authority from those speaking. The figure of the ideal insider or native informant cannot speak, in Gayatri Spivak’s sense (1993), freely or unencumbered by imperial politics. However, while these postcolonial critiques and theories of the native informant or ideal insider are useful for understanding how editorial decisions are made and shaped and what pressures subaltern media makers face, a more generous reading of the Afghan and “half-ghan” film participants would entail recasting them using Spivak’s (1987) concept of “strategic essentialism”, whereby filmmakers and their subjects actively and consciously create essentialising self/other representations to raise awareness. The activist strategy conceives essentialism as a temporary performance for the sake of action and agency. Though more derided, stepping into the native informant or ideal insider role is not that dissimilar from partaking in strategic essentialism. Both sets of participants are keenly aware of the unequal power differentials and their subaltern and subordinate position vis-à-vis the imperialist hegemonic structures that control the dissemination of information. However, engaging in strategic essentialism connotes more of an agentic and activist disposition that aims to subvert, resist and counter the stereotypes and tropes that they are temporarily peddling.

The first two of these three films offering “authentic” narratives, *Beneath the Veil* and *Kandahar* (both released in 2001 before 9/11), are structured as first-person testimonial accounts. *Beneath the Veil*, while directed by Cassian Harrison, the Channel Editor for BBC Four, features the British-born journalist Saira Shah, who is of Afghan, Indian, British and Scottish descent. She secretly goes back to Afghanistan with the help of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) to uncover the Taliban’s violence against women. While the film positions her as a potential insider with privileged insight into Afghanistan, Shah, as the multi-hyphenated interlocutor of the film, both lays claim to the country and distances herself from it with comments such as “This is my father’s country”.

Whereas *Beneath the Veil* follows the eyewitness accounts and narration of Saira Shah, Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *Kandahar*, which is based on a true story, in the first scene introduces us to Nafas, an Afghan-Canadian journalist in search of her sister and a story. Throughout the film she speaks into a tape recorder to document her experiences. Both films allude to the conventions of guerrilla-style documentary and combine them with investigative journalism video conventions, complete with hidden cameras and shaky handheld camera-work. The protagonists, Saira Shah and Nafas, who guide the audience through the strange terrain of Afghanistan, are themselves a bridge between cultures, half Western and half Eastern.

In contrast, the film *Osama* adheres to more traditional narrative storytelling conventions; its director Siddiq Barmak, having graduated from the Moscow Film School and apprenticed with Iranian filmmakers, is influenced by both Soviet realism and the Iranian avant-garde. The audience experiences the story arc of the young protagonist, Osama – a girl disguised as a boy, ultimately caught by the Taliban – without being included in the filmmaking process. Interestingly enough, Makhmalbaf provided production funding and support to enable Siddiq Barmak to make *Osama*. The publicity for *Osama* stressed the casting of amateur Afghan actresses and actors and that it was shot in Kabul, further strengthening the film’s authenticity. In interviews, Barmak was also quick to align himself with the Northern Alliance, the northern ethnic groups who worked post 9/11 in conjunction with the US military to oust the Taliban from power, thus reifying the US-led war and his allegiance to it. Via his casting and location choices and his own positioning vis-à-vis the US war in Afghanistan, Barmak is signalling his ideal insider/native informant credentials.

The Afghan women and girls in these films directed by men, on the other hand, serve first and foremost as case studies, data, evidence and embodiments of tragedy in order to authenticate the extremity of the situation of Afghan women under the draconian rule of the Taliban, then in their first regime.<sup>5</sup> *Beneath the Veil* starts with sad string music over shaky slow-motion footage of the now infamous public beatings and executions of chadari-clad Afghan women by the Taliban in Kabul’s Ghazi Stadium, referred to as Kabul Stadium in the West. Accompanied by Saira Shah’s voice-over narration, the film continues in a guerrilla exposé style of documentary filmmaking, highlighting more and more atrocities against Afghan women. Makhmalbaf’s feature film *Kandahar*, based on the true story of Afghan-Canadian journalist Nelofer Pazira’s search for her friend, follows Nafas, who escaped Afghanistan with her family during the Soviet Invasion in 1979. Now she must return to Afghanistan to rescue her sister from the oppression of the Taliban. Her sister, who has been maimed by a landmine, has vowed to commit suicide by the next lunar eclipse.

Barmak’s film *Osama* is about a young girl who has to disguise herself as a boy to earn money for her desperate widowed mother and grandmother. It turns similarly tragic once her ruse is up and the Taliban discover she is a girl. The film was so tragic that Colin Powell said in a public statement, “This movie will sear your soul. ... But in the end it will teach you why President Bush is right about waging the war on terrorists” (U.S. Department of State 2004). *Osama*, together with the narratives of the other two films (and similar documentaries), placed the Afghans and the diaspora who were involved or featured in the films into George W. Bush’s essentialist category of “us” or “good Mus-

5 Over two decades later, the situation of Afghan women continues to deteriorate in the Taliban’s second incarnation. However, their plight is considered irrelevant in the current political context of shifting US imperial interests in Venezuela, Israel-Palestine, Iran and Greenland, amongst other countries.

lims” – as opposed to “them” or “bad Muslims”, rendering Afghan women, too, victims of terrorism, in this case in the form of extreme misogyny.<sup>6</sup> As outlined above, all three films use ideal insiders and native informants to offer up authenticity in the service of perpetuating the dominant US discourse of Muslim women as victims of their repressive societies.

