

The Small, Imperfect Cinema of Afghanistan -  
Through the Work of Roya Sadat

Soraya Ata.

A Thesis  
in  
The Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts (Film Studies) at Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

June 2019

**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
**School of Graduate Studies**

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Soraya Ata.

Entitled: The Small Imperfect Cinema of Afghanistan - Through the Work of Roya Sadat  
and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Fine Arts (Film Studies)**

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with  
respect to originality and quality.

Read and approved by the following jury members:

Jean-Claude Bustros	Chair
Viviane Saglier	External Examiner
Masha Salazkina	Examiner
Kay Dickinson	Supervisor

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Program Director

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of Faculty

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Abstract

---

### The Small, Imperfect Cinema of Afghanistan - Through the Work of Roya Sadat

This thesis investigates Afghan cinema, reborn two decades ago with the establishment of new modes of governance and influenced by all the changes this brought. Following Teshome H. Gabriel, the project examines Afghan cinema according to three core means of investigation, as laid out in his critical Third World film theory: text, production and reception. It then supplements Gabriel's schema with an analysis of the importance of education. After the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction and transition has been significantly shaped by neo-liberal economic policies that have strongly impacted its fragile film industry, as well as the country at large and its people's lives. This thesis looks closely at the current infrastructures for cinema in Afghanistan via the journeys that filmmaker Roya Sadat has made through them and the circumstances under which her films have been made. It focuses on the management of complex forms of technical production, the mobilization of skilled labor and professional expertise, and the deployment of substantial resources in a situation of extreme economic and social duress. Afghan culture is steeped in poetry and stories upon which its cinema draws. There is a hunger to tell stories. This thesis melds evaluations of extra-textual contexts with explorations of the cinematic language and narrative tropes of recent Afghan films in order to understand how this cinema connects and communicates with an Afghan audience.

## Acknowledgement

---

Throughout the completion of this dissertation, I have had the privilege of receiving tremendous amount of support. My debt to their generosity and kindness is immense. First and foremost, I am eternally grateful for the unfaltering patience of my supervisor, Dr. Kay Dickinson, whose constructive criticism shaped and guided the articulation of this project.

I am indebted for the valuable and unbound access to Roya Film House given to me by Roya Sadat, who warmly welcomed me into her home and answered all of my questions; I hope that this project has accomplished its purpose and done justice to her guidance.

I would like to express my very great appreciation to Aziz Dildar whose personal experience combined with his immense academic and historical knowledge of Afghanistan film education and culture, cultivated further areas of this research.

I am grateful for professor Sami Nabipour's enriching contribution to my understanding of the current state of academic development in film and cinema of Afghanistan, and his generous gift of his only copy of the book, *The Revolution Process of Cinema in Afghanistan* (2011), by Abdul-Wahid Naziri.

My delightful meeting with the famed director, "engineer" Latif, whose kindness and smile accompanied his patient replies while granting me with his memories of Afghan cinema in the decades of 1960 – 1980s, which is a true privilege, given the very limited surviving archives.

I am thankful for the generosity of professor Mariam Kakar, who provided me with digital copies of archival materials she had independently gathered over the years.

There are a number of individuals whose assistance in different ways helped me to connect peoples and institutes that became the key resources for this project: professor Hamid Kabuli, Nargis Afghanyar, S. Ahmad Shakib Mousawi, Sohabe Herawi and Muhammad-Agha Zaki.

I am thankful for my uncle, Abdul-Ghani Ata, who is a refugee in Iran, but selflessly accompanied me on my two-month long trip in Afghanistan by being a constant presence of safety and strength in the streets of Kabul.

Finally, my mother, Laila, who has always been a source of inspiration and admiration while unconditionally supporting my unconventional curiosities, and instilling in me love and passion for my motherland.

## Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One History of the Birth	13
Chapter Two The Journey of Making - Production	31
Chapter Three Recognize Our Own Image - Distribution and Reception	60
Chapter Four The Power of Knowledge - Education	91
Conclusion What Will Happen?	110

## Introduction

---

My poetry is an image  
My poetry is an alarm  
My poetry is the complex look of my garden, and because of the fall briskly  
All of its flowers and plants are dried  
My poetry is the incubus of the time that is bleak  
My poetry is an image  
My poetry is an alarm  
My poetry is not an act for any gipsy of the market  
That would be my trade  
That gives be bread  
That gives me cloth  
That allows me a space in the line of wage earners  
My poetry is born out my devotion  
It is all feelings, it is all art  
My poetry is an image  
My poetry is an alarm<sup>1</sup>

Barat-Ali Fedayi

“Inja Afghanistan ast” which means “this is Afghanistan” is a repeated phrase you can hear in conversations with Afghans in Afghanistan and even Afghans who live in the diaspora. People use this line to justify the differences between where they live and how this country operates. Both men and women apply this phrase with negative connotations to express how, because this is Afghanistan, things just don’t work here or things are not going to change. This geographical attention to a country, whose location - lying along important trade routes such as the Silk Road and those connecting Southern and Eastern Asia to Europe and the Middle East - has long been a prize sought by empire builders, which for millennia, great armies have attempted to subdue.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author.

Afghanistan's geographical location provides the backdrop for looking at Afghanistan as not simply a place but a calamity, a situation.

The instability in the region has not only hampered the progress of Afghan society but also decreased the development of its cinema. Afghan cinema has been inextricably linked to the different conflicts that have marked the social context of the country and the region. But as the country continues to cope with the consequences of past developments, the current political situation reveals a tone unique to this part of the world. The new political establishment demonstrates enthusiasm for Afghan film. The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 marked a new beginning for the country's film industry to rise again. Afghan film-makers returned home from the diaspora and things started up again thanks to hard work and effort.

Filmmaking as an ideological tool becomes an instrument for social transformation through individual and indigenized themes which focused on the lives and struggles of people. As a result, cinema has allowed the opportunity to relate what Afghan society has experienced during the years of its most radical repression and how they are coping with this new situation. Teshome H. Gabriel, in his essay "Third Cinema as the Guardian of Popular Memory," accounts for the impetus behind Third Cinema as "participatory and contributive to the struggles for the liberation of the people of the Third World."<sup>2</sup> Some of the works of Afghan cinema have explored ways of understanding the voice and testimony that move away from the traditional formulas repeated by the mass media and by the most commercial cinemas; they introduce a reflection on the expressive possibilities available to tell an Afghan story.

While most of the Afghan population is not educated, not even able to read and write, cinema and movies can help Afghans to discover more about themselves, as well

---

<sup>2</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel, "Third Cinema as the Guardian of Popular Memory." In *Questions of Third World Cinema*, ed. Pines, Jim (British Film Institute. 1990), 55.

as the outside world. This nation has lived through so many impediments, and for so long, without the mirror of cinema that one could almost say it does not recognize its own image.

Roya Sadat as a Third World filmmaker, tries to mirror this society. Her work is the prism through which this thesis examines Afghan film production. Her films, with their geopolitical implications, show the impact of war on people's lives, the conflict between tradition and modernity, race, class, tyranny, cultural practices, revolution, colonialism and a weak economy. Sadat's work relies more on an appeal to the social and political conflicts her characters face as its primary rhetorical strategy and less on the example of individual psychoanalytic processes and their resolution. There is no solution to the misery of her characters. We meet them before the clash of their unstable situations and follow them as they struggle to survive and we leave them as they find no way out of the hostility of their environment. As Teshome H. Gabriel writes "the individual 'Hero' in Third World context does not make history, they only serve historical necessities."<sup>3</sup>

Once more Teshome H. Gabriel, in his article "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films," looks at the three components of Third World critical film theory - the text, the production and the reception - that are drawn from the cultural history of Third World people. Afghan filmmakers such as Sadat have demonstrated a profound understanding of the potential of small budget films, not only for the future of Afghan cinema, but also for the progress of the new country as whole. While any film project is itself a collaborative work drawing on professional and non-professional skills, in the case of Sadat, it is more a joining of forces. Because of the impoverished economic and social development, there is a lack of material resources such as film technology and funding,

---

<sup>3</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel. "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films." In *Questions of Third World Cinema*, ed. Pines, Jim. (British Film Institute. 1990), 48

which are available to some, not to all. All these conditions force the filmmaker to use any available means to fulfill their project.

Focusing on these three components, text, production and reception, in Sadat's films, assists us in seeing the political point of view of the director, while simultaneously shedding light on Afghan cinema's fragmented infrastructure. The text (film) becomes the intersection of cultural codes and sub codes, and the formal thematic and grammar of the film are based on the daily life of people which is intertwined and rooted in the cultural history of the Third World more generally. In her films, Sadat looks at the traditions, customs and social and economic struggles of Afghan people. She doesn't see the need to introduce these traditions, or explain the circumstance of their struggles, because the audience of her films are the Afghan people, whose lives run parallel with the narratives of her films. But on the component issue of production, it is the low security and poor economy of the country that are still fragile after decades of warfare.

Though filmmaking had a promising future in first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in recent years, the fighting between the Afghan government and Taliban and ISIS forces have intensified and the suicide attacks that are continuously happening within the cities and especially in public areas have deteriorated the security situation even more. For these reasons, filmmakers face great challenges for the production of their film projects in terms of finance and security and also, for the same reason, these films never get screened in the limited local theaters. The only way that people can see these films is via CDs, DVDs and television, if they get broadcast through private television channels.

### Theory and Methodology

Yet before looking at the current situation of cinema in Afghanistan, I will outline how this research project contributes to the field of Afghan film studies. In particular, I do this by illuminating the central relations between governance, sovereignty, and power, and their

combined connections to film. In examining the cinema of Afghanistan after 2001, I explore the limitations and potential of the visual arts to represent the diversity of embodied Afghan experiences. However, the scope of this study is limited in how it can represent the views of filmmaker(s) and film industry experts. This project is mainly focused on the work of one Afghan filmmaker, which neither draws a complete image of Afghan cinema, nor fully represents the culture to which it is supposed to belong. Rather, this thesis endeavors to tell the multifaceted story of cinema through the works of Roya Sadat, as a medium of and tool for social change in a society that is entering into pivotal but highly uncertain times.

As each chapter will elaborate, this study examines the links between art, culture, cinema, and conflict, posing the following research questions: to what extent is cinematic production reflexive of and a participant in the public sphere developing in Afghanistan? How do Afghan artists understand their own society? Can cinema bridge the communication gap between religious and non-religious citizens, between different ethnicities, between generations and genders? What reflections are taking place in newly formed assumptions about the role of the artist as citizen? In tackling these questions, I will provide an in-depth examination of the role of art and cultural activities in addressing violence and building trust, facilitating dialogue and promoting intercultural competency and understanding. Using a case-study methodology, the chapters to come offer a closer exploration of art and cultural activities in Afghanistan.

This project is mostly based on interviews with film directors, writers, professors of film and cinema at Kabul University, film producers, technician personnel, and press materials published on Afghan film and its cinema. A semi-structured research questionnaire guided all interviews. Additional information was collected through email exchanges with research participants.

Most of my fieldwork was conducted in Kabul, a city that is the most ethnically diverse space in the country. Roya Film House, which is the first film production company established after 2001 by Roya and Alka Sadat, two filmmaker sisters, is located in Kabul. The city has often been the location of film productions; the home for TV and news outlets; the venue of various film festivals; and host to most NGOs and foreign organizations. The international presence in Kabul ensures an audience and funding to promote not just cultural production, but particularly contemporary art made by women. As much as the city also creates new hierarchies of power and domination because of its transportation, medical, education, and telecommunication sectors, it also remains the locale from which artists may experience new forms of social mobility. My focus on Kabul as the center of power and opportunity for investments and higher education was informed by the fact that it has represented a site of political possibilities for artists, activists, and women, while simultaneously notions of corruption, security and law and order problems and air and water pollution remain deeply associated with that space in the collective imagination.

I recognize that my own identity as a researcher cannot be abstracted from the research process. First, I situate myself as an Afghan Canadian who has received an academic education in Canadian universities. One of the challenges I have set myself for this project is to look at the subject mostly through non-Western scholars. Because of the conservative structures of power and domination that prevail in Western culture, and the inequalities that exist in a globalized world-system, from political institutions in general to film industries in particular, and because of the capacity limitations of Western theories to describe or explain other contexts than those for which they were created, it is necessary to adopt theories and perspectives that have been produced locally rather than extrapolating Euro-American conceptual models.

After the attacks of 9/11, Afghanistan became a center for media attention. News about the Taliban, especially their treatment of Afghan women, became the subject of many political debates. Images of the Afghan woman, covered in her burka, were on the front pages of major news outlets. The visual identity and cinematic construction of Afghanistan has been shaped and sustained through various representations through news media outlets, documentaries, and cinematic productions. Western films offer representations of Afghanistan as a warlord-ridden land of strife and oppression, and Afghan people as barbarians, ferocious Pashtun tribesmen, or noble savages. The influential essay, "On Violence," by Frantz Fanon, details how representational violence is consistently done to the colonized and formerly colonized world - the regions that are now labelled the Global South - by these sorts of images. I will later use this text as a way through which to understand constructions of the visual identity of Afghan people.

There is a great demographic diversity of ethnicity and languages in Afghanistan, with many minor communities living in extremely remote environments due to the mountainous topography of the country. In, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that, through storytelling, alongside everyday communication and shared experience in the mother tongue, African culture is able to be transmitted to and through communities and across generations. People write in order to communicate ideas and writing in a major world language communicates the author's ideas more widely than doing so in a small regional language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, however, argues for targeting a primary audience -speakers of marginalized languages - through language and its particularity to a specific social/historical context. Concerning the making of films regarding marginal communities, it would be possible to argue on purely artistic grounds that a local language is simply better at describing certain things - the rhythms of daily life, say, or regional wildlife - than another.

Another key theoretical approach for this project is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of the 'minor movement', first introduced in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. I believe that Afghan cinema, and especially Roya Sadat's cinema, is minor cinema as defined by the French philosophers as a movement where "the minor takes a major voice and speaks it in a way that expresses one's preferred identity."<sup>4</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, a minor work is inexorably political because its characters are linked to a larger social framework: an individual story "necessarily expresses social contradictions and problems, or directly suffers their effects."<sup>5</sup> This self-representation, as a form of self-empowerment, gives an opportunity for Afghans to engage with the powerful ideologies of mass media in the region, as well as in the West. This position enables the filmmaker to express another possible community and to forge the means for different consciousness and another sensibility.