As a multi-hyphenated insider/outsider, an Afghan refugee who grew up in the United States, I, too, meet all the qualifications and criteria for native informants and ideal insiders. In fact, my own experience as an Afghan-American filmmaker further corroborates the prevalence of the native informant phenomenon, revealing how these dynamics push subaltern producers into essentialist ideal insider and native informant roles. In 1999, I travelled to Afghanistan as a young video journalist subcontracted by the Feminist Majority Foundation to covertly film Taliban violence against women. My footage – of brutal restrictions, but also of women’s extraordinary acts of resistance, from underground schools to clandestine clinics – became the basis of the Foundation’s “Stop Gender Apartheid” campaign.<sup>7</sup> When I returned, I created a short film, *Buried Alive: Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* (2000), and tried to secure funding or broadcast support. Knowing what media gatekeepers expected – even if I didn’t yet have the theoretical vocabulary to describe it – I chose a sensational title and supplemented my footage with interviews from white women experts. Still, no one was interested. As critics of participatory filmmaking remind us, subaltern filmmakers are often compelled to participate in their/our own representational containment under the weight of internalised, structural and market constraints (Minh-ha 1991, Rony 1996, Rangan 2017).

Yet, immediately after 9/11, those same producers began calling, not to commission my film, support my analysis or platform Afghan women’s agency, but to obtain my raw footage that could fit neatly into a ready-made narrative supporting military intervention. They wanted the images of violence, stripped of context, history and Afghan-led interpretation. My experiences exposed the racialised hierarchy of corporate media: expertise was reserved for outsiders, usually white commentators, while those with cultural and linguistic fluency were relegated to the role of fixers or liaisons expected to supply and/or be the sources of “authentic” data. Afghans could offer bodies, images, pain and “authenticity”, but rarely interpretation, authorship or authority.

This is not to suggest that the ethnic or racial make-up of producers is the only determinant in producing more complex, less sensationalist content, in this case when representing Afghan women and regarding gender/sexuality

6 Cf. Kundani 2014, Kumar 2012, Mamdani 2004, Osman 2022.

7 In the pre-9/11 years during Taliban rule in their first incarnation, when there was little media attention paid to the situation of Afghan women, the Feminist Majority Foundation and RAWA were lauded for raising awareness. However, after the 9/11 attacks, they were critiqued for drumming up war. See Young 2003, Cooke 2002, Kolhatkar / Rawi 2009.

practices and human rights discourses more broadly. Rather I want to emphasise that cultural and language fluency, and the level of involvement of those with that fluency, do make a difference. However, ultimately even when producers and/or their filmic interlocutors have cultural fluency, market forces are often a bigger determining factor in the ideological bent and messaging of a film. Corporate gatekeepers, in conjunction with policy directives, apply pressure of a political and economic or political economic nature by greenlighting or censoring film projects at various stages of production, forcing producers to negotiate, compromise or abandon their visions (Boyd-Barrett 2004, Herman / Chomsky 2002). Market logics and political imperatives determine what counts as “newsworthy” or “authentic”, in this case privileging sensationalist content in alignment with the emerging narrative justifying military intervention.

## Distorted and duplicitous knowledge production on Afghanistan

As postcolonial and media scholars have long shown, Western representations of Afghanistan, especially during the War on Terror, have produced highly distorted forms of knowledge that essentialise Afghan society and legitimise imperial interventions.<sup>8</sup> These narratives strip away context and have entrenched the tropes of Afghan culture as backwards, women as passive victims and the society as inevitably mired in violence. Moreover, these narratives have not emerged accidentally; they are embedded in the political economy of the War on Terror, which rewards sensationalism, decontextualised suffering and images that legitimise imperial interventions. Their omissions – of history, geopolitics, women’s political activism and the transnational forces that shaped the rise of Islamism – are not incidental but part of a broader colonial logic that produces Afghanistan as knowable only through tropes of terror, misogyny and backwardness. It is within this broader machinery of distorted and duplicitous knowledge production that these films must be understood.

Despite their performative gestures towards authenticity, current affairs and documentary, *Beneath the Veil*, *Kandahar* and *Osama* participate in the broader system of distorted knowledge production on Afghanistan. Rather than offering historical background or present-day context, they rely heavily on dramatic cinematic techniques – exploiting close-ups of women crying, slow-motion images of violence against women, ominous silhouettes of Taliban fighters in traditional garb silhouetted in darkness and generic “Middle Eastern” music – to cast the Taliban as the ultimate villains and Afghan women as ultimate victims.

8 See, for example, Said 1978, Abu-Lughod 2002, Hirschkind / Mahmood 2002, Shohat / Stam 2014, Kumar 2012.

Translation choices also amplify otherness: Afghan civilians interviewed in Persian and Pashto are dubbed by voice actors with exaggeratedly broken English, reinforcing caricatures of linguistic and cultural backwardness.

During the two-decade-long Global War on Terror, certain scenes and Muslim sayings became almost obligatory in US media coverage of Afghanistan. In *Osama*, during the public execution scenes (by stoning and shooting), angry spectators repeatedly shout “Allah Akbar” (translated on screen as “Praise God”). All three films also include what seem to be mandatory madrasa (religious school) scenes, where the young Afghan boys are indoctrinated in Islam. Without translation or context, scenes of young boys in Islamic attire sitting in front of Qurans, reciting verses out loud in a ritualistic manner demonise not just the Taliban but, by extension, Islam itself. Yet for many refugee families devastated by decades of war, madrasas, which were heavily funded by the US, the Saudi and the Pakistani governments, were places where boys could be fed and sheltered – an economic survival strategy effaced by these cinematic narratives. This was also the case for boys orphaned because of the war.

These are examples of how the films’ subtexts convey a simplistic version of the East – in this case, of an undifferentiated, monolithic and hateful Islam. Long-bearded, turbaned and toting weapons, the Taliban ominously lurk in alleyways, beat up women on the street, ride smirkingly in tanks and lock up women inside houses and prisons. It is as if they one day appeared overnight from some Islamist Hell. Conversely, all Afghan women become extreme victims of backwards misogynist Afghan men and the ultimate silent suffering subjects. Afghan culture is interpellated as static, unchanging and bound by archaic, problematic traditions.