Due to Afghanistan's history of wars with different world powers, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is another critical source that I will rely on. Freire believed that any attempt to construct a theory of action with the oppressed must involve a serious and sincere attempt to understand the realities of their daily lives. Therefore, he emphasizes the importance of dialogue and co-creation of knowledge. Freire states that the key to liberation is the awakening of a critical awareness and thinking process in the individual. While Freire mostly looks at the education system, I will argue that cinema is another vehicle of liberation, for at its core lies the desire to give voice to the oppressed through dialogue and the co-creation of knowledge.

The U.S. needed global support for the invasion of Afghanistan as a War against Terrorism, and the plight of women in Afghanistan, among other concerns, as a humanitarian crisis justified military intervention. Reversing abuses of women's rights

---

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1986). 18.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix, Guattari. 1986. *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*. (London: Continuum. 2005). 224.

became an explicit policy goal, at least at the level of rhetoric. Certainly, the impact of this invasion superseded the dynamics of gendered disadvantage, which already existed in a patriarchal society such as Afghanistan's. Yet, its influence over, for example, the erosion of local livelihoods and growing poverty, the criminalization of the economy, and insecurity due to the predations of armed groups and factions, increased after the 2001. Deniz Kandiyoti, in *The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan* (2007), draws attention to the crippling disconnection between different facets of post-conflict transition. The processes of institutional development and reform which started since the Bonn Agreement in 2001 and the attempts at securing women's rights in the troubled history of state-building and state-society relations in Afghanistan have not succeeded entirely. As Deniz Kandiyoti notes,

combinations of new pressures (such as poverty, indebtedness and predation by local strongmen) and existing practices (such as the early marriage of girls against the payment of bride price) create outcomes that may easily be misidentified as unmediated expressions of local "culture", thus detracting critical attention from the full nexus of influences that deepen the vulnerability of girls and women.<sup>6</sup>

The tension has persisted between a rentier state bolstered by foreign subsidies, which had a relatively weak engagement with society, in changes in social relations, especially in regards to women's rights, and a rural hinterland that both resisted the incursions of the state and attempted to represent tribal interests within it.

Regardless of Afghanistan's diversity of linguistic, ethnic, and cultural practices, Afghanistan as a nation has shared bodily experiences that came upon its people. The solidarity which Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing*

---

<sup>6</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti. "The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *United Nations Research Institute for Social Development*, Geneva, 2005), 25.

*Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, introduces in "sisterhood," "experience," and "community" have been guidelines for this research which looks into how film and Afghan filmmakers can focus on links between the daily life of Afghan people in different parts of the country, with collective action, the theory and pedagogy of Third World and international feminism and activism.

Despite all the promises of the post-Taliban era, Afghan cinema struggles at every phase of filmmaking. As there is no system of state funding for film, Afghan filmmakers can't afford to work independently of foreign donors or Afghan television budgets and acting in total artistic independence remains an aspiration for them. Beyond production, distribution is also another issue which Afghan film-makers and producers are facing. While only seventeen movie theaters, which were built during Communist era, are active in the country and are in state of decay, they only screen B movies from Hollywood and Bollywood.

This project investigates the current cinema infrastructure of Afghanistan through the journey of Roya Sadat and the circumstances in which her films are produced, distributed and received by Afghan audiences. Following Teshome H. Gabriel, it looks at the three core components of his Third World critical film theory: the text, the production and the reception.

Chapters one to three of this project assess Sadat's films under these terms. The first chapter will give a brief history of cinema in Afghanistan, which is intertwined with its political history, starting in early twenty century in order understand its output as text. The second chapter will focus on the theme of production and the parameters governing cinematic production in Afghanistan, through a close look at Sadat's first film *Three Dots* (2003), and also her latest film *A Letter to the President* (2017). The third chapter will concentrate on the theme of distribution, especially as regards Sadat's first feature film, *A Letter to the President* (2017). The reception of local media products is another

important element that it will be investigated with reference to several films; *Osama*, (Siddiq Barmak, 2003), *Three Dots*, *Playing the Taar*, *The Patience Stone*, (Atiq Rahimi, 2012), and *A Letter to President*), to grasp how Afghan artists understand their own society and how, in turn, cultural and historical elements play a role in connecting these films with the people. Although Teshome Gabriel's does not include education as a components of his critical theory of Third Cinema, I strongly believe that cinematic education and training is crucial for the future generation of filmmakers in a country such as Afghanistan. In chapter four, I will examine the history and challenges of education, the limited access to education that prevent social integration and national development, and how these circumstances are impacting the training and cinematic education.

This thesis therefore looks closely, and from four different angles, at a cinema that was reborn two decades ago with the establishment of new modes of governance, and all the changes they brought. The arrival of 3G internet and other technologies, the establishment of the faculty of cinema in Kabul University, and the operation of different private film training institutes, film festivals, especially in Kabul, which showcase Afghan productions, are the changes that have impact on Afghan cinema. With all these alterations, can one be hopeful that Afghan audiences observe their own national cinematic products? Can one be hopeful that an Afghan film industry exists?



## Chapter One

---

In 2015, on one winter night in Winnipeg, Canada, the author of *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001) Hamid Naficy was giving a talk. Following this, I asked him in casual conversation about the omission of Afghan films from his book. His reason was the inaccessibility of films from Afghanistan. It is true that, before the fall of the Taliban in 2001, few had heard of or seen an Afghan production, especially in the West. However, many things changed after the Taliban lost power and, with the establishment of a transitional government, Afghan cinema returned from the dead. In order to keep pace with the events now unfolding in Afghanistan, it is necessary to provide some context by looking Afghanistan's history and then examine the modest, yet boisterous, history of cinema in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has long been a hub of diverse cultures due to its location as the nodal point between the civilizations of India, East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and thence Europe. "Afghanistan, a nation of minorities"<sup>7</sup> has demographics comprised of four major ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek. Numerous other minor ethnic groups - Nuristani, Baluchi, Turkmen, and Aimaq - also call Afghanistan home. In addition to the official languages of the country, Dari and Pashto, the government has also recognized five other languages for their regional importance: Hazaragi, Uzbek, Turkmen, Balochi, and Pashayi. There are also some minor languages including Vasi-vari, Tregami, Askunu, and Kalasha-ala. This diversity has made Afghan society a complex and complicated entity for the United Nations and NATO in their mission for the state-building process.

---

<sup>7</sup> Nassim Jawad. "Afghanistan: A Nation of Minorities." *Minority Rights Group* (1992). <https://minorityrights.org/publications/afghanistan-a-nation-of-minorities-february-1992/>

The ancient settlers in Afghanistan were the Persians, under Darius the Great (522-486 BCE)<sup>8</sup>; and the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE).<sup>9</sup> A Buddhist civilization flourished from the late first century CE, its kings reigning in Bamiyan until the end of the 10th century. An Arab raid on Kandahar in 699-700 brought Islam, strengthened as the Turks gained power in Iran, Afghanistan and India. The Mongolian, Genghis Khan, invaded in the 13th century. For the next few hundred years, Afghanistan was fought over by various Indian and Persian empires. Finally, in the 18th century, a group of Pashtun tribes under Ahmad Shah Durrani defeated the Moghuls and the Persians to consolidate his own large but unstable empire.

The subsequent political events marked a turning point in Afghanistan's modern history that have impacted it until today. It is, therefore, imperative to analyse how international historical and political context influenced the country's national policies and legacies that continue to shape Afghanistan's current and future developments including economic, cultural and educational.

The Anglo-Russian power struggle known as 'The Great Game' during the 19<sup>th</sup> century sited Afghanistan strategically. Britain tried to bring Afghanistan under direct rule, but suffered resounding defeat in the first Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42).<sup>10</sup> During the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-80<sup>11</sup>, Afghanistan lost considerable territory and control of its external affairs to Britain. Britain provided modern weapons and an annual subsidy to Afghanistan's rulers in order to keep Russia at bay and protect its Indian colony. Abdur-Rahman Khan (1881-1901), with the support of the British, by whom he was later patronized financially, politically, and militarily, signed the Durand Line

---

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (New York: Da Capo Press. 2002), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 136.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 204.

Agreement on November 12, 1893<sup>12</sup>, drawing an official border between British India, known today as Pakistan, and Afghanistan. This agreement split the Pashtun people into two separate countries. At his death in 1901, Abdur-Rahman Khan was succeeded by his son, Habibullah.

Amir Habibullah Khan (ruling from 1901 to 1919) maintained satisfactory relations with British India in return for an annual subsidy and retaining full control of his country's internal affairs. He introduced reforms in Afghanistan, including a modern style of education, electricity, automobiles, and Western medical methods. Cinema was also among this list of what was brought into Afghanistan by Amir Habibullah Khan<sup>13</sup>, with the screening of silent films from other countries in the early 1920s. Screenings took place in the monarch's palace for noble audiences only.

After World War One, pressure was mounting for full independence. Habibullah Khan's antiwar policy was unpopular with the young anti-British elements in the population. In 1919, he was assassinated and his son Amanullah seized the throne and declared independence. His era (1919-1929) was characterized by modernisation reforms of political authority, state institution and society. He deviated from his father (Amir Habibullah Khan) and his grandfather (Abdur-Rahman Khan)'s policies in domestic and foreign affairs, and entered into diplomatic and economic relationship with the Soviet Union, Germany, Italy Turkey and Iran. This international policy, brought Afghanistan out of isolation and boosted different channels in economic, cultural and educational development.

Britain was defeated in a Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919-21 and Afghanistan regained control over its foreign affairs. The new king undertook land reform, regularized taxes, extended education and gave the country its first constitution. But his

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>13</sup> Abdul-Wahid Nazari. *The Evolution Process of Cinema in Afghanistan*. (Ministry of culture Press, 2011), 5.

attempts to shift power away from village elders and the religious establishment led to revolts and he was toppled in 1938. A Tajik called Bacha-yi-Saqao seized power, but was soon deposed and executed by a Pashtun, Nadir Khan – who started a dynasty that was to last until 1978.

A new era started with Nadir Khan (aka Nadir Shah (1929–78)) and was characterized by defragmentation of political authority, selective policy and strong ethnic (Pashtun) nationalism. Nadir Shah was in power from 1929-33, and he continued Afghanistan's modernization through road construction, building a national army, and establishing a faculty of medicine and a banking system. Nadir Khan was assassinated by a student in 1933, he was succeeded by his 19-year-old son Mohamed Zahir (Zahir Shah (1933–73)). Zahir Shah undertook a number of economic development projects, including irrigation and highway construction, backed by foreign aid, largely from the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1964, he established a constitutional monarchy and prohibited royal relatives from holding public office. This constitutional monarchy lasted till 1973. During this time, intellectuals enjoyed greater freedom; women began to enter the workplace and government.

In a bloodless coup on July 17, 1973, Zahir Shah was deposed. The leader of the coup, General Mohammad Daoud Khan proclaimed Afghanistan a republic with himself as its president. During the Cold War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) and the United States (U.S.), poured aid into the country, and, during Daoud Khan's brief rule, the country benefited from oil and gas revenues. Kabul was full of students and its University was a hotbed of political ideology – both Communist and Islamic. Women and men studied together and came into contact with foreign teachers.

On 27 April 1978, Daoud was overthrown and killed in a communist coup (the Saur Revolution) led by Afghanistan's People's Democratic Party (PDPA). Noor Mohammed Taraki took power, but his Marxist land and social reforms led to violent

demonstrations. The U.S.S.R. increased aid to Taraki's regime; meanwhile, the U.S. actively supported resistance groups. The U.S.S.R.'s President Breshnev, fearing the U.S. would take advantage of mounting chaos, sent in troops to Afghanistan in December 1979. Breshnev believed the Soviet army would be able to withdraw after six months.<sup>14</sup>

During the ten-year invasion by the Soviet army in Afghanistan, after Taraki, two different communist governments came to power and both were unable to control the national uprisings. Soviet forces responded by destroying agriculture and livestock in order to cut off supplies to the resistance. Russian bombing of villages claimed nearly a million Afghan lives. International support came via Mujahidin groups exiled in Pakistan which were funded mainly by the US, Saudi Arabia and China. The U.S. poured in money and weapons to arm the opposition through the Pakistani secret intelligence services known as the ISI. By the late 1980s, aid from the US and Saudi Arabia reached around \$1 billion per year; while between 1986 and 1990 around \$5 billion worth of weapons went to the 'holy fighters' of the Afghan Mujahideen.<sup>15</sup>

### "Cinema in the Midst of Struggle"<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, after the introduction of cinema in early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Habibullah Khan, it took a long time for the first Afghan film to be produced. *Love and Friendship*, directed by Rashid Latif 1946<sup>17</sup>, was a co-production with India. This film was followed by several other films such as *Smugglers* (1950) and *Friday Night* (1950), both directed by Alil Rawnaq, and *Difficult Days* (1952), directed by Wali Latifi. During the late 1950s, Indian films began to dominate the commercial cinema market in Afghanistan. Soon after, against a backdrop of growing nationalism, local filmmakers emerged to produce films

---

<sup>14</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan: A military History*, 234.

<sup>15</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan: A military History*, 250.

<sup>16</sup> The term borrowed from a screening series in Concordia University

<sup>17</sup> Nazari, *The Evolution Process of Cinema in Afghanistan*. 15.

which identified Afghanistan as an independent nation. Afghanistan's first home-grown feature film, *Rabi'a Balkhi*, was made in 1965 by Daoud Farani and A.K Halil. A major box office success, it took as its subject matter the life and times of the eponymous 10th-century princess and poetess from Balkh.

The national film institute, Afghan Film, which is a state-run production company, was established in 1968, and it set up the National Film Archives and its own film laboratory. Until then, filmmakers had to send their negatives to be developed to India or the Soviet Union. The Afghan Film Organization started by producing documentaries and newsreels, highlighting the official meetings and conferences of the government. In the absence of television, all these films were shown in cinemas before Indian feature films.

Beside Afghan Film, other private film studios companies emerged at this moment, such as Nazir Films, Ariana Films, and Shafaq Films that produced around seventy films during this period. The films made during this time drew applause at film festivals in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Some of these titles were very successful in the Tashkent Film Festival, such as *Mother's Advice* (Abdul- Khaleq A'lil, 1972), *Villages are Awakened* (Abdul- Khaleq A'lil, 1982), *Hot Summer in Kabul* (Vali Latifi & Ali Hamraeive, 1983), and *Escape* (Latif Ahmadi, 1984). In conversation with Latif Ahmadi, known as engineer Latif - a much-loved film director and head of the state-run cinema agency, Afghan Film, under the communist government - who calls the mid-1970s and 80s the golden age of Afghanistan cinema, Ahmadi talks about how going to the movies was a leisure activity for entertainment, a form of pleasure and delight for everyone. He says that in those days, film and cinema were exciting forms of entertainment, especially in big urban centers. Afghans youth and families alike flocked to movie theaters with some of them operating until midnight to fulfil the high demand.