These decontextualised representations not only obscure the diversity of Afghan Muslim life and the historical conditions that produced the Taliban, but also deny the long history of reform and women’s rights in Afghanistan. In *Beneath the Veil*, for example, there is considerable focus on the graphic videos of Taliban violence committed in Kabul Stadium, which becomes a metaphor for the Taliban’s ruthlessness and the people’s suffering. Yet there is no footage of the stadium during prosperous times, when it was home to women’s marches and athletics during various celebrations including the Independence Day festivities (commemorating freedom from British colonial rule), which I remember seeing as a child. Judging only by Western media’s representation of Afghanistan (including the three films in question), viewers might be led to believe that it was always a primitive country ruled by vicious Islamic despots. There is virtually no discussion of the context in which the Taliban rose to power. There is no historical analysis of the women’s rights movements in Afghanistan (starting as early as the 1920s) or of the devastating impact of imperial interventions, including the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the CIA’s clandestine sponsorship of Islamist resistance groups in their fight

against the Soviets during the Cold War. Of course, the decisions not to include such crucial historic analysis are deliberate, meant to deny the East a cohesive past, in accordance with colonial discourse.

These misrepresentations and distortions align with the racialised logics of the very lucrative War on Terror film and television industry.<sup>9</sup> They mirror older sexist tropes of the “damsel in distress”, which feminist media scholars have long analysed as central to Western gendered narratives (Tuchman 1978). Violence against women becomes hyper-visible, while more commonplace forms of gendered harm – such as domestic violence – remain invisible. In these films, Afghan women are symbolically and literally annihilated even as they are hyper-represented: stripped of agency, flattened into metaphors for cultural backwardness or conscripted into what Spivak (1993: 93) famously described as “white men saving brown women from brown men”.

As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (2014: 2) argue in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, “Eurocentricism first emerged as a discursive rationale for colonialism, the process by which the European powers reached positions of hegemony in much of the world”. European powers were able to justify their colonial domination by asserting their own superiority and the East’s innate inferiority. One of the ways the West lauded itself as superior was to cite the “emancipation” of women in modern society. Hence, the West could justify their rule in the name of liberating colonised women from their “repressive” societies. The West denied the colonised a complex past, instead offering “visual embodiments of gendered and eroticised tropes” (Shohat / Stam 2014: 9). Afghan women become orientalised symbols – veiled, silent, violated – while Afghan men become caricatures of hyperviolence.

This is consistent with what Leila Ahmed (1996, 2007) identifies as “colonial feminism”: the instrumentalisation of women’s rights to justify imperial domination. Ahmed has shown that Lord Cromer, the Viceroy of Egypt, supported Egyptian women’s rights but condemned the suffragist movement at home. In his 1908 book *Modern Egypt*, a pioneering orientalist text, Cromer wrote: “The position of women in Egypt, and in Mohammedan countries generally, is therefore a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilisation, if that civilisation is to produce its full measure of beneficial effect” (quoted in Abu-Lughod 1998: 129).

US leaders from George W. Bush to Donald Trump, while speaking emphatically about the equality and liberation of Afghan women, have repeatedly undermined the rights of women and other marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQI+ communities within the United States. They condemn the Taliban’s persecution of minorities and women as “unacceptable” but legitimise their

9 Cf. Osman 2019b, 2022; Said 1978; Shaheen 2001.

own attacks on the rights of the subaltern as the defence of unborn children, heterosexual marriage, biological gender and white supremacy. Over one hundred years after the colonisation of Egypt, India and other parts of the Global South and East, the US government in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks echoed almost the same call to action to liberate Afghan women from the Taliban and the people of Iraq from Saddam Hussein.

After the 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the political imperative to “save Afghan women” evaporated, and media attention largely disappeared (Osman / Bajoghli 2024). As decolonial scholars argue, this selective concern reflects the “outsourcing” of patriarchy and racism to the Global South (Grewal 2013, Wardak 2018). At the same time, colonisers of the past and neo-imperialists have fetishised and overemphasised polygamous harem life and violence against women more generally. Shohat and Stam (2014: 9) refer to these representations as “visual embodiments of gendered and eroticised tropes of ‘virgin lands’ and ‘dark’ continents of ‘veiled’ territories and imaginary harems and the fantasies of rape and rescue”. Thus, countries at the crosshairs of imperialism, such as Afghanistan, become a screen upon which Western anxieties, fantasies and geopolitical ambitions are projected – shaping not only global perception but also the lived realities of Afghan women, whose voices and agency are routinely subordinated to the demands of imperial storytelling. As a result of this encounter, in the postcolonial world women have become potent symbols of identity for society and the nation-state. Women’s bodies have become contested areas. How a woman dresses and behaves are hotly debated cultural signifiers. The veil has become a symbol – hence, the West’s fascination and preoccupation with going “beneath”, “behind” and “lifting” the “veil”, as the titles of mainstream media illuminate.

Taken together, these representational patterns illustrate how dominant media industries produce a highly selective and politically expedient archive about Afghanistan – one that foregrounds spectacular violence, erases historical context and relies on Afghan women’s suffering as the narrative hinge for justifying imperial projects. Such knowledge production is neither accidental nor benign; it is embedded in global hierarchies that determine whose voices are amplified, whose expertise is legitimised and whose images are extracted as raw material for advocacy, entertainment or war-making. Decolonising knowledge production on Afghanistan, therefore, requires attending to these structural asymmetries: recognising how Euro-American media political economies shape what becomes “truth”; foregrounding Afghan women’s own analyses, histories and creative work; and challenging the political and commercial incentives that continue to privilege sensationalised representations over complex, grounded and self-determined accounts of Afghan life.