There was even a special movie theater, Cinema Zeinab, reserved exclusively for women.<sup>18</sup>

While Afghan cinema production has remained far less prolific than that of any other country in the region, and its cinema underdeveloped because of a poor economy, it experienced a thriving period in the last century, started in late 1970s with the founding of the Afghan Film institute by King Mohammad Zahir Shah (1914-2007). Film production rose during the Communist era (1978 to 1992). During this period many contentious reforms took place, such as equal rights for women, universal education and extensive land reform. Changes in society were, of course, depicted in films, where women were portrayed as strong and independent characters that made their own decisions (*Sculpture are Laughing* (Toryalei Shafagh, 1975)); or films where the farmers were encouraged to use modern technology to yield better harvests (*Villages Are Awakening* (Abdul-Khaliq Alill, 1981)). Also, these farmers valued education and sent their young children to school.

After the April Coup of 1978, with the new socialist government and Nur Muhammad Taraki as the head of the Khalq Party and the government, fortified by the Soviet occupation, the notion of propaganda films arose and censorship was imposed on films whose content was not in line with the new government and the party doctrine. With the short-lived presidency of Hafizullah Amin (14 Sept 1979 - 27 Dec 1979), another communist politician who came into power after Taraki, the intensity of control and censorship increased as did the production of propaganda films about the revolution. During this period, Soviet trainers were brought into the country and Afghans were offered scholarships and sent abroad to study in the U.S.S.R. Several of them

---

<sup>18</sup> Latif Ahmadi. Interview with Soraya Ata. Personal interview. Kabul August 18, 2018

received scholarships to study at the filmmaking school of The Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography a.k.a. VGIK and at universities in Eastern European countries.<sup>19</sup>

In an interview with the BBC, director Siddiq Barmak who was the recipient of this scholarship and studied in Moscow Film Institute (VGIK), talked about the use of film as propaganda in this period. He mentions that even Hafizullah Amin wrote a script about the Saur Revolution, and he and his family were supposed to act in this film.<sup>20</sup> Barmak, who was working with Engineer Latif at that time on production of the film, adds that during filming the segment about the last days of Daoud Khan government, the red flag of the Khalq Party was brought down and the three stripes flag of Daoud Khan put back on the presidential palace, while army planes were flying over the location. People in the city who didn't know that this was for the film thought that the previous government had come back into power. They gathered in the nearest intersections to the presidential palace to show their excitement. Men ran into shops to buy razors to shave their mustaches which was the look of Khaliqi's supporters. Amin's government arrested a substantial number of people accusing them of being counterrevolutionary.

At the same time, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. were engaged in the Cold War and the U.S. was genuinely interested in building counter-power to the U.S.S.R. The U.S. ultimately followed a non-intervention plan, resulting instead in the funding of troops, the Mujahideen, under Reagan's presidency. To make sure of the success of the plan, it was sold on with religious and nationalist tones in its rhetoric. The fighters were convinced that they would ultimately liberate their country from the foreign invaders. The driving motto of the Mujahideen, who were mostly people from the countryside, was that every Muslim's duty is to fight the godless, atheist, Communist menace and to drive

---

<sup>19</sup> Alam Payind. "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 21, no. 1 (1989): 107-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/163642>.

<sup>20</sup> Karim Heidari. "Afghanistan Cinema in the Ray of April 7 Coup" *BBC*. April 26, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-43893986>

it out of Afghanistan. In April 1988, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev subsequently carried out an earlier promise to begin withdrawing Soviet troops in May of that year; troops began leaving as scheduled, and the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan in February 1989. The occupation had left 1.5 million Afghans dead, five million disabled, and five million refugees; the country was abandoned by the world and Afghanistan turned into violent anarchy.

The bulk of the military support that was given to the Mujahedeen - with the purpose of fighting the Russians - then turned against itself, with different hard-line factions quickly beginning to fight among themselves. The communist government, under President Dr. Najib, was still holding control of the capital city, Kabul. The chaotic power struggle between four main armed groups - Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, the violence between them from the crossfire of bombs and rockets in various attempts to take control over Kabul - left the city in complete ruins. It was not jihad anymore, it was a struggle for power. In April 1992, the Mujahideen took control over Kabul and declared an Islamic State. Four main groups, each with their own foreign backers, fought for control of Kabul. Thousands of Kabul's residences had died and around a million had been displaced. Rape was condoned by most factional leaders. Other cities suffered similar fates.

In 1994, a small group of religious students (or Taliban), living near Kandahar under the leadership of Mullah Omar, objected to the behaviour of the Mujahideen commanders controlling the area. With support from elements in Pakistan, they launched a military campaign aimed at creating an Islamic State based on strict sharia law. They imposed order, collected weapons, tore down checkpoints to extort money and refused to take bribes. Saudi Arabia provided funds, goods and diplomatic support and Pakistan trained fighters and sent personnel into Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban from 1994-2001. Osama bin Laden, who, during the Soviet occupation had

funded and trained Arab Mujahideen recruits, returned to Afghanistan in 1996.<sup>21</sup> By 2000, the Taliban controlled 90 per cent of Afghan territory, but were only officially recognized by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the UAE.

During the Mujahideen period and then especially through the Taliban regimes, filmmaking was brought to an abrupt halt. The Mujahideen burned or changed the use of movie theaters across the country. Because of the location of these buildings, usually in the center of town, and located at busy intersections, the warlords seized them for themselves as power hubs. If warlords could not appropriate the buildings, they were burned down in acts of iconoclasm, with cinema taken as symbols of communism and the West. Starting in 1993, the production of films was banned by fundamentalist rulers. The Taliban (1994-2001) came with more severe laws about film, cinema and art in general. They marked their headquarters and checkpoints with rolls of loose film and cassettes dangling from bars.

On several occasions, they attempted to burn down the whole film archive. They did, in fact, burn all the prints of foreign films.<sup>22</sup> There are different narratives and debates on how Afghan Film Archive is being saved. One story involves the interference of the Taliban Minister of Culture, who personally came to the archive building and inform the staff about the Taliban's plan of destroying the archive. The other narrative relates the heroic act of the lab technician Khwaja Ahmadshah and a colleague, who saved the archive by hiding the negatives of Afghan productions and left on the shelves the prints and the foreign films whose negatives were presumably safe elsewhere. They placed the reels in a hidden room, nailed a blackboard on its entry and painted it over to disguise it. The Taliban came and burn what was left behind.

---

<sup>21</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan: A military History*, 286.

<sup>22</sup> *A Flickering Truth*. Directed by Pietra Brettkelly. New Zealand: Umbrella Entertainment, 2015. DVD.

In 2001, things started to change in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda, under the leadership of Osama bin Laden operatives, hijacked four commercial airliners, crashing them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Although Afghanistan was the base for al-Qaeda, none of the nineteen hijackers were Afghan nationals. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, the U.S. demanded the Taliban hand Osama bin Laden over to face US justice. Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar refused and on 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2001, less than a month after the September 11 attacks, U.S. President George W. Bush launched an operation with the mission of fighting the “War Against Terror” in Afghanistan. The British supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan that initially involved U.S. airstrikes and bombing. Then there was a wave of conventional ground forces as military classified peacekeepers from Canada, Australia, Germany, and France later pledged support to this campaign of promoting stability and aid delivery. By the end of 2001, the United Nations administrated the process of implementing a transitional Afghan government from consultations held in Bonn, Germany. Soon after, foreign investments, NGOs, and aid organizations poured capital resources into urban centers, especially Kabul, with the capital city developed into a transnational space. This opened a line of flight for Afghan cinema to reach new heights.

### **A Recent History of Afghan Cinema - Art and Culture During the Transitional Period**

In a post-conflict society, art is a part of national reconciliation efforts, including film, music, crafts, architecture and theater, among other art forms; these have played a key role in reducing the emotional burdens of war that usually leave deep scars in a country's psyche and peacebuilding efforts. Using anecdotal evidence, the use of theater helps national audiences express difficult emotions, re-examine established ideas, and improve their emotional well-being. Important to note here is that every country's experience in using art in their reconciliation process is different - influenced by anything

from their history of conflict to their state's engagement of cultural policies. The government, as the main supporter of this effort, works alongside different partners to establish a platform for the growth of creative industries.

In the case of Afghanistan, repeated cycles of conflict have made the growth of cultural policies all the more challenging. Despite difficulties, Afghan artists' use of film, music, and theater in the reconciliation process – alongside radio, the press, and periodicals – have tried to tell national stories based on shared experiences of events. In Afghanistan, with involvement from various partners such as government and foreign organization, there are several examples that have focused on the use of art in attempts to facilitate healing and rebuild national identity. For instance, the establishment of a national war crime museum which focuses on the public acknowledgment of Afghan war victims, the National Victim's Conference in Kabul with representatives from government, civil society, and victims of war from various regions in Afghanistan, also the establishment of organizations such as the Afghan Film Project that supports local filmmakers, along with many different art and culture festivals in different fields. However, despite all the efforts, because these activities and events usually concentrate on Kabul, with its continued occurrence of conflicts and attacks, one can question the success of such endeavours in Afghanistan.

As Afghanistan's governmental structure is undergoing essential changes in the quest for a Western model, art and culture have also been shaped by the influence of foreign aid funds. Donors' interests are in turn dictated by the foreign policy interests of different international stakeholders. Any Afghan organization or individuals who are in the fields of art or culture depend on these donors, and they are at times forced to shift points of view and activities to focus on what is requested of them by benefactors. Foreign aid and its NGOs are proving instrumental in dictating international policy

towards Afghanistan. Almost the majority are focused on gender, promoting human rights and women.

On reflection, the level of attention paid to the plight of “Afghan women” since 2001, year after year, was in sharp contrast to the silence that had marked the years of civil war after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989. This is important to note. During the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, the body of scholarship on Afghanistan was mostly concerned with documenting formal political parties, tribal and sectarian groups, as well as broader geopolitical dynamics that exacerbated the conflict. The primary objective of these portrayals has been to explore the limitations and potentials of the state, the tribe, and Islam for nation building and the formation of political ideologies. The absence of women from these descriptions and documents sets them at a distance from the literatures that were produced after the U.S. Invasion of Afghanistan. But the argument is the same as the one the U.S.S.R. used to invade Afghanistan. We are here to save the people. The U.S.S.R. used the class argument and the U.S. gender.

When the United States began bombing Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the oppression of Afghan women was the moral grammar mobilized to rally popular support for the military invasion of the country. This classic form of colonial feminism was reactivated through major news outlets, in documentaries, feature films, and pop culture in general. Films about Afghanistan and especially Afghan women were in strong demand by festival programmers around the world. As Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi note, “After 9/11, writers and photographers flooded the country, each apparently with a book contract and a new angle on ways to describe the ever-intriguing, ever-photogenic burqa”<sup>23</sup> Many books and articles were written concerning Afghan

---

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Heath and Ashraf, Zahedi. eds. 2011. *Land of the Unconquerable : The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Accessed May 26, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

women's rights. To name a few: *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (eds. Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi), *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance* (Cheryl Benard), *Behind the Burqa: Our Life in Afghanistan and How We Escaped to Freedom* (Batya Swift Yasgur), *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia* (eds by Valentine M. Moghadam) were presented in international conferences. Women in blue chadari (burqa in Arabic) have become the reductionist epitome of the image and idea of women in Afghanistan. Through these representations, the U.S. gained the support of audiences in NATO member states to justify the ongoing need for their presence in the region. However, the women in the chadari are one of many realities of Afghanistan. While there are women who wear chadari, beside them there are also women who are doctors working in the most remote areas. Women who are running their own businesses, women who are teaching at university, and women who are active in media and communications as writers, programmers, and directors.

As I mentioned above, the foreign policy interests of different international stakeholders have an essential effect on art and cultural activities inside Afghanistan. The military invasion and on-going 'colonial presence' in Afghanistan was framed by the mission to rescue 'Afghan women' and 'girls' from repression by the Taliban, not just in political and legal actions, but also in influencing cultural practices. This motto and the embedded visual vocabulary of imperial powers were disassembled through art that investigated chadari-wearing female figures as its main focus.

On the same note, Paniz Musawi Natanzi in her article "Art, Geopolitics, and Gendering in Afghanistan" observes that contemporary women artists in Afghanistan received wide attention during the reconstruction of the Afghan state in the years preceding the US invasion. Afghan artists and especially "Afghan women artists working

on women's rights, children, peace or attempts at countering violence, drugs and corruption have higher chances of being financially supported by donors from NATO member".<sup>24</sup> They serve as objectified figures to showcase Western nation-state-building processes as the judicial, socio-political, and economic model of justice.

During the post-2001 period, many different fiction and documentary films were produced by Afghan filmmakers. To list a few here: *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, 2003), *Three Dots* (Roya Sadat, 2003), *Earth and Ashes* (Atiq Rahimi, 2004), *Choori Forosh* (Razi Mohebi, 2006), *Playing the Taar* (Roya Sadat, 2008) and *Kabuli Kid* (Barmak Akram, 2008), the majority of which deal with Afghan society, leaving the foreigners off the screen. Family conflicts are shown, as are conflicts across generations, the abuse of women's rights, and the oppressive structures of warlordism/feudalism. Culturally, then, the war is always present in its devastating effect on people's living conditions and psyches.

The present absence of foreigners, especially the NATO armed troops, aid workers, foreign diplomats and consultants in Afghan films, are complex and contradictory. This is because the relationship of the younger generation of filmmakers with foreigners is affected not only by the international military presence in Afghanistan - the partially stable security and the freedom to work on cinema - but also by filmmakers' dependence on international funding. Not many of them could afford to work independently of foreign donors or Afghan TV budgets.

Roya Sadat (born 1983), a native from Herat province, start her filmmaking career as a producer and director after the fall of the Taliban. She was the first woman director in the history of Afghan cinema in the post-Taliban era, and ventured into making fiction and documentary films that deal with the themes of injustice and the restrictions

---

<sup>24</sup> Paniz Musawi Natanzi, "Art, Geopolitics, and Gendering in Afghanistan", *Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy* (2017).

imposed on women. In 2003, she made her first short film *Three Dots*, which claimed many national and international awards. After the success of her film, she went back to continue her studies and she graduated from the Law and Politics faculty of the University of Herat in 2005. After graduating from university, she attended the Asian Film Academy in South Korea in 2006 for a short period of time. Upon returning back to Afghanistan, TOLO TV, the biggest private TV channel in Afghanistan, approached her to direct a TV series, and that was when she decided to move to Kabul to have better access to the resources that were more available there in comparison to other cities. She and her sister Alka Sadat, a documentary filmmaker, established the ROYA Film House (RFH) and under this banner produced more than 30 documentaries and feature films. Due to the shortage of skilled female professionals in the film and media environment, RFH offers training for young women in four different fields: photography, cinematography, editing and animation. Sadat also co-founded the first International Women Film Festival in Afghanistan.

Looking at the overall history of cinema in Afghanistan, or Afghanistan itself as a country, the questions arising have to do with domination, the struggle for autonomy, spheres of influence, and a balance of power - crucial for any genuine understanding of the more general social and political frameworks for this new wave of filmmaking. Film in the past was a propaganda tool in the hands of government, but in the hands of artists and activists, it was a tool for communication and social change, often relying upon the formation and transformation of subjectivity. Current Afghan cinema, however, is breaking the link between action and reaction; this marks a shift from the cinema of Communism to the post-Taliban filmmaking environment.

Specifically, current cinema approaches the situation by depicting the experiences of individuals caught in the midst of these clashes. By providing insight into the lived experiences of individuals in these sites of conflict, cinema complicates the

hegemonic narrative. The experience, the fundamental pivot in these movies, is personal and political. The filmmaker, making a movie about a subject of civic importance, adds much to its substance, value, and usefulness when the project becomes a reflection or an engagement emerging from the filmmaker's private life and intimate experience. This personal engagement is necessary, because the film lays claim to a political reality. The shift mentioned above is in response to contemporary socio-economic formations, a response to the analyses of political theorists attempting to understand the evolution of politics in the 21st century. The emergence of neoliberal economic policies, and the growth of networked information systems, have restructured the film/media cultural industries, as my subsequent chapters will reveal. All components of the filmmaking process, the contexts of production and distribution, are factors crucial for an understanding of film aesthetics. Third Cinema, after various crises – both political and economic in different geopolitical settings – carries a project of decolonizing both a people and the imagination. Its combination of filmmaking and criticism, and, most of all, the ways in which it has turned the spectator into a guerilla resister and an ally, makes Third Cinema profoundly important for a cinematic history of resistance to neoliberalism. It is to this struggle and this mode of cinematic conception that this thesis now turns, firstly through an analysis of production contexts.



## Chapter Two

---

### The Journey of Making

*Three Dots* (2003)

*A Letter to the President* (2016)

Cinema has developed as one of the most captivating and expensive of the communications media. No other art form has circulated as effectively, nor has it surpassed so many national and cultural boundaries. Unlike other art forms, films are created almost solely for mass distribution. Looking from the outside, following the news about films being produced in Afghanistan in the past two decades, the enthusiasm surrounding them gives the impression that the Afghanistan film industry has been born again. But in the summer of 2018, while visiting Kabul - home to many filmmakers, production companies, TV stations and various media platforms, institutions with the one important agenda of training the new generation of technicians and artists - I came to a different conclusion.

In the early days of academic film studies, national cinema was generally an unproblematic category and implied a natural relationship between nation and film. Andrew Higson, in his 1989 article "The Concept of National Cinema," points towards an "inward-looking" perspective where national cinema can only be understood as "histories of crisis and conflict, of resistance and negotiation."<sup>25</sup> He understands national cinema not as unified and homogenous, but as a "relationship to already existing national political, economic and cultural identit[ies] ... and set of traditions".<sup>26</sup> It provides a link that helps reveal the contradictions and gaps, and the tensions between the hegemonic and non-hegemonic ideologies at work in the cinematic discourse of a nation-state.

---

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen*. 30, No. 4. (Autumn 1989): 37 DOI: [10.1093/screen/30.4.36](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.4.36)

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," 42.

Stephen Crofts, coming with a similar perspective in his article "Concepts of National Cinema" (1994), argues that, in order to better understand national cinemas, it is important to analyze them in terms of these categories: "production", "audiences" "discourses", "national-cultural specificity", "the cultural specificity of genres and nation-state cinema movement", and "the role of the state".<sup>27</sup> Cultural, economic, and political contexts influence the conventions of national cinemas. National cinema as a social practice becomes the place of debates about a nation's history, conflicts, heritage, and governing principles.

In conversation with professionals in the film and cinema field, such as directors, producers, film professors, writers, photographers, actors, I realized that there is no such thing as a film industry in Afghanistan in the conventional sense of the term. Looking at the exact meaning of 'industry' in a dictionary, you will find two types of definition; one defines industry as "an activity or domain in which a great deal of time or effort is expended"<sup>28</sup>. Making a film is not a solo project and it requires a group of professionals to participate in it, which is certainly hard work, even harder in the case of Afghanistan where one has to try to make the impossible possible. At every step, filmmaking requires every conceivable source of time and effort.

The second definition of industry declares it to be "a particular form or branch of economic or commercial activity."<sup>29</sup> Due to the slow cycle of film production in Afghanistan, where, in the span of three to four years, only one feature film was made, this industry cannot generate meaningful profit through commercial ads, ticket or DVD sales. Other revenues such as merchandising dollars, television rights, video-on-demand

---

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Crofts. "Concepts of National Cinema," In *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*. Eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.), 1-11

<sup>28</sup> *English Oxford Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Industry," accessed Oct 15, 2018.

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/industry>

<sup>29</sup> *English Oxford Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Industry,"

(VOD) and streaming are opportunities that seem impossible in a setting like Afghanistan.

To identify the parameters governing cinematic production in Afghanistan, and point out some of the persistent challenges faced by filmmakers, one needs to take a closer look at the context. To do this, I am following the path of one filmmaker as a case study in order to draw on reliable data.

The economics of movie making render it an extremely risky investment, and the risk factor is much higher in Afghanistan. The prohibitive cost of producing films for most independent filmmakers around the world is a struggle. Insufficient funding for production is not something specific to one geographical location. Filmmakers in Afghanistan are also in this bind. With the absence of government support for film and cinema, and reduced security challenging the trust of private investors, the filmmakers are on their own. Most films that were made after 2001 were produced in three different ways. The first is that the director, besides her/his Afghan citizenship, also holds another citizenship from either a European or North American country. These returnee Afghan film-makers arrive in Afghanistan with a fully funded project and tend to bring their own crews and equipment in order to ensure the professional standards that are not yet common in the domestic film industry. A few fiction films that have been made this way since 2001 and include: *Earth and Ashes* (Atiq Rahimi, 2004), *Kabuli Kid* (Barmak Akram, 2008), *The Black Tulip* (Sonia Nassery Cole, 2010), *The Patience Stone* (Atiq Rahimi, 2012), *Wajma, an Afghan Love Story* (Barmak Akram, (2013), *Mina Walking* (Yosef Baraki, 2015) and *Black Kite* (Tarique Qayumi, 2017).

The second mode of film production in Afghanistan sees local filmmakers making their films with the help of foreign organizations. The aid either comes as equipment rental, or financing either a portion or all of the production cost. In this case, the technical crew is usually local. Some of this second group's feature films are: *In Foreign*

*Land* (Hafiz Asefi, 2000), *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, 2003), *Opium War* (Siddiq Barmak, 2008), *Hope* (Abul-Samie Majroh, 2008), and *Sheep and Wolf* (Shahrbanoo Sadat, 2016).

The fact that these two modes of production connect is due to conditions put in place through economic neoliberalism, which opens up means of financial support for film production that I will now lay out. Economic neoliberalism is an economic theory, a set of economic policies and an ideological conviction that supports uncontrolled competition by maximizing economic freedom for individuals, which thus reduces the amount of state intervention to the bare minimum.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, as Joseph Nathan Cohen and Miguel Angel Centeno explain, neoliberalism advocates for the elimination of government-imposed restrictions on transnational movements of goods, capital and people.<sup>31</sup>

Mette Hjort in *The Cinema of Small Nations* lists the key development factors of neoliberal economy as: “[the] transnational imperative of finance capital, the deregulation of markets, the increasing geographical mobility of labour, and the global penetration of communications networks facilitating business, information, entertainment and other forms of cultural exchange.”<sup>32</sup> These measures have permeated the boundaries of the nation-state - as the primary unit of economic, political and cultural differentiation in the world system - and have also weakened the regulatory control of governments, thereby eroding the sense, and indeed the reality, of national autonomy.

Looking at neoliberalism in relation to Afghanistan, Naomi Klein’s book *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) explains how post-conflict reconstruction projects in the country have

---

<sup>30</sup> Harmes Adam. “*The Rise of Neoliberal Nationalism*,” *Review of International Political Economy*, 19 no 1, (2012): 59-86 DOI: [10.1080/09692290.2010.507132](https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2010.507132)

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Nathan Cohen, and Miguel Angel Centeno. “Neoliberalism and Patterns of Economic Performance, 1980-2000.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 606 (2006): 32-67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097817>.

<sup>32</sup> Mette Hjort. “Introduction,” In *Cinema of Small Nations*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2007). 8

become ways of enforcing and intertwining the policies of the United States and the World Bank. Through these, the objectives of neoliberalism come to life by way of pacification and privatisation. The World Bank administers the country's aid through a trust fund and it has already managed to privatize health care by refusing to give funds to the Ministry of Health to build hospitals. It has also increased the participation of the private sector in the water system, telecommunications, oil, gas and mining, and directed the government to 'withdraw' from the electricity sector and leave it to 'foreign private investors.'<sup>33</sup> The aid industry, which mostly runs through NGOs, dictates terms to the Afghan people and the government. NGOs are accountable to their funders, enriching them, not the people amongst whom they work.

The absence of a fully developed film industry in a country such as Afghanistan has required an engagement with others in relation to the current debates concerning national and transnational cinema. The concept of 'national cinema' along with the status of the nation state can be brought into question by the impact of globalisation. As discussed previously, Afghanistan's long history of war and invaders, its current position in the world as a sovereign nation-state, as well as a contested space in a transitional state under UN mandate, still has not stabilized its central government after two decades, and its economy is very fragile.

The ambiguous state of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the global routes of the opium trades, the ongoing war and conflict, and the presence of U.S. and NATO military forces are all further indications of the fluidity and instability of Afghanistan's borders that shape the contexts of Afghan economic, political and cultural agency. These conditions have had a strong impact on Afghanistan's national film policy, which is less concerned with protecting local production or culture, perceived as being

---

<sup>33</sup> Naomi Klein. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Toronto: (A.A. Knopf Canada, 2007). 416.

under threat from Americanisation or Iranianization, and instead is embracing the putative benefits of the division of cultural labour, and the abstract levels of inward investment that minor foreign-funded productions might bring in terms of local employment and the purchase of goods and services.

In conversation with local Afghan filmmakers, who are only able to produce a feature in the span of every three to four years, it appears that they have proven supportive of such changes, which have brought greater freedom, opportunity, choice and diversity. But, as Hjort sees it, the transformative effect of globalisation on the international motion picture industry is the "shift from a cultural to an economic" set of priorities, which, while it can have the effect of boosting the international status and visibility of small or minor players, is also a threat to "the erosion of cultural difference and non-commercial filmmaking practices that might be entailed by acquiescence to a Hollywood/American agenda."<sup>34</sup>

Neo-colonialism - via the Western media and Hollywood films - constitutes the greatest impediment to an evolution of national ideology in Third World countries. Because of the former's advantage over technology and education, these sectors have been successful in setting the agenda for news and information in Third World countries. The representations of Afghanistan in Western films offer an image of warlord-ridden land of strife and oppression, and Afghan people as barbarians, ferocious Pashtun tribesmen, or noble savages. The influential essay, "On Violence," by Frantz Fanon, details how representational violence is consistently done to "dehumanizes the colonized subject."<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Hjort. "Introduction," *In Cinema of Small Nations*, 2007, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Frantz Fanon. "On Violence." In *The Wretched of the World*. New York : Grove Press, 2004. 7.

The customs, tradition and the myths: are the very mark of this indigence and innate depravity [...] it is an impassionate claim that their world is fundamentally different [...] with the help of his agents of law and order [...] the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil [...] the 'native' is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absences of values but also the negation of values [...] in other words, absolute evil. A corrosive element, destroying everything within his reach, a corrupting element, distorting everything within which involves aesthetics or morals, and agents of malevolent powers, an unconscious and incurable instrument of blind forces.<sup>36</sup>

The limited selection of perspectives and information presented in the mainstream media are encoded with a language and sources of visual information that are inadequate and disconnected from the lived reality.

It is noteworthy here to mention the presence of Iranian filmmakers who have produced films in Afghanistan or in Iran based on Afghan subjects, a situation which has become more prevalent since 2001 in Iranian global art house cinema. The trend started with the Makhmalbaf clan, and the number of films they made in Afghanistan, such as *Journey to Kandahar* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2001), *Five in the Afternoon* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2003), *Joy of Madness* (Hana Makhmalbaf, 2003), *Stray Dogs* (Marzieh Meshkini, 2004), and *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame* (Hana Makhmalbaf, 2007). So, what about these films and their impact on Afghanistan visual identity? Kamran Rastegar, in his essay "Global Frames on Afghanistan," points to the important role these films

---

<sup>36</sup> Fanon. "On Violence." 6.

have played in “producing a cinematic framework for viewing the contemporary history of Afghanistan; nonetheless, in the years immediately following the 2001.”<sup>37</sup>

The success of Iranian films on Afghanistan, such as *Journey to Kandahar*, in major film festivals around the world, followed by their commercially successful reception in the Global art cinema market, helped to create a global cinematic discourse, and to some extent public discourse. These films have been influential in setting the terms of political and cultural debates in Europe and U.S. As Rastegar points out, “elite commentators, journalists, and activists are very often among the audiences of art house cinema, particularly cinema that addresses topical or controversial international issues.”<sup>38</sup> The fact that these films were made by people who share the same language and culture as Afghanistan brings them more weight in the eyes of Western cultural figures and intellectuals.

Another important relation between Afghanistan and Afghan films involves projects that were produced by, or with the significant involvement of, Iranian film producers, such as *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, 2003), which is as the most famous title among them. *Osama*, an international co-production between Afghanistan, Iran, the Netherlands, Japan, and Ireland, was produced with technical assistance from Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and with post production funds from European sources. The technicians who worked on the film are the same people who have contributed to many previous projects with the Makhmalbafs. Because of its film distribution contract with MGM, and other major studios in the U.S., *Osama* has been a commercial success to this day, rare for an Afghan film.