## The “helpless victim”: Women and girls’ failures in film

In keeping with imperial and orientalist tropes, these films not only erase the history of Afghan women’s rights movements and their achievements, as noted above, but also invest heavily in narratives of women’s and girls’ weaknesses, failures and lack of agency. The prevalent failure tropes, which I discuss in this section, of course work in tandem with the tragic victimhood tropes that I explored in the previous section; they are mutually constitutive of each other. The failures of women and girls, which prevent them from improving their tragic situations, reinforce a simplistic binary view of gender and fixed gender roles that is anchored in Western modernity and its hegemonic notions of gender difference. Michel Foucault (1975) analysed how the modern state constructed and normalised an individual’s sense of self and sexuality by disciplining the body through the institutions of the prison and the hospital – but also via the nuclear family, which required strict gender roles (Abu-Lughod 1998). By showing women ultimately helpless to free themselves from horrific situations, these films cling to a hollowed-out and outdated version of Western modernity and its sexist and problematic patriarchal norms.

Siddiq Barmak in his film adheres to these regressive gender roles and the gender binary. Though his protagonist, Osama, is apparently based on the true story of a young girl who saved her family from starvation by cross-dressing and working as a boy, Barmak’s focus is on the tragic part of her story, her eventual failure to pass and her exposure as a girl. What exactly happened in the true story of the girl whom Osama is based on is unknown. However, *bacha posh*, or girls dressing as boys, is a part of Afghan culture and has been subject to considerable speculation and debate in Western media, like other gender/sexuality practices of Afghans, as to whether it is a regressive/harmful or progressive/liberatory practice (Osman / Crews 2025: 21). Without delving into the complexities of the *bacha posh*, it is important to note that numerous young Afghan girls were forced to cross-dress and passed successfully as boys during almost fifty years of war and its accompanying misogyny. Barmak’s Osama, on the other hand, is unable to transcend gender differences. In the boys’ school, she is repeatedly singled out because her voice, hands and feet are “like a girl’s”. Attempting to climb up and down a tree in the schoolyard during recess becomes the metaphor for her lack of masculine traits. On several occasions, the boys bully her and force her to climb a tree to test her boyhood. On every occasion, she becomes mortified, fails and cries until her friend Esfandi climbs up the tree and brings her down. In fact, given that during prepuberty, there are fewer physical differences between girls and boys, one can argue that these “tests” would not be too difficult for Osama. Barmak, by exaggerating gender difference, denies the heroine any agency of her own.

Likewise, in *Kandahar*, the heroine, Nafas, is unsuccessful in finding her sister. (Similarly, in the true story of Afghan-Canadian journalist Nelofer Pazira’s search for her friend, not her sister, the friend tragically committed suicide.) The difficulty of finding an obligatory *mahram*, or male escort/chaperone (to pass as a relative), along with other obstacles such as the looting of passing caravans and overall lawlessness, prevents her from travelling to Kandahar to rescue her sister. Interestingly, one of the few men who help Nafas in her endeavours is an African-American man who passes as Afghan, thereby giving the impression that all Afghan men are either in cahoots with the Taliban or just plain brutal and unsympathetic to women’s causes.

Although all three films are tragic, *Osama* is the most extreme by far. In the conclusion of Barmak’s film, Osama’s secret is discovered. Our protagonist, frightened and crying, is tortured by being hung in a well. Then she awaits her punishment in a prison filled with women. When she is brought before the public for her execution, a perverted old mullah (religious cleric), who has become infatuated with her, decides to marry her. He gives her a huge ancient-looking lock as a wedding gift then proceeds to lock her up in a room, where she briefly struggles to get out. In keeping with the imperial “fantasies of rape and rescue” (Shohat / Stam 2014: 9), she becomes a prisoner of excessive male desire.

In the final scene of the film, a paedophilic’s fantasy, the perverted old mullah enters her room and, after a fade to black, emerges contently, whereby it is cinematically implied that Osama has been raped. Ironically, the actress playing Osama comes across as much more capable than the actor playing the feeble old mullah. Even within the film, the subtext betrays itself and the work’s believability. Most Afghan women in the diaspora that I have spoken to about *Osama* find it too disturbing and dogmatic to watch. Yet it continues to be broadcast periodically on Afghan diaspora channels in the United States.

Although authored by or at least involving Third World filmmakers, these films, in effect, reinforce the essentialist worldview and hegemony of Western elites. The filmmakers do not explain the complicated histories of the pre- and post-Taliban world that shaped the stories they are telling. Even the framing and perspective of these Third World voices conform to First World geopolitical and corporate media agendas to represent cultural differences as exaggerated, sensationalist and over-the-top. In conjunction with the US legacy media, they have succeeded in creating the ultimate misogynist bogeymen and the perfect helpless female victims to add to the Western media’s already vast repertoire of evil, threatening and backwards Muslim men and their helpless Muslim women. This is not to suggest that the Taliban should be painted in a positive light but to question their extreme vilification and the extreme tragedy of the female characters within the films.

Taken together, these narrative choices – exaggerated gender binaries, relentless depictions of failure and the absence of historical or political context

– reduce Afghan women to symbolic victims and Afghan men to monolithic perpetrators. Even when made by Afghan or regional filmmakers, the films reproduce a familiar repertoire of orientalist images that align neatly with Western geopolitical narratives and media market demands. In doing so, they obscure the complexity of Afghan gender practices (including *bacha posh*), erase the long histories of women’s activism and sideline the diverse forms of resilience and agency that existed even under Taliban rule. We see only glimpses of the women teachers who bravely ran underground schools, the women doctors who bravely practised clandestinely and the women activists who bravely documented the events.