The third way that the filmmakers or producers make films is through personal investment, going into personal debt to fund their project. Help comes from family and

---

<sup>37</sup> Kamran Rastegar. "Global Frames on Afghanistan." *In Globalizing Afghanistan*, Durham, London: (Duke University Press, 2011). 146.

<sup>38</sup> Rastegar. "Global Frames on Afghanistan." 147.

friends for location, transportation and borrowing items for the set design. Some of these films are: *An Apple from Paradise* (Hamayoun Marawat, 2008), *Mirage* (Ghorban-Ali Mirzayi, 2008), *A Letter to the President* (Roya Sadat, 2016), and *The Faceless* (Ali Akbar Akbar Kamal, 2017). There are a lot of low budget action, commercial, B movies that fall under this category. The Afghan director Salim Shaheen is one of the most active and prolific directors within this genre. His films are distributed through low quality DVD and VCDs; the majority of the audience for his films are Afghan males.

Certainly, the list of the names could be longer, but the lack of a database makes it difficult to search for them, which it is the same case for the second group. There is not enough information about these films, especially the independent productions in the third group, which is another sign of their low budgets. Distributing and advertising for a film requires another budget, which these teams cannot provide. Looking in both English and Dari, and searching through national and international media platforms, does not easily locate this information.

As I introduced earlier in this project, Roya Sadat, like many filmmakers and artists, started working with minimal financial support and primitive technical equipment. Her films belong to the third mode of production. Sadat's two low budget short films, *Three Dots* (2003) and *Playing the Taar* (2008), were both completed with basic technology. Her first feature film, *A Letter to the President* (2016), was also made the same way. Working with miniscule budgets is the only way of filmmaking in Afghanistan; it is also a way of life for Afghan people given the poor and unstable economy of the country.

Poverty is widespread in Afghanistan, especially among rural populations. Regional and seasonal differences are important aspects of poverty. Poverty and food insecurity are multifaceted phenomena; people depend on low physical, financial assets and unskilled human capital. Temperatures vary dramatically through the seasons, with hot summers and frigid winters; and, similarly, there are stark differences in elevation and

terrain across regions. Both elements, the regional and the seasonal, correlate with poverty outcomes, and, in some cases, they interact in ways that directly affect well-being. For example, severe winter conditions affect transportation and, in high mountainous areas, such as the Bamyan, Daikundi or Badakhshan provinces, roads are often blocked throughout the winter due to heavy snow accumulation. These communities in particular are forced to rely only on the food supplies that households store before the winter. Unsurprisingly, these three provinces all have poverty rates that are much higher than the national average.

The main source of income in the country is agriculture, a key economic sector. Over 80% of Afghans live in rural areas and are engaged in agriculture and livestock-raising, which both contribute about more than 40% of the country's GDP - minus the opium economy.<sup>39</sup> Agricultural production is constrained by an almost total dependence on erratic winter snows and spring rains for water; the water supply is primitive and the use of machines, chemical fertilizer, or pesticides is not widespread. Low investments, natural disasters, the country's extreme susceptibility to water shortages (due to many factors such as the reduction and loss of Afghanistan's glaciers), worsening drought, and poor management of waste and pollution has caused a rise in poverty, especially in rural Afghanistan.

However, this decline in agriculture was not only due to environmental issues but also the outcomes of war-related damage to the irrigation systems by various hostilities, artillery shelling, the blowing up of bridges in bomb blasts, expansive areas covered in landmines, and the imposition of frequent sieges and attacks by the Taliban or NATO troops.<sup>40</sup> As a result, around a million people have been uprooted and displaced from

---

<sup>39</sup> Khal Mohammad Ahmadzai. "Food Security and Rural Poverty in Afghanistan." (PhD diss. Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, 2014), 38.

<sup>40</sup> Masood Ahmad and Mahwash Wasiq, "Water Resource Development in Northern Afghanistan and Its Implications for Amu Darya Basin," *World Bank Working Papers*. (2004), 8. <https://doi.org/10.1596/0-8213-5890-1>

their villages into urban areas, which brings further negative impact in the form of unemployment, poverty, weakened infrastructures, and a decline in human health, all of which cause more trauma, stress. Many households take loans, from family and friends, or through mortgaging land. Taking out a loan for the majority of people is a coping strategy to meet basic needs such as food and health care. Indebtedness is a factor in both the creation as well as the perpetuation of poverty, which leads to forced labour migration. Labour migration, both inside and outside Afghanistan, is a very important income strategy for over a quarter of households. For the poor, it is a crucial way of coping with uneven job opportunities inside the village, or of seeking better-paid work elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> As I mentioned earlier, taking loan is also a coping strategy to meet the basic needs of local filmmakers who, without any other kind of investment or support, need to find a way to finance their project.

In a conversation with Roya Sadat, these situations reveal themselves through the production journey of her short film *Three Dots* (2003), offering a glimpse of a revival of cinema in Afghanistan while at the same time mirroring the situation conditioning Afghan society and its filmmaking. Sadat was the host of a children and youth television program while writing the story of her film. In 2002, through a journalist, she got to know about Siddiq Barmak and gained his contact information. In a phone conversation with Barmak, Sadat talked about her film script and her plan for making it and he promised to help her acquire a camera and sound equipment from Afghan Film (the state production studio). The same year, Sadat was part of a team representing Herat province, and journeyed to Kabul to participate in a national conference called Youth and Civil Society. During that trip, she met Barmak in person and he put her in contact with a French NGO who were offering funding of \$2000.00 to young Afghan filmmakers.

---

<sup>41</sup> Jo Grace and Adam Pain. "Rethinking Rural Livelihoods In Afghanistan," *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Synthesis Report* (July 2004), 51. <https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/14627>

She came back and started preparing for the production. The fund from the French NGO covered the rental fee of the equipment and the labour of the technicians and the editor. The shoot took over three weeks and she could only pay the lead actress and a few local people that acted in the film. One of her family members, who was the employee at a hotel in Herat, offered to provide room and meals for the cinematographer and sound technician who come from Kabul to help make the film.<sup>42</sup>

The story of the film takes place in the Province of Herat, in the rural area close to the border with Iran. The poverty and the harsh conditions of the environment are present in every scene. The lives of the people in the movie run parallel with the reality of rural life in Afghanistan. The landmines spread all over and the people with missing and amputated limbs walking around are other bitter realities which dictate how these people live. She found the sources of her inspiration for this film in stories she heard from people, and mostly women and children, who had been displaced from rural areas and had come into the cities because of continued years of drought during the Taliban era. The majority of the men were forced into the opium trade and drug trafficking. These people, mostly women and children, were either residing in tents on the outskirts of the city, or had come into the cities and were living in the streets and alleys. Director Roya Sadat says that, even though she has lived her entire life in Afghanistan and experienced the Civil War and also the Taliban, when interacting with people and especially women from other parts of the Herat province, she noticed that, while all Afghans suffered from the same condition, the level of damage is certainly not the same for everyone. *Three Dots* is the story of the destruction of these families.<sup>43</sup>

The plot of the movie centres on a young single woman named Gul-Afrooz, who lives in a village in northwestern Afghanistan along the border of Iran and struggles to

---

<sup>42</sup> Roya Sadat. Interview with Soraya Ata. Personal interview. Kabul August 18, 2018

<sup>43</sup> Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018.

raise her three children. Although, at first, she was engaged to her lover Firooz, she has been forced to marry an older man, who goes missing in a drug smuggling trip. Now she works inside the house of a local warlord, Khan, who pushes her into delivering drugs across the border and, when she refuses, she loses her job at his house. There is not much to do in a small village to make a living, since drought has crippled all the families living there. She asks friends and family for bowls of flour. She goes to the desert to collect bramble and exchanges it for food. Since everyone in the village is poor and suffers a broken family like herself, nothing works in her favour. She is caught up in traditional structures, and the hunger and illness of her children force her to accept Khan's offer. On her way to Iran as a drug courier, she is arrested by Iranian police and sentenced to life imprisonment.

All of the characters in the film are played by non-actors. Besides the lead actress, Gol-Afrooz, and two other young females, who travelled with the director from the city to the location, the other characters in the film are all played by local people, people who have been deprived of everything. As I mentioned earlier, in Afghanistan the literacy rate is very low, in rural areas it amounts to a single digit percentage. During the shoot, Sadat recalls a day, while they were filming an outdoor scene, when a group of young motorcyclists who were in their teens or early twenties, came and circled them. These young men had heard about the shooting crew and came from other villages to see. They started asking Sadat the question of what the crew were doing here? They asked to be shown how camera and the sound system worked. She filmed them and showed them on the little screen they had. Sadat says that what fascinated one of them was not the image but the sound. One touched the wire of the headphone, asking how is it possible that sound moves through this cable?<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018.

It may sound strange for us reading this today that they were unaware of an almost century-old technology. But we are talking about 2002, right after the fall of the Taliban and, before that, the bloody civil war that crippled the Afghan people and these young men who all their lives had been kept away from anything that could possibly allow them to think in other ways.

Sadat recalls another incident when they were shooting a night scene and their only way to light the scene was to use a lantern, since the lighting equipment they had brought was burned. While shooting, they notice that something faraway with a very powerful light on it was moving toward them at high speed. The light came closer and closer and eventually arrived: a young man with very tired face on a motorcycle and a young sick woman sitting behind him. She was pregnant with a complication and they were driving a long way to try to reach a clinic in the city. They saw the light of the lantern in the darkness of the night and drove towards it. The husband told them that they had previously lost a child and this time they were trying to save it. The young pregnant woman was the first female to leave their village for pregnancy treatment.<sup>45</sup>

Another occurrence, which paints a better picture of the condition these people are living through, happened in the house in which the film crew was staying with one of the local families where the man was the elder of the village. Slowly, Sadat noticed that he was a bandit, stopping the cars passing through his area and taking their valuables. One day, it seems that he returned with a good haul and his young children became extremely happy and excited. They would jump down the roof and go up again, repeating the same activity while shouting in extreme happiness. Sadat adds that our beliefs and principles are all forms that change as our lives do, the experiences we go through, but sometimes through observing the situation of others. She adds that "though at core I believed the man's actions to be wrong, and felt sorry for the travellers

---

<sup>45</sup> Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018

who lost their goods because maybe among them were people suffering the same level of poverty, seeing the happiness on the faces of these children who had not had a proper meal for a while made me very happy."<sup>46</sup>

There is wedding scene in the film where one of the male characters, named Sher, is marrying a very young girl. The man was one of the local people participating, and the girl came from the city to play a role in the film. Later on, the film crew had to change their location due to a security threat they had received and they planned to leave there as soon as possible. The man who played the character of Sher would not allow them to leave and remonstrated that the young woman was his wife and that they could not take her away. Sadat relates, "I repeatedly explained to him that this was film and the events in the film are the re-enactment of reality we are living, and this marriage was also one of them and it doesn't mean anything."<sup>47</sup> But the man kept insisting that they had conducted the ceremony and it was a real wedding. Finally, he agreed to let her go if the divorce went through. The mullah of the village had to come and divorce them officially.

For me, writing down the stories and incidents that Sadat encountered during the production of *Three Dots* is an attempt to better understand the situation in which people in rural areas were living right after the fall of the Taliban, though the quality of life has not changed for them until this day. Their economic poverty is something that is the first thing that becomes apparent, but the consequences of this condition, which spill over into education, health and the future of these people, can only reveal themselves when one interacts with them.

One of the problems with which South and Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are dealing is the radicalization of young people.

---

<sup>46</sup> Roya Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018

<sup>47</sup> Roya Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018

The younger generation, mostly angry young men growing up in poverty, who are not able to go to school or find jobs, are therefore a good target for the groups such as the Taliban and ISIS to radicalize for a good number of reasons.

Here we see the impact of the Madrasa – the Islamic school – and how it has come into existence. In my own personal experience during my trip to Herat in 2014, I came across two Madrasas. One was by the Gazur Gah Shrine, the resting place of the important Sufi figure and poet, Khwajah Abdullah Ansari, also known as Pir-i Herat, located in the historic part of city which is a tourist attraction. Young boys of different age ranges were out sitting under the trees in groups reading the Qur’ān.

The other school was located between Herat City and Karukh District, which is 50km northeast of Herat. Passing through in a car, at first, I didn’t know that this was an Islamic school, I stopped to take a look at it since, against all the mud houses and the tents of displaced people along the road, the building, with its attractive, white Islamic architecture, was like a shining jewel falling into a desert full of dirt. I was denied entry because I am a woman and it was an exclusively male school. On the plaques of both schools, the year of their establishment was written. It was in the past decade, and when I asked around about the school, what I learned was that these schools are usually funded by the Saudi and Iranian governments, depending on whether they are Shia or Sunni.

With the advent of Islam in Afghanistan in the seventh century, education within the framework of Islam thus has existed for more than a millennium. Islamic education takes place in common institutions such as mosques, madrasa, and Qur’ān schools, as well as in Western types of schools, and reading and memorizing the Qur’an are the prime objectives of Islamic education.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Pia Karlsson and Amir Mansory. "Islamic and Modern Education in Afghanistan - Conflictual or Complementary?" In *Educational Strategies Among Muslims in the Context of Globalization: Some National Case Studies*. ed. Holger, Daun And Geoffrey, Walford. (Brill Leiden Boston 2004), 90.

Madrasahs usually, as boarding institutions, accept students from different villages who attend the school and live there together. The aim of the madrasah is to provide "the specialists a Muslim society needs or, in other words, to produce masters in Islamic theology and law."<sup>49</sup> But, since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, these schools have been described as sources of terrorism.

Thinking about education and its relation to cinema, in a society which has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, one could think of filmmaking as the expansion of communications methods to convey messages and promote objectives. Here is a means of fostering social and political consciousness and a sense of belonging that instills confidence among Afghans by exploring Afghan societies and the role of tradition - in sum, the promotion of a progressive vision of education. Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* talks about the transformation of the marginal:

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not 'marginals,' are not people living 'outside' society. They have always been 'inside'—inside the structure which made them 'beings for others.' The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves.'<sup>50</sup>

Films can tackle what many have regarded as the archaic aspects of tradition that have blocked further social improvement for people, especially women, marginal communities, and the poor. Filmmaking is the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it, even challenging the governments that have come to power, citing the rampant corruption and isolation of a disinterested political

---

<sup>49</sup> Pia Karlsson and Amir Mansory. "Islamic and Modern Education in Afghanistan - Conflictual or Complementary?" 94.