The result is a cinematic landscape in which Afghan women’s stories are framed through inevitable and extreme tragedy and Afghan society appears static, violent and culturally predetermined. These representations of extreme tragedy of course can partly be attributed to filmmakers’ artistic licence to dramatise events. However, by failing to accurately represent the full spectrum of Afghan women (and men), these films not only disempower the characters on screen but also reinforce a broader system of knowledge production in which Afghan voices become legible primarily when they confirm Western expectations of barbarism and helplessness. These films thus exemplify how self-representation, when produced within the constraints of global media hierarchies, can slide into self-orientalisation – reproducing the very tropes that decolonial scholarship urges us to dismantle.

## Afghan women filmmakers and Afghan feminist futures

The limits of dominant representations, however, do not mean Afghan women lack alternative imaginaries or creative agency. When we turn to media produced *by* Afghan women or shaped through meaningful collaboration with them, a very different set of narratives comes into view – one that refuses to reduce Afghan women to mute victims and instead envisions feminist futures grounded in local context. Still, the question remains: Why have most of the films celebrating Afghan women’s agency (mostly produced in the region and mostly by women) not met with success in the West? In this final section, I reflect on this question with insights from my own experience of making and marketing such a film, and I highlight other filmmakers who are using innovative, collaborative methods to centre Afghan women despite the challenging political economy of the cinematic landscape.

In my ethnographic research on Afghan media worlds in my book *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars* (2020), and in my interviews with Afghan women media producers and audiences, women consistently articulate a desire

for stories that invert the logic of victimhood imposed by both patriarchal power and Western media markets. Afghan women face victimisation on a daily basis – steeped in a misogynist world of warlordism and Islamism and living through decades of conflict that have constrained their daily lives: when they are afforded the opportunity to produce or consume media, they want a media world that is the opposite of their brutal reality. They want a world where they are the heroes and saviours, a world where they have the power to save not only themselves but also the nation. A world in which they are protagonists, protectors, reformers and nation-builders.

The work of Afghan women media makers such as Saba Sahar, a prominent actress and director, who also happens to be a police officer, exemplifies this alternative horizon: producing films where women appear as generals, police sergeants and heroic warriors, she cultivates a cinematic space in which Afghan women can imagine – and see – forms of power denied to them in the material world. She has even created her own film franchise, Saba Films, where she creates alternative visions of womanhood. This highly visible work can be risky. In August of 2020, a year before the US withdrawal and the Taliban takeover, Sahar was the target of an anonymous assassination attempt when her car was ambushed; she was shot four times but survived.

As I have documented in detail in my book, during the US-led war and interventions in Afghanistan, visibility became deadly for on-air, frontline and high-profile media makers, especially women. While the international funded media sector provided media makers many opportunities and served to create a robust public sphere to challenge ruling elites, as violence increased over the two decades, so did violence directed at the media sector, especially at women and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Osman 2020).

While Afghan patriarchal hardliners attack Afghan women media makers and activists literally and figuratively, they also disdain Afghan and foreign soap operas on grounds of “immorality”. However, the shows’ large fan base makes them valuable for generating debates over domestic and gender issues at home and in the public arena. The gun-toting villains, usually sisters, mothers and aunts-in-law who scheme against the protagonist couples, were particularly fun and empowering for Afghan women viewers. These genres offer a subversive space where women can escape and challenge the male gaze and patriarchal social order and control (Osman 2011, 2020, 2023).

I also sought to create an alternative mediascape to feature stories of different Afghan women, including my own, in my documentary film, co-directed with Kelly Dolak, *Postcards from Tora Bora* (Osman / Dolak 2007). Though not a pre- or post-9/11 film that centres on the situation of Afghan women under the Taliban, it was made in the early years of the US war in Afghanistan and is helpful for understanding how non-commercial films can centre Afghan voices as well as how the political economy of the media industry impacts them.

*Postcards from Tora Bora* is narrated from my point of view. I wrote the narration based on my journal entries and spoke in my own voice, which is not always the case in personal documentaries, which sometimes features voice-overs by celebrities. Despite receiving suggestions to use a celebrity voice-over to make it more marketable during our festival run, I opted to use my own voice because it simply made more sense to narrate my own story. The film also employs animation, old home movies, newsreel footage and man-on-the-street interviews to document my return trip to Afghanistan and tell my family's story of fleeing Afghanistan during the Soviet–Afghan War. It was a collaboration among three primary stakeholders – myself, Kelly Dolak and Stephen Jablonsky, who did the animation and also co-edited and co-produced it.

In a conversation with the cinema studies scholar Karen Redrobe about collaborative refugee films for *Film Quarterly* journal, we argued that Afghan and other SWANA refugees' stories that are widely distributed and achieve a degree of mainstream success do so at the cost of perpetuating dominant tropes about the West vis-à-vis the East; conversely, independent films, such *Postcards from Tora Bora* (2007), *The FBI Blew Up My Ice Skates* (Ebrahimi 2016) and the documentary *Half a Life* (Shogaolu 2017), where women and non-white directors or writers are at the helm, traverse a wider range of topics and issues, but the films themselves are sidelined. In comparing *Postcards* with another collaborative refugee documentary film, namely the internationally successful Danish *Flee* directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen (2021), which tells the story of the director's childhood friend, a gay Afghan refugee with the pseudonym of Amin Nawabi, we raised questions about Nawabi's level of participation and noted gender differences between the two films.

With regards to *Postcards*, Redrobe (Osman / Redrobe 2022: 24) wrote that it “differs so dramatically from the kind of human rights documentaries that became common in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center that focused exclusively on the suffering of Afghan women and girls”. She explained that by showing

a range of Afghan- and Afghan-American voices, many of them managing to be humorous in spite of all [the suffering] ... complex conversations among men and women, old and young, Afghans and Afghan- as well as Anglo-Americans emerge in the context of dynamic and playful visual strategies that help viewers listen and see differently.... [The] film is also striking for the way it presents a view of Kabul and its surrounding areas from a three-pronged female perspective: that of Kelly Dolak, a white North American; that of your aunt, an Afghan older woman; and your own Afghan-American point of view. This dismantles the oversimplification of “women” in the Afghan context. (Osman / Redrobe 2022: 24–25)

Despite *Postcards from Tora Bora* doing relatively well on the film festival circuit, premiering at the Tribeca Film Festival, it did not get picked up for broadcast or theatrical release and achieved no commercial success. Buyers

and distributors dismissed it as too “experimental” for our use of animation and the back and forth between flashbacks and the present day. The genre-melding elements that we were experimenting with, such as the use of animation alongside live-action footage, were certainly novel. *Postcards* (2007) was released concurrently with the acclaimed documentary memoirs *Persepolis* (Satrapi / Paronnaud 2007) and *Waltz with Bashir* (Folman 2008), the films that arguably put animated personal-political documentaries about the Middle East on the map. And though *Postcards from Tora Bora* was innovative and experimental, it was equally narratively driven, like its counterparts *Persepolis* and *Waltz with Bashir* and the much later released *Flee*. However, when women are at the helm, especially when one is a heritage or hyphenated filmmaker and big-name directors or celebrities are not involved, creative leaps are not framed as innovative. Not being beholden to corporate media meant we had the editorial and production independence to focus on the stories we wanted to tell but also meant that the film did not reach wide audiences and we could not launch our film careers (Osman / Redrobe 2022).

Relatedly, Nelofer Pazira’s co-directed film, *Return to Kandahar* (Jay / Pazira 2003) – which is the documentary version of the fictionalised *Kandahar* (Makhmalbaf 2001) that she starred in and that is based on her story – did not receive anywhere near the attention or popularity of Makhmalbaf’s film. Like *Postcards from Tora Bora*, it was critically successful and had a successful film festival run but did not achieve commercial success or wide distribution in comparison to its counterparts. Both *Postcards* and *Return to Kandahar* were picked up by small independent/educational distributors, Documentary Educational Resources and Bullfrog Films, respectively.

Yet despite these political economic challenges, in order to counter dominant narratives, it is important to highlight stories, films and other work about and by Afghan women, including women leaders. As someone who has been involved in Afghan women’s rights movements for decades, I have met many incredible activists doing amazing work in the region yet have noticed that only a few voices and organisations register in global media circuits. There are many other local heroines and groups in the Afghan region actively working for human rights under difficult and dangerous conditions and in need of resources. In my article “Media and Imperialism in the Global Village: A Case Study of Four Malalais and the Af-Pak Women’s Rights Movement” (Osman 2019a), I highlight the trajectory of iconic female political figures and their activism and reform in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I argue that when popularly supported local Af-Pak women activists, who fight bravely for human rights, equality and justice, also hold US foreign policy accountable for the rise of extremism and corruption in their region, they are silenced by hegemonic ruling elites and their conformist media institutions for deviating from prescribed victim scripts.

It is rare for even Western filmmakers buoyed by their own privilege and their place in centres of media-making power to find commercial success in attempting to tell counter-hegemonic, collaborative stories. The documentary *Enemies of Happiness* (2006), made by the Danish filmmaker Eva Mulvad, is noteworthy in this regard because it chronicles the life of the parliamentarian and activist Malalai Joya and it was met with acclaim and success. Joya gained international recognition after making an impassioned speech denouncing Afghan warlords and their war crimes during a 2003 *loya jirga* (public assembly) to ratify Afghanistan's then new post-9/11 constitution.<sup>10</sup> Joya bravely spoke up against Afghanistan's warlords, with many of the most notoriously powerful, dangerous and ruthless ones in attendance and, in the process, also condemned the US warlords who had empowered them. Captured by Afghan journalists and on delegates' mobile phone cameras, her speech was broadcast on almost all Afghan television and radio stations.

In the videos, the viewer can see and hear the warlords become increasingly outraged as they forcibly remove Joya. Mulvad's film won many international film festival awards, including the prestigious Sundance (2006) and IDFA (2006) awards, and was broadcast first on European television stations (2006) and then subsequently on PBS under the title *A Woman among Warlords* (2007). It follows Joya's successful campaign for parliament, starting with the dramatic video of her historic speech. The film shows Joya campaigning for political change in Afghanistan by engaging with community members and listening to their concerns. Once elected her commitment to human rights becomes even more evident in the film. She intervenes on behalf of women and other marginalised groups by challenging abusive and violent patriarchal authorities including husbands and community elders.

Despite the success of the films that featured her, attention from Euro-American media and praise in the Western media for her efforts to speak against the Afghan ruling elites, Joya's anti-imperialist critique ultimately diminished her status and led to censorship. In 2009 CNN took issue with Joya calling the US presence in Afghanistan an "occupation". In 2010, when she was named among *Time Magazine's* "100 Most Influential People in the World", a *Time Magazine* feature critiqued her for not embracing US and NATO forces in her country. In 2011, the US State Department denied her a visa for a three-week book tour to promote her book *A Woman among Warlords: The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice* but reconsidered after considerable pressure from progressive US activists and organisations such as the ACLU. Joya's case exemplifies how women who critique neo-imperialism as an impediment to women's liberation tend to fade from the Western media spotlight.

10 Defense Committee for Malalai Joya, "The Brave and Historical Speech of Malalai Joya in the LJ". 2 July 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLC1KBrwbck>.