<sup>50</sup> Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum. 2002). 74.

elite as barriers to realizing the aspirations of the people following national liberation. As Freire continues, "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information."<sup>51</sup> Film can illuminate new perspectives, activating emotions and generating empathy in audiences, which can be substantive fuel for action. Coherent actions can facilitate major changes in society's viewpoint, lexicons, values and practices: "consciousness as consciousness of consciousness."<sup>52</sup> Through the filmic medium, oppressed peoples can be alerted to the conditions of their exploitation.

*Three Dots* is a work that is inexorably political because its characters are linked to a larger social framework: in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, an individual story 'necessarily expresses social contradictions and problems, or directly suffers their effects'.<sup>53</sup> Sadat, as a female Afghan filmmaker, represents two different types of minorities at the same time. First is the nation of Afghanistan oppressed and victimized in the political and economic wars between world powers, and then the representation of the Afghan rural woman whose condition is the outcomes of bigger events and also the restricted traditions that limit her. This self-representation, as a form of self-empowerment, gives an opportunity for Afghans to engage with the powerful ideologies of mass media in the region, as well as in the West. This position enables the filmmaker to express another possible community and to forge the means for different consciousnesses and sensibilities.

These incidents that occurred during the production of *Three Dots* might place the film crew in opposition to the villagers, but the truth is that there are few differences between them in terms of education, social, and economic growth. While people in cities might be closer to health clinics, or can send their children to school, the poor

---

<sup>51</sup> Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 79.

<sup>52</sup> Freire, 79.

<sup>53</sup> Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*. (London: Continuum. 2005). 224.

quality of education and the healthcare system does not remove them far from the situation experienced by rural populations.

There are parallels and mirroring between Afghan cinema production and the society depicted in their films. An Afghan production crew works with limited resources of every kind and with the most primitive equipment. They use whatever tools are around to make their projects. Roya Sadat recalls a scene from shooting *Three Dots*, when she needed an overhead shot. First, her cinematographer who only had experience in journalism and covering news, had never heard of this technical term "top shot" and, second, they did not have a crane or even a workable tripod to execute the shot. Eventually, she came up with the solution of tying the camera to the tripod with a scarf, then dangled it from a rooftop over the heads of the characters. Afterwards, the cinematographer told her, "You just needed to tell me you want a shot from God's view."<sup>54</sup>

During this time - the early 2000s - recruiting female actresses was another stumbling block to producing films, leading to the employment of women from neighbouring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. During the Mujahideen era, when people viewed cinema and music as products of communism, women who were active in these fields were the main targets of rape and sexual harassments, several female singers were shot dead and actresses went into hiding or left the country. Besides this, the Mujahideen and religious leaders also spread fundamentalist ideology among the people in regard to the status of women working in media. Women's disempowerment in Afghanistan persisted culturally through notions of nationalism, custom and tradition.

However, through the state-building process, Western countries have forced the new government to pay special attention to women's rights, positioning women in different levels of government. This unique relationship influences Afghanistan's power

---

<sup>54</sup> Roya Sadat. Personal interview. Kabul, August 18, 2018

structure, including its constitutional development, regardless of whether those in authority tend towards 'Islamist' or 'secular' political objectives.

In Afghanistan, there is no law that forces women to cover their hair by wearing hijab, but women feel the social pressure to conform to taking the scarf in order to maintain their reputations. Sexual harassment and other forms of violence in public spaces are an everyday occurrence for women and girls, just as they are around the world, in both urban and rural areas, and in both developed and developing countries. Women and girls experience and fear various types of sexual violence, from unwanted sexual remarks and touching to rape and femicide. This happens on the streets, in and around public transportation, schools, and workplaces. Wearing the hijab allows women acceptance into certain social classes. It grants them more respect from their conservative society and more freedom to roam within public spaces with little or no feelings of guilt or shame from the community.

Roya Sadat, after writing her script, looked for her lead actress for almost a year. Mojgan Joya, who played the role of Gol-Afroz in the film *Three Dots*, was a mother of two and carpet weaving student when Sadat asked her to perform in the film. Joya took a big risk accepting the role, since, in 2003, the situation was not ready for women in the film and media industry. She joined the project with no acting background.<sup>55</sup> Though the shortage of female actresses and female technicians in the Afghan film and media industries still persists, it is taking small steps toward improving. In recent years, popular Afghan television shows have played an important role in slightly softening the edge of general opinion in regards to how women appear on screen. However, female actresses limit themselves to the types of roles they are willing to play. For example, if there is scene where they need to have physical contact with a male co-star, some of them try to

---

<sup>55</sup> Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018

not accept the role or ask the director to make changes in the script. But as I mentioned above, this stigma is changing slowly.

One of the other issues affecting production is that of security which plays a big role in production. Depending on the location of shooting, the lack of security takes on different aspects. Film crews get threats all the time, anonymously. For example, in 2014, there was popular television show called *Shirin*, which received constant threats. Aziz Deldar, the writer and co-directors of the show, mentions that "the location of the show got attacked at night by several hand bombs and, since there was no filming scheduled at that time, luckily no one got injured, but a lot of damage was sustained."<sup>56</sup> This tactic is being used by radicals to scare people and prevent any activity that is not in line with their agenda. This type of security issue places significant obstacles in the way of film-making.

The other kind of security issue that interposes, as I mentioned previously, is landmines which have considerable impact on people's lives in Afghanistan. A report by The HALO Trust, a non-profit organization, funded by the British government, that works to remove debris left behind by war, reports that, "nearly 80 percent of the minefields in the country had been cleared in the past 30 years."<sup>57</sup> Despite an effective demining program, and well-developed mines awareness, the mines continue to claim civilian victims every day. Seeing amputees is a common occurrence in every city in Afghanistan, particularly in rural areas close to borders, and important intersections on the roads. In the film *Three Dots*, there is scene where Gol-Afooz is gathering dry bushes in an effort to exchange them for food. Sadat recalls that, to protect her crew, and prevent any injurious incidents, before the film crew got out of their car to prepare for the shoot, she

---

<sup>56</sup> Aziz Deldar. Personal interview. Interview with Soraya Ata. Kabul, August 28, 2018

<sup>57</sup> RFE/RL "Afghanistan's Herat Province 'Cleared Of Landmines,'" February 15, 2018  
<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-landmines-cleared-herat-halo/29042145.html>

walked every corner of that space first, to make sure there were no landmines.<sup>58</sup> There is a character in the film, a young boy with amputated leg. Sadat says that this character was not in the original script, but because she saw many people with amputated limbs, she decides to add it later.<sup>59</sup> The shooting was finally over, luckily without any life-threatening incident.

The post production took a much longer period. Sadat says that she had to send the Afghan Film camera back to Kabul as soon as the shooting was over. She adds that, because there was no equipment with which to convert the mini DV tape and transfer the film into a digital format, every week she had to visit the main hotel in Herat City to ask if there were any foreign journalists with video cameras staying there.<sup>60</sup> She needed the camera to do the transferring. After that, she spent another month going to a wedding videography store to edit the film.

*Three Dots* was a great success for the young filmmaker. The film was immediately bought by the Human Rights Committee, and it screened in many film festivals around the world. *Three Dots* opened many doors and brought exposure for Sadat and she got invited to several national and international film festivals. After she finished her education – Political Science and Law – she was invited through Atiq Rahimi<sup>61</sup> to join TOLO TV Station, and direct the first drama series ever entirely written, acted, filmed, produced and broadcast by Afghans, for Afghans in Afghanistan, *The Secrets of This House*. The show was a great success. While in Kabul, she and her sister, Alka Sadat<sup>62</sup>, established the first independent Afghan film company, Roya Film House, in 2003. We will read

---

<sup>58</sup> Sadat. interview. Kabul, 2018

<sup>59</sup> Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018

<sup>60</sup> Sadat. Interview. Kabul, 2018

<sup>61</sup> Atiq Rahimi is a French-Afghan writer and filmmaker who made *Earth and Ashes* (2004) and *The Patient Stone* (2012). Rahimi, like many other artists, returned to Afghanistan after 2002 and joined the media Moby Group as an advisor. He currently lives in Paris.

<sup>62</sup> Alka Sadat is prolific documentary filmmaker whose works spans social, political and military subjects.

more about organizations like this and their impact on the education and mobilization of the new generation of Afghan artists presently.

Sadat's oeuvre also moved – though slowly - toward better cinematic quality. While working for TOLO TV, she made her second short film, *Playing the Taar* (2008), which is about a 17 years-old girl, named Ay Nabaat, from an ethnic minority (Turkman). She has woven carpets at home since childhood. Her father, in order to end his enduring bloody hostility that has lasted for years with another ethnic group (Tajik), marries Ay Nabaat to a man who already has four wives. After the marriage, when Ay Nabaat gets pregnant, her husband, in order to revenge his lasting hostilities, claims that the child is illegitimate. She is forced to give birth to her child in an abandoned and ruined house. We will return to this film later in a more detailed analysis.

As with her first short film, Sadat used non-professional actors and again focused on a rural setting and a minority group. Since Sadat was working in television, for the production of this film, she had access to better equipment such as a camera and lights and was also in better financial situation, funding the whole film herself.

Fast forward to 2016, after Afghanistan had passed through three presidential elections. The security situation has worsened. The central government struggle to even provide security and safety to only Kabul. The Taliban and the ISIS attacks increase in different parts of the country. The rate of suicide attacks is very high in Kabul and it has also gotten more difficult to travel and find appropriate shooting locations. Bamiyan, for example, a much-liked location for fiction and non-fiction film-makers, is not as easily accessible as it used to be. The same goes for other spots as well. Despite these conditions, many organizations related to cinema and film had been established. Some had been dissolved and some continued to work. Kabul city has fifteen radio and television stations. Kabul University established its first ever cinema faculty, and even though the cinema faculty is under the theater department, it retains its own

independence. Beside Roya Film House, many other organizations are offering training in the audio-visual fields.

While Herat and Mazar-e Sharif began to experience better security and safety, it is Nangarhar, a Pashtun language province, bordering Pakistan that has become the top site, after Kabul, where most of local films are being produced. This province constantly experiences attacks by ISIS, the Taliban, and NATO, however many Pashtu language films are made here and it has been host to technical workshops for young people who are interesting in cinema. Nangarhar is known as 'the Small Mumbai' and, in the 1980s, the city had two cinemas, one state-run and one private. While the government closed the first one, the second was destroyed by a car bomb during the civil war. In a report published on TOLO News website, many filmmakers complain that, with no cinema in Jalalabad, they have nowhere to premiere their films.<sup>63</sup> Their only public screening venue available is the tent cinema that usually is set up in Amir Shir Ali Garden during the two Eid holidays. Other premieres take place in hotel lounges, but often the expenses exceed the income from sold tickets. The limited interest of Afghan TV channels in showing Pashtu movies forces filmmakers to seek out a market for their DVDs in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. This is an attractive market for Afghan filmmakers because the majority of residents there are Pashto-speakers, just as in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan; however, the market is very limited and the profits do not return a fraction of the outlays.

Roya Sadat continued to work in television and, in 2016, she directed her first feature, *A Letter to the President*. This film differs greatly from Sadat's previous work, in term of plot, and also production. The plot centers on a married woman named Soraya, from a higher middle-class family who works as police chief in Kabul. Her struggle

---

<sup>63</sup> Mir Aqa Popalzai. "Nangarhar Lacks Proper Cinema Halls to Display Local Movies," *TOLO News*, 27 June 2017. <http://prod.tolonews.com/arts-culture/nangarhar-lacks-proper-cinema-halls-display-local-movies>

between government law and customary law in Afghanistan leads to a series of events, including the accidental killing of her abusive husband, that land her in a jail, where she pens her defense in a letter to the president. The majority of the actors are professional and came with experience. Lenna Alam, who plays the main role, is an Afghan American actress who is nowadays a household name in Afghanistan. Mamnoon Maghsoodi, who plays the role of the president, is an actor from the Communist era. The other actors either have experience working on television or in cinema. For the production of *A Letter to the President*, Roya Sadat says that they tried to attain universal cinematic standards of quality, so they hired a foreign cinematographer and used DaVinci Resolve for editing and color correction.<sup>64</sup> Though the film earned much praise around the world in many film festivals, it still hasn't been seen by many Afghans.

Afghan films reception in Afghanistan is another important subject that needs to be looked at to really understand the failure of film industry in this country and will be treated in more detail in the following chapter. Sadat's cinema, like that of many other 'third world' filmmakers, offers the most direct and clearest explanation to an uneducated audience; during the struggle to survive, and for liberation, they stopped telling stories. Then cinema became a tool for people who are not voiceless, but haven't been heard yet. However, given the sophistication that surrounds today's politics of image, is it actually possible to use the filmic medium to alert oppressed peoples to the conditions of their current exploitation? Is film really able to bring changes to the socio-judicial system?

Going back to the beginning of this chapter, regarding the questionable existence of an Afghan film industry, I can say that the business of filmmaking in Afghanistan does not operate like in many other countries. There is no central organization that could oversee the film production in the country, in terms of financial

---

<sup>64</sup> Roya Sadat. Interview with Soraya Ata. Personal interview. Kabul, September 4, 2018

and technological resources or as an industry managed, operated and run for and by the people. It can also be called, in Gabriel H. Teshome's words, "a cinema of mass participation"<sup>65</sup>, where technical and artistic perfection in the production of a film cannot be the aims in themselves. The temporary nature of the work comes with no benefits, such as health insurance, vacation and sick time, paid holidays, and unemployment benefits and when a film project ends, the technicians, trained vocational skilled workers, are laid off till the next project. Because of the cultural and human costs, set within this political economy of Afghanistan, film projects don't happen often.

In different province or cities, a group of people enthusiastic about film and cinema have gathered around each other and they are trying to make films. Kabul, which has the highest concentration of filmmakers, artists and also the opportunities, leads the way, but other cities are also trying their best. The subjects of the films made by Afghan filmmakers are mostly about Afghan society and the problems and conditions they experience. The problem is neither analyzed nor solved, but rather affirmed in its continued existence as problem. In *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (2001), Mike Wayne describes third cinema as a political body of filmmaking "committed to social and cultural emancipation." He writes that third cinema films are political in the way that they "address unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources, and the hierarchies of legitimacy and status accorded to those differentials."<sup>66</sup> This is evident from the position from which the filmmakers speak, from the very act of speaking itself, and via the means that conveys political articulation or the articulation of the political under present conditions. Jean-Luc Godard draws attention to the

---

<sup>65</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel. "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films." In *Questions of Third World Cinema*, ed. Pines, Jim. British Film Institute. 1990.