Over two decades later with the rise of the Taliban regime in their second incarnation, we see more agentic films made by Afghan and diasporic Afghan women filmmakers and in meaningful collaborations with them. Although space constraints do not permit me to elaborate, a few noteworthy ones deserve at least a mention. These women filmmakers did not face the same pressures and urgent imperative to conform to the early post-9/11 “saving Afghan women” narratives as their predecessors. In the post-US withdrawal era, as US imperial interests and the media spotlight shifted away from Afghanistan, with no immediate impending attack or war on the Taliban planned, the media and public focus also shifted away from the saviourism rhetoric and Afghan women’s rights. Instead US imperial interests and the media spotlight turned to Iran, Venezuela and Greenland, among other countries, highlighting where possible the human rights abuses in those countries. Less encumbered by US imperial interests and hegemony, these Afghan filmmakers are able to traverse a wider array of topics and themes related to women’s rights and expressions of women and girls’ agency.

The Afghan-Canadian filmmaker Fazila Amiri’s documentary *And Still I Sing* (2022) features three Afghan singers and musicians, including the pop star Arianna Sayeed, and follows their trials and tribulations in attempting to pursue their dreams while fighting for the future of Afghanistan’s culture and artistry against hardliners who want to silence them by any means necessary. Similarly, the documentary film *In Her Hands* (2022), which was directed and produced by the Afghan-British filmmaker Tamana Ayazi in collaboration with Marcel Mettelsiefen, follows the difficulties faced by Zarifa Ghafari, the brave, young new mayor of Maidan Shahr, in the lead-up to the Taliban takeover of the country. Likewise, the prominent and prolific Afghan filmmaker and television director Roya Sadat has made numerous important films and television programmes that have gained acclaim in Afghanistan and beyond. Her documentary *The Sharp Edge of Peace* (2024), for example, focuses on four prominent Afghan women leaders and politicians, Fatima Gailani, Fawzia Koofi, Habiba Sarabi and Sharifa Zurmati, who were bravely trying to negotiate with the Taliban to forge a road to peace that included women’s rights.

In the lead-up to the US withdrawal, as the US-backed Afghan government was collapsing and the Taliban were regaining ground, these films and filmmakers show the resilience and tenacity of Afghan women and girls to fight back and carve out their place in society. On the one hand, the women’s efforts were unsuccessful as the Taliban returned to power and repealed laws that inscribed women’s rights and protected their gains, and most of the women and girls featured fled to other countries. However, more importantly, the films succeed in showing the diversity of Afghan women, their achievements, past and present, and their perseverance in demanding their rights on their own terms, and thus subverting the patriarchal tropes of failure and imperial saviours. More-

over, the featured women continue to speak out from abroad. These films have had varying degrees of success commercially, ranging from being acquired by global streaming giants such as Netflix to circulating on YouTube.

These works, including my own, demonstrate that feminist media from Afghanistan and in the diaspora is possible and can thrive – when women are allowed to define the terms of their own storytelling. Yet the political economy of global media continues to marginalise precisely these kinds of narratives. As the cases of the more agentic films I have highlighted reveal, when films, filmmakers and/or who they feature challenge imperial scripts or foreground women’s agency without conforming to victim-centred tropes, they rarely receive commercial backing, broad distribution or sustained Western attention, and when they do receive a level of success it hinges on the imperial time period or the context of imperial geopolitics and their imperial narratives. Even when Afghan women create compelling, innovative and critically acclaimed work, dominant structural hierarchies ensure that the media system rewards stories that fit established geopolitical, gendered and aesthetic expectations, rather than those that complicate or subvert them.

Nevertheless, these films and media practices have managed to carve out imaginative and political space for feminist futures that resist both Islamist and Western patriarchy and saviourism. They reveal a broader repertoire of Afghan women’s agency – one that mainstream representations obscure – and they model forms of collaborative, self-authored and/or feminist storytelling that destabilise imperial knowledge frameworks. In foregrounding humour, multivocality, creativity and critique, they point toward a decolonial media practice that neither denies violence nor reduces women to its passive objects. Instead, they reclaim narrative power, offering visions of Afghan womanhood that are complex, situated and defiantly self-determined.

## Conclusion

In summary, not all collaborations are collaborative, nor are all participatory films participatory. We need to be sceptical when media are praised and marketed as authentic and realistic based on the inclusion and participation of the subjects featured in the films. We cannot assume that all so-called collaborative and participatory media ventures are equitable. As we have seen, many filmic gestures towards “giving voice” to Afghan women and girls fall woefully short of that goal. Some subjects are given a voice, but that voice may not be their own or it may not be allowed to shape the narrative. These women often function as the illustrative or emotive object of the film, without the agency to see, or paint, the larger picture. Films that call on “native informants” or “ideal insiders” reinforce certain tropes – of women’s victimhood and of Afghanistan’s

backwardness – further perpetuating the dominant ideologies propagated by Western imperial powers. Further research into the nature of collaboration and participatory media and its political economy and hierarchies of power is required. Certainly, discourse analysis and textual analysis of films, as I have done here, can illuminate the dominant messages and ideologies embedded in media and the degree of the collaborative process and praxis. Likewise, while sharing my insights as a filmmaker working in and scholar of Western and Afghan media industries is an important first step, a full analysis would require conducting ethnographic research and interviews with the filmmakers and their interlocutors whom I have discussed in this article.

Moreover, critical media studies demands that we interrogate who truly controls the means of production, distribution and circulation. We have to map the mainstream media industry and the ways that it has curtailed the full participation and inclusion of subaltern people. The mapping also requires contextualising the success or lack thereof of media within their political moment and within the geopolitics of foreign policy more broadly. That some of the films I have discussed became successful in a variety of ways during the time that the George W. Bush administration, including Colin Powell, Dick Cheney and Laura Bush, were championing Afghan women’s rights in the United States and the US was launching its longest war in Afghanistan, was no coincidence. Market forces, geopolitics and imperial interests – all caught up in the United States’ “Forever War” – converged to over-determine which media were able to reach and spread among the viewing public. These distorted, one-sided or limited narratives were then amplified, shaping foreign policy, public imaginaries and humanitarian agendas and determining which Afghan women were deemed “worthy” of support.