<sup>66</sup> Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (2001), 1.

distinction between "making political films and making films politically,"<sup>67</sup> which is perhaps the strongest distillation of this point.

In conditions where the established modes of production and distribution and the established stylistic and narrative conventions do not exist, specific modes of filmmaking, the practical ways the filmmaking process is organised around financing, planning, production, post-production and distribution and the styles (the way the films themselves are designed and structured via camerawork, editing, sound design, narrative organisation) all become attempts to enact and affect social and political change. Afghan filmmakers are putting forth political messages, but already filmmaking is a political choice given that the political implications of their modes of production, distribution or their styles of shooting and cutting, mean that they are already making films politically.

Teshome H. Gabriel points to the impact of technology as a mediated factor within ideological discourse. He writes,

'technology' as such does not in itself produce or communicate meaning; but it is equally true to say that 'technology' has a dynamic which helps to create ideological carryovers that impress discourse language, i.e. ideological discourse manifests itself in the mechanisms of film discourse.<sup>68</sup>

In Third Cinema, usually the subject matter overrides style and technical and visual priorities. The goal is not to create 'spectacle', but to recall and remember events. Cinema is a serious social art. Filmmaking works as a tool for stimulating political consciousness and overcoming the impotence of thought, the moment of openness

---

<sup>67</sup> Dónal Foreman. *The Filmmaker-Activist and the Collective: Robert Kramer and Jean-Luc Godard* <http://donalforeman.com/writing/kramergodardintro.html>

<sup>68</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel. "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films." 1990.

when the structural principles of society are called into question. Film production in Afghanistan, with all its difficulties, is creating such moments of openness and undecidability: moments that also question the structural principles of cinema



## Chapter Three

---

### The Distribution and Reception of Afghan Films within Afghanistan

The distribution and screening of Afghan films inside Afghanistan is the missing leg in the triangle of the film industry I outlined in my introduction. Afghan filmmakers have been deeply engaged in an attempt to enact and affect social and political change through their work and almost all filmmakers wish for their work to have some kind of positive impact. Although they all have strong local concerns, and their geographical location plays a pivotal role in shaping the narratives and the protagonists' situations, these films do not, however, screen for local people for many reasons.

There is no official distribution company in Afghanistan and usually the filmmakers themselves distribute their films. Also, the lack of movie theaters is another reason for the people being unable to see local productions. There are only 18 movie theaters left in the country since the Taliban period, six of which are located in Kabul. These buildings, which were built in 1970s and 80s, are currently decaying because of a lack of maintenance during years of war. Also their projection technology is not compatible with today's formats. These movie theaters only screen Pakistani films in Pashto, American action films and Bollywood romantic films for young rowdy, largely unemployed male crowds in pursuit of any distraction from their drab surroundings as their sole audience. Beside the lack of enough movie theaters and security issues as problems for Afghan film distribution inside Afghanistan, Aziz Deldar, writer, director and professor at the Film department in Kabul University, sees the impact of radicalised Islamic culture that influenced people during the Mujahideen and the Taliban era. He says that these forces break the culture of cinema, something that was very acceptable to people previously when it was a regular family activity to go to movie. In the present moment, if a family goes to the cinema, it seems abnormal. Now it is a gendered activity.

While I was in Kabul, in the summer 2018, I was in a meeting with Roya Sadat and her team discussing how to screen *A Letter to the President* inside Afghanistan. Recently, a couple of companies which distribute films in Afghanistan have emerged. The Roya Film House (RFH) set a condition, which was that the film must only be distributed inside Afghanistan and that the companies they work with should guarantee against the film being uploaded to YouTube.

However, since there is no copyright law in Afghanistan, this was not possible. Also, these companies buy the rights of the film for about five to ten thousand dollars and negotiate on the number of DVDs they are going to make for each province. This way of doing business is sufficient since the price those companies pay is very low, and the filmmaker doesn't have any control over their project after the contract is signed. At the same meeting, the team decided to test the idea of screening the film themselves by renting an auditorium space and seeing if there was any way they could make profit so as to start their next project. *A Letter to the President* has so far had only one public screening in Afghanistan. The film was Afghanistan's entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 90th Academy Awards in 2017 and one of the conditions for all the entries is a public screening before the Oscars.

Beside foreign NGOs and other cultural organizations, each NATO stakeholder has their own cultural center which is generally attached to their embassy. These cultural centers usually have a screening room with a good number of seats. However, it is not possible for the public to use them for fear of attacks. In 2014, during a theater performance at the French cultural center, a teen suicide bomber exploded his bomb inside a crowded auditorium, which killed and injured many people, especially young adults, since the majority of attendees were high school students.

I follow one of the RFH staff to a meeting with the administration staff of organization named Nama Resana.<sup>69</sup> The capacity of the auditorium space in this cultural centre was 185 seats, and the cost to rent for one hour was 5000.00 AFN. The currency exchange of Canadian dollar to Afghani was 1.00 CAD à 77.55 AFN. The movie is a feature film and it runs over one hour, so renting the space cost \$10,000.00 AFN. The rent amounts to slightly over \$200.00 CAD. Because of the security situation, RFH had to hire a security team to monitor and check everyone attending the screening, which cost around \$15,000.00 AFN. This is without any expenditure on advertising or printing the tickets. The income of most people is very meager, so the price of the ticket cannot be too high. Even if the team did place higher prices on the tickets, and if all the 185 seats sold out, still they could not recoup all the expenses for only one screening. Because they couldn't advertise the screening ahead of time, as is the case for any type of public gathering in order to minimize the risk of attempted suicide attacks, there is no guarantee that enough people would know about the event and be able to show up, since it was a one-off screening.

This is one example: for a film that is more known to Afghan people, at least to the elite group, since it was in the news for a while because of the Oscar nomination and because it also won many awards, such as One Future Award at the International Film Festival of Munich. Also the director, Roya Sadat, is very well known in Afghanistan since she works in television and has directed popular television shows such as *Silenced Heaven* and *Khate Sevum* (Third Line). However, this popularity of the film in the national and international media was followed by many requests for private screenings of the film by different organizations and foreign embassies in Kabul. I personally attended a private screening for the executive administration of the World Bank. What was interesting in the case of these private screenings is that such organizations don't pay the

---

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.nama.af.gi>

screening fee. Maybe, given their awareness about the absence of local movie theatres (there is almost zero chance of distribution in the country for Afghan films inside Afghanistan), this fact prompts them to look at these private screenings as a favour that gives more exposure to the film.

As mentioned, changes have happened between the years of 2001 and 2016. The media grew very quickly, and television channels, radio stations, and newspapers flourished with the support and resources of international organizations. This support hinged on the belief that a thriving media sector would become a pillar of the country's fledgling democracy. Based on a social media report,<sup>70</sup> by 2010 there were 175 FM radio stations and 75 terrestrial television stations in Afghanistan - a striking change for audiences who had relied on either regime-controlled channels or foreign radio since the Soviet invasion. However, I need to mention that the majority of these television stations are only able to buy cheap, older foreign productions and air them instead of producing their own programs.

While journalists face threats from both the security forces and insurgents, and they are threatened, assaulted and killed by the Taliban, ISIS, the individual Afghan officials, warlords, and insurgents, who all stop them from reporting, still, in spite of these issues that journalists are facing, Afghanistan's freedom of speech and press is better than all its neighbors'. There is no specific law pertaining to cinematic productions, but cinema counts under the press law. Article 34 of Afghanistan's constitution allows freedom of speech and press, though there are restrictions on media that may invoke Islamic law, threaten national security or be offensive to other sects and there are also restrictions on negative representations of different tribes and their costumes and traditions. But Aziz Deldar points to the self-censorship that artist and filmmaker apply to

---

<sup>70</sup> "Social Media in Afghanistan - Users and Engagement", *Internews*, Altai Consulting, 2017. <https://www.internews.org/resource/social-media-afghanistan-users-and-engagement>.

their work. He says that individual people working in the government, or powerful people outside it, can put pressure on the distribution of cinematic productions. He points to the public screening of the film *Departure* (2004), directed by Abdul-Wahid Nazari, who received a scholarship to study in Bulgaria Cinema and Television and in 1982, received his PhD. The film is about a important passage close to Kabul city, and the crimes on civilians that the Mujahideen committed in this spot during Civil War. The film had one screening in Afghan Film studio and then Nazari was threatened by ex-Mujahideen who are now part of the current government.<sup>71</sup>

The presence of women and girls in the media has stimulated instrumental change in public opinion and the normalization of women's presence in public. When it comes to government supervision, Afghan filmmakers have much more freedom of action. They can criticize the government and address controversial questions much more easily. Afghan cinema does not fall under the rule of modesty and thus can create visual verisimilitude; actresses do not have to wear hijab; actors and actresses can have physical contact. It is not the government but society - the traditional and tribal structure, the prevalence of traditional and radical Islam, and classical patriarchy - that acts as the controlling force and draws the red lines.

While exploring the division between urban and rural in Afghanistan in the context of gender, the emerging Afghan media continues to neglect rural communities. The "typical" Afghan woman is still depicted as educated, modern, and a member of the working class, while the majority of the country's women are rural, uneducated, and have a very complicated lifestyle, which is different from those portrayed in national and private television channels. Among rural communities, few men have access to modern forms of media; availability amounts especially to radio, and occasionally to television. In the context of geographic constraints and sparse socioeconomic opportunities, by

---

<sup>71</sup> Aziz Deldar. Personal interview. Interview with Soraya Ata. Kabul, August 28, 2018

representing only the educated elites, the central media have created a clear distinction between “good” and “bad” women in the eyes of rural Afghans, whose worldview is usually rooted in tribal power that sees Kabul-based modernization in a negative light. Rural women and girls are not able to relate their lives to the content of current media programs. This creates a backlash whereby there is growing resistance to the idea of educating and empowering women and women who are educated or who do work outside the home are stigmatized as dishonorable.

The year 2012 was a turning point, when the first 3G license was obtained by a service provider, making mobile internet faster, of better-quality, and cheaper for users. Mobile internet became more common as less expensive smartphones became available, with 12% of the Afghan population using the internet, 9% of the population being social media users, and 8% being mobile social media users.<sup>72</sup> These figures underline the predominance of mobile technology as a primary access to the internet and social media in Afghanistan. One of the defining features of social media as a medium is the fact that lines between categories of users can be blurry at best. Social media users correspond to the array of actors who create accounts; these can be personal, or for an organization, public or private, and anyone can be both a consumer and a producer of content on social media.

In comparison to the neighboring countries, access to the Internet is available to a smaller percentage of the Afghan population. Social media users are a group of young, educated and urban people, who grew up in the age of the internet and have been exposed to information technologies throughout their lives. Predominantly, users have a certain level of basic education and are more likely to come from urban middle-class families, which have comparatively more access to smartphones and technological

---

<sup>72</sup> "Social Media in Afghanistan," *Internews*. 2017.

devices.<sup>73</sup> While there is also a growing number of internet users in the countryside, lack of access to the Internet remains the main barrier to social media access, especially in rural areas which do not benefit from 3G coverage, and the rural, older, and illiterate Afghans are left out of conversations happening online.

As the social fabric of daily life is shaped by communication practices, users take their places at the center of social change processes. Digital media and Cyber-space as mediators of the communication process, from the beginning, were about networking - networks of people who have a common interest. The Internet has been a hub for social activism in many forms. Online networking and communication has expanded into the Afghan Diaspora communities. The diversity of Afghan society is reflected in the Afghan diaspora, which is also not homogeneous and is often divided on ethnic, tribal, and sectarian lines. These diaspora communities around the world are microcosms of diverse cultures and identities, maintaining the same complexity and complicated identity of Afghanistan society; through the Internet and social media, their strong ethnic and kinship relations and networks with the people living in the homeland have increased and expanded. The skilled diaspora have been instrumental in the transfer of knowledge and technologies to Afghanistan and strong supporters of development and reconstruction in all sectors. Saad Mohseni is one example of the Afghan diaspora who changed the media scene in Afghanistan and in the region. His MOBY Group, launched in Afghanistan in 2002, is now active across South and Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa and its activities are in broadcasting, digital and online, production, strategic communications, publishing, music, sports and research.

Sandra Ristovska sees the concept of media as mediator in the manifestation of media activism as useful because "it provides a theoretical lens that insists on the cultural, social, political and historical specificities of the contexts in which communication

---

<sup>73</sup> "Social Media in Afghanistan," *Internews*. 2017

processes create meaning and generate possibilities for social change."<sup>74</sup> The sociopolitical activities of Afghan internet users are mostly expressed in the form of debates among different ethnicities, religions, sectarianism, and modernity proponents, as well as conservative and traditionalist actors. All of these interests engage in debates about current policies or the overall security situation, and use the web as an operative platform to mobilize supporters, extend networks, and organize collective actions.

Though the digital divide in Afghanistan is very deep because of the high rate of digital illiteracy among different classes and genders, we cannot ignore the role of media in challenging the power inequality between the center and the margins. As mentioned, the gender inequality of Afghan women in different sectors persists and also bleeds over into the online world. Women are less online in comparison to men, due to economic and educational factors.<sup>75</sup>

However, those women who have been using the internet on a daily basis have learned to leverage social media as a new platform for social advocacy. They have launched campaigns to raise awareness about the situation of women in Afghanistan, and citizens that would not ordinarily be drawn into taking a stand outside of the platform now find a way to support issues and express their opinions due to social media. One example of this development comes in the form of a film about street sexual harassment, *Do Not Trust My Silence*, (Sahar Fetrat, 2013), released on social media. The short film, which went viral, touches on the sexualized and disrespectful treatment of Afghan women in public life, and soon sparked a debate on different online channels.

---

<sup>74</sup> Victor Pickard and Guobin Yang, *Media Activism in the Digital Age* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 8.

<sup>75</sup> Amy Antonio and David, Tuffley, "The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries," *Future Internet*, vol 6(4), (2014) 673-687  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673>

Looking at the relationship between the Internet and film distribution in Afghanistan, many of these films are being uploaded to YouTube, however, access to the Internet for people is expensive, and, as mentioned, it is not available to most areas, especially rural ones. The majority of people access the Internet via mobile phone devices and buying a computer or laptop is not affordable. However, diaspora communities are benefiting from online piracy and this is how the majority of Afghan films reach them. The major method of distribution for Afghan films, or any films in general inside Afghanistan, is the pirated DVD and VCD. People watch films at home since it is safer and cheaper.