For marginalised and low-resource filmmakers, especially those in the cross-hairs of US imperialism and including those of us in the Afghan diaspora, “making it” or finding even nominal success as a filmmaker in the corporate media industry involves a difficult balancing act of placating and/or abiding by market forces and dominant ideologies, without compromising one’s own positionality and world-view. My own experiences with the media industry in making the two films I have highlighted in this article taught me that the degree to which filmmakers challenge imperial and masculinist projects, and therefore gender and us-vs.-them binaries and assimilationist discourses, has a direct impact on both the scale of their circulation and their commercial and critical success or lack thereof.

This is not to say that the earlier “saving Afghan women” films that I have analysed are not deserving of their commercial and critical success and circulation. Indeed, they are based on true stories that are tragic in their misogyny: femicide and suicide were and still are major issues in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and more broadly during the almost five decades of war and insecurity

that has plagued Afghanistan. Yet we need to figure out how to present the sobering realities and the deplorable plight of Afghan women without further disempowering them. We must also question the extreme tragedy of these films and the “masculinist protection” and saviourism narratives that underpin them (Young 2003) and take creative leaps to imagine alternative cinematic possibilities. For every Osama and Nafas that got caught, how many girls and women bravely persevered? These films reinforce traditional gender roles, patriarchal norms and imperialist paternalism more broadly. Their overwhelming focus on the victimisation of women voyeuristically fetishises violence towards women. Echoing the feminist film critic and filmmaker Laura Mulvey (Sassatelli 2011), the films’ sadistic gaze is crafted around male audiences’ pleasure – and Western audiences’ imperial fantasies.

Afghan women already possess the knowledge, agency and ability to dismantle this imperialist ideology. The Afghan and non-Afghan women filmmakers that I highlight in this article and the Afghan women they feature in their films, including activists, musicians and politicians, among others, are using the power they have in public and private life so that their world-views and imaginaries may prevail. In Afghanistan and in the diaspora, we are imagining and working for a future where Afghan women have basic human rights and are free. To build towards that future, transnational feminist organisations that seek to support them, and the global media industry that selectively represents them, must centre the voices of Afghan women and enable them to create their own stories and media – not continue the business as usual of positioning them as mere objects and subjects of Western-centric imperial and patriarchal fantasies.

Ultimately, the struggle over representation is inseparable from the struggle over whose knowledge counts. The films analysed here – whether authored in the West or by Third World filmmakers navigating Western markets – reveal how imperial epistemologies continue to structure what kinds of Afghan stories are legible, fundable and globally circulated. Decolonising knowledge production therefore requires more than exposing and critiquing orientalist tropes: it demands restructuring the conditions under which Afghan women can author, produce, distribute and interpret their own narratives. As the examples of these independent women-led documentary projects show, Afghan women already possess the creative imaginaries, political analysis and storytelling capacities to craft feminist futures beyond the frame imposed by both Taliban and Western patriarchy and saviourism. What remains lacking is not their agency, but the political will of global media institutions, funders and audiences to support and amplify these alternative epistemic communities. If we are committed to decolonial and transnational feminist praxis, then we must transform the structures that privilege imperial narratives – and recognise Afghan women not as symbols of rescue but as producers of knowledge, agents of critique and authors of their own cinematic and political futures.

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- Amiri, Fazila (dir.) (2022): *And Still I Sing*. First Hand Films / BBC Four Storyville, 90 min.
- Ayazi, Tamana / Mettelsiefen, Marcel (dirs.) (2022): *In Her Hands*. Propagate Content / Hidden-Light Productions / Moondogs, 93 min.
- Barmak, Siddiq (dir.) (2004): *Osama*. Barmak Film / NHK / Swipe Films, 83 min.
- Ebrahimi, Sara Zia (dir.) (2016): *The FBI Blew Up My Ice Skates*. 21 min.
- Folman, Ari (dir.) (2008): *Waltz with Bashir*. Bridgit Folman Film Gang / Les Films d’Ici / Razor Film Produktion, 90 min.
- Harrison, Cassian (dir.) (2001): *Beneath the Veil*. Channel 4 / Hardcash Productions / Independent Television News, 54 min.
- Jay, Paul / Pazira, Nelofer (dirs.) (2003): *Return to Kandahar*. Icebreaker Films and J Films, Inc. in association with the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 65min.
- Makhmalbaf, Mohsen (dir.) (2001): *Kandahar*. Bac Films / Makhmalbaf Productions / StudioCanal, 81 min.
- Mulvad, Eva (dir.) (2006): *Enemies of Happiness*. Bastard Film, 59 min.
- Osman, Wazhmah / Dolak, Kelly (dirs.) (2007): *Postcards from Tora Bora*. Documentary Educational Resources, 87 min.
- Rasmussen, Jonas Poher (dir.) (2021): *Flee*, 90 min.
- Sadat, Roya / Deldar, Aziz (dirs.) (2024): *The Sharp Edge of Peace*. MIRA Studios / Roya Film House / Foothill Productions, 95 min.
- Satrapı, Marjane / Paronnaud, Vincent (dirs.) (2007): *Persepolis*. France / United States, 96 min.
- Shogaolu, Tamara (dir.) (2017): *Half a Life*. Ado Ato Pictures, 12 min.
- Wolf, Richard (dir.) (2001): *Behind the Veil*. Lobodocs, 25 min.