### Was the International Success of Sadat's Films Dependent on Gender?

As mentioned, the film *Three Dots* (2003) was received enthusiastically, especially by the international community; it travelled around the world and collected prizes in different film festivals. Inside Afghanistan, also, the film screened in different festivals which were funded through foreign aid, and the majority of the audiences for these film festivals are people working in foreign organizations, and mostly from the educated sector of the society. NGOs, activists, writers, and scholars seek to "empower women" through solidarity, which communicates not simply compassion, but a willingness to act, to speak up, to work to change the status quo. Solidarity does not act simply on conscience, but also examines why an inequitable relation exists in the first place.

In her book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty responds to the question of why feminism without borders is the best feminist praxis. She maintains this, first, because it recalls urgency, as well as internationalist commitment, and secondly, because it responds to an acute awareness of borders and boundaries. Borders suggest both containment and safety, and women often pay a price for daring to claim the integrity, security, and safety of their bodies and

living spaces. She stresses that “our most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them.”<sup>76</sup>

What Mohanty means by border is not only the invisible line between countries, but also the borders inside and across racialized communities, which are very visible in the context of Afghanistan. As explained at the beginning of this thesis, with the diversity of different ethnicities and languages in Afghanistan, borders have come in many guises - rich and poor, women and men, Shia and Sunni, Dari and Pashtu, different tribes, and many other categories. As Mohanty points out, the burden of behaviors, attitudes, institutions, and relational politics that are interwoven into the social system are an integral part of the social fabric and fall on the shoulders of women in the society of Afghanistan.

What Mohanty suggests is “the politics of solidarity”<sup>77</sup>, as feminist praxis. She defines the term as “of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities.”<sup>78</sup> Diversity and difference are central values of solidarity theory that are to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. This practice would and could cross many boundaries and borders.

Looking at the war-torn history of Afghanistan from within a framework of solidarity and shared values, marking the social and cultural changes that came with each war, and that had substantial impact on the lives of all Afghans regardless of their cultural ethnic differences, could play a significant role on a variety of levels. As Mohanty explains in detail,

---

<sup>76</sup> Chandra Talpade, Mohanty. *Feminism without Borders Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Longueuil, Québec: Point Par Point, 2007), 2.

<sup>77</sup> Mohanty. *Feminism without Borders* , 4.

<sup>78</sup> Mohanty. 7

Feminist practice [...] operates at a number of levels: at the level of daily life through the everyday acts that constitute our identities and relational communities; at the level of collective action in groups, networks, and movements constituted around feminist visions of social transformation; and at the levels of theory, pedagogy, and textual creativity in the scholarly and writing practices of feminists engaged in the production of knowledge.<sup>79</sup>

Mohanty's different levels of feminist practices are evident in the work of Free Women Writers, where we can see these degrees of collective action in groups, networks, and movements constituted around feminist visions of social transformation. This organization, composed of writers, students, and activists based in Afghanistan and the diaspora, is working for a more equal and just Afghanistan. Their method of improving the lives of Afghan women operates as a subset of interaction, through advocacy, storytelling, and education, by publishing books and using of new media and digital technologies.

Their first book, *Daughters of Rabia*<sup>80</sup> (2013), is a collection of Afghan women's writings in defense of their human rights that includes articles, poems, narratives, and essays about gender equality, environmental concerns, economic inequality, and democracy. Their second book, *You Are Not Alone* (2016), unprecedented for Afghanistan, is a short guide to help Afghan women through providing practical tips for seeking legal aid, forming networks of support, and protecting their mental health. It includes discussions of culturally-taboo issues such as marital rape and extra marital relationships and separates the myths from the reality about the drivers of violence. More

---

<sup>79</sup> Mohanty, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Rabia Balkhi, is known as the first Dari Poetess

importantly, it tells women survivors of violence that they are not alone, and it is not their fault.

One important fact that plays a big role in the accessibility of information, such as in the latter title, is language. Both books are available in both of the official languages of Afghanistan, Pashtu and Dari, and people can download and print them without charge. While Free Women Writers' Facebook page operates in both languages, their site is in English, which limits their audience.

Looking at the notion of *Feminism Without Borders* in the context of an international market for the reception and distribution of Afghan films whose subjects (sometimes their directors) are Afghan women, one can argue that the interests of transnational feminists in solidarity and resistance work in the service of an expansive global capitalism, provided for by the current geo-politics of Afghanistan. The support sought to "empower" and "liberate" Afghan women remains a political process with interventionist political outcomes. As was discussed earlier, the oppression of Afghan women was the moral grammar mobilized to rally popular support for the military invasion of the country. The rhetoric of women's liberation, empowerment and other terms are used frequently to justify this intervention. Despite minor progress in women's political participation, women are still a minority in public life and are often marginalized in policy-making. The forethought behind this modern-day colonial intervention into Afghanistan was, for women, a remodelling of gender roles. As we have seen, this classic form of colonial feminism was reactivated through major news outlets, in documentaries, feature films, and popular culture in general. Films about Afghanistan and especially Afghan women were in strong demand by festival programmers around the world.

## The Reception of Afghan Films within Afghanistan

A notable segment of this cinema – Afghan cinema, which can be called feminist – is composed of works that challenge the hegemonic codes of gender and reflect a critical awareness of the role of culture and politics in the formation of our collective and individual understanding of gender and sexuality. Afghan cinemas are viewed as heterogeneous and diverse bodies that originate from and find meaning in particular socio-cultural contexts. In the course of working on this project, I have tried my best not to give the topic of Afghan Women special treatment, though I could have very easily done so since my case study pivots upon a female director, the protagonists of her films are women, and also because I am an Afghan woman.

But I consciously draw the line on not reproducing the same literature about the plight of women in Afghanistan as Western feminists have in the past two decades. This doesn't mean that I am in denial about the condition of women in patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal society such as Afghanistan, but I am also aware of "politics of location"<sup>81</sup> in the context of Afghanistan where, besides gender, we are governed by ethnicity, religion, class, and race. I have tried to bring attention to how the situation of Afghanistan, now, under this modern imperialism, impacts the country as a nation and not just women. Focusing only on the lack of women's rights would be like treating the symptoms of the illness and not addressing the cause. Deteriorating security, poverty and inaccessible education, in my opinion, are the main causes of women's struggles in Afghanistan. Also, I am fully aware that the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. and NATO and the rhetoric of female empowerment has reduced female oppression to symbolic items of clothing, ignoring its deep causes. Legal equality for women remains absent, and while the machine of war is running at full speed, the poverty, insecurity

---

<sup>81</sup> Adrienne Rich. "Notes Toward a Politics of Location." In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. (New York: Norton, 1994). 210-232

violence and illiteracy which are the major factors impacting the quality of the life of especially women and children, are growing worse by the year.

Looking at another Afghan film, *Osama* (Seddiq Barmak, 2003), which, as pointed out previously, is an international co-production between Afghanistan, Iran, the Netherlands, Japan, and Ireland, and was screened at several festivals, including Cannes, and the London Film Festival, it should be noted that, while it was well received by Western critics and viewers, it was not screened in Afghanistan. It was the first Afghan film to win a Golden Globe and generated a fair amount of financial profit. The plot of the film centres on an Afghan family, all females, who, after the death of the father and an uncle, are left to fend for themselves during the Taliban era. The mother and grandmother force the main character, a 12-year-old girl, to disguise herself as a boy named Osama in order to find work and feed her family.

The first shot of the film indicates that Seddiq Barmak's main audience is Western spectators. The audience is introduced to the world of the film through the viewpoint of a Westerner, a journalist who is following and filming Espandi, an Afghan beggar boy, in the alleys of Kabul. We see Afghanistan and Afghan people literally through the lens of a foreigner. When Espandi looks right into the camera and asks for more dollars to guide the man through the streets and show him more of the city, it seems that the Western viewers are the film's intended audience. The man behind the camera gives money to Espandi and asks him to follow the mother and daughter in the street. His camera follows all three.

The director more or less tries to address local audiences too, but the main focus is to fulfill the expectations of Western viewers. *Osama* has a message for them that is quite different from what it presents to its Dari-speaking viewers. The film opens with two different texts on the screen. The Dari epigraph placed at the top reads "Oh God, side me with those who sacrifice their world for their religion, not those who sell their religion

for the world." This is a quote from Ali Shariati (1933-1977), an Iranian sociologist and an advocate of political Islam that had a major role in articulating a religiously-inflected discourse of radical social and political change in Iran before the 1979 revolution in Iran. The English text, which seems to be a translation of the Dari (but is not), is a quote from Nelson Mandela that reads "I cannot forget, but I can forgive." Graham Mark notes that the quote unveils *Osama* as "a kind of Afghan Holocaust remembrance, as evocation of the past and its horrors to remind Afghans and the world of what must never happen again."<sup>82</sup> The Dari text insinuates that the Taliban are the ones who sold their religion to gain worldly power. It views them not as the face of Islam, but as a corrupted group that deviated from the path of God, and they do not represent the faith of Islam. The film does not, in the words of Elahe Dehnavi, "depict religion as the cause of evil; it rather rejects a radical reading of Islam that revealed itself in the Taliban's actions and policies and this view point is not shared with the English-speaking audience."<sup>83</sup>

The film aligns itself with the Western liberal mindset and its theories of liberation. In the opening sequence, women are demonstrating in the streets of Kabul, carrying signs that read "We Are not Political," "We Are Hungry," "We Are Widows," and "We Need Job," recognizing that the personal is political. This was the definitive slogan of second-wave feminism, which become a way of the film justifying the U.S. military intervention to 'save' Afghan women from the monstrous presence of the Taliban.

*Osama* stops short by only representing the horrors of the Taliban and fails to illustrate the political and historical background that made possible the rise of the Taliban. Because *Osama* does not provide its audience with any information about the history of foreign interventions and the formation of the Taliban under the support of the U.S., it gives the West exactly what it wants to see - a helpless victim of the Taliban who

---

<sup>82</sup> Mark Graham. *Afghanistan in the Cinema*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010). 101.

<sup>83</sup> Elahe Dehnavi. "Veiled Voices: Female Subjectivity and Gender Relations in Afghan and Iranian Cinemas" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7939/R3PV6BM81>

passively watches how her life unfolds in front of her eyes. *Osama*, similarly to *Kandahar* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2000), is obsessed with chadari. It captures better than any documentary the ingenuity of the head-to-toe covering, simultaneously a prison for the woman it covers. Each time a female character wears the chadari – and especially when it is pulled over her by a man – she is not only dehumanized, but willed out of existence altogether: faceless, voiceless, helpless. As Mark Graham suggests, the film, “replete with Orientalist set pieces,” tells the West that “Afghanistan is a damsel in distress, desperately in need of rescue.”<sup>84</sup> Setting the film against state values, Siddiq Barmak seems to be conscious of his role at both national and international levels and has in mind foreign film festivals. There might be moments when the film, consciously or unconsciously, echoes Western rhetoric about the Muslim world.

The depiction of the East as a place of both terror and redemption of sins, through visual motifs that are not reflective of real life in these places, has a long history going back to Georges Méliès’ 1905 film *The Tribble Turkish Executioner*.<sup>85</sup> But this isolation of visual motifs from the vast sea of images that make up the Muslim world creates a narrative that relies on omitting any complexity or diversity for Western audiences. Barmak, also without any contextualization of the story of Afghan women’s oppression and the complexities of gendered experience of selfhood, space, and otherness, depicts this extreme passivity and no sense of agency for the film’s female characters. This only echoes the imperialist discourse; the film does not fully reflect the reality of the lives of girls and women in Afghanistan who do not simply submit.

In *Passing the Rainbow* (Elfe Brandenburger, Sandra Schäfer, 2008), which reflects on and theorizes the media landscape of post-Taliban Afghanistan, there are interviews with Hamida Refah and Zobaida Sahar, who play *Osama*’s mother and grandmother

---

<sup>84</sup> Mark Graham. *Afghanistan in the Cinema*. 103.

<sup>85</sup> Graham. *Afghanistan in the Cinema*. 86.

respectively. Sahar notes, "Everything shown in the film *Osama* is true." When the interviewer asks whether they liked the ending of the film, however, Sahar says, "The ending is sad." She continues,

In our opinion, it would have been nice... My role as the Mother should have been to save my daughter. My role was too small. When the old man was taking the girl away, the Mother should have been able to meet him on the way. Then she would have gotten into an argument with him. I would have allied myself with my daughter to defeat the old man. That would have made the film more successful.<sup>86</sup>

When I ask my Afghan friends to watch an Afghan film, or any film about Afghanistan, they refuse if the subject is the misery of Afghan women because they don't accept the extreme submissiveness depicted. Films such as *Osama* might be very successful in painting the picture of suffering of Afghan women during the Taliban, but they fail to present them.

Earlier, I mentioned how social media impact women's voices in social and political matters, but social and gender activism in Afghanistan didn't start in 2001 and it is not a new notion. Despite living in a traditional patriarchal society, where women are automatically seen as being of lesser status, seeking equality and rights has been a shared concern for women throughout Afghan history.

In the early 20th century, Queen Suraya's serious and sustained campaign paved the way for future efforts by women. She encouraged women to get an education and opened the first school for girls in Kabul. She sent 15 young women to Turkey for higher

---

<sup>86</sup>Zobaida Sahar. *Passing the Rainbow* DVD. Directed by Brandenburger, Elfe and Schäfer, Sandra (Mazefilm Berlin, Germany). 2008

education in 1928<sup>87</sup> and opened a women's hospital for treating female patients. Suraya was very instrumental in enforcing change for women and publicly exhorted them to be active participants in nation building. Although women faced many ups and downs after King Amanullah Khan's reign, Mohammad Zahir Shah, who came to power after, made some efforts to bring women to power. During this time, women won seats in the cabinet.

With the arrival of the Communist regime in Afghanistan, the women's movement did not change their nature but rather continued their work within a different structure. Women continued to occupy seats in the government, but also began forming organizations. In 1977, before the Moscow-directed coup, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was established in Kabul. After the coup, and particularly after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979, RAWA became directly involved in the war of resistance. In contradistinction to the Islamic fundamentalist "freedom fighters" of the anti-Soviet war of resistance, RAWA from the outset advocated democracy and secularism. The Mujahideen, Islamic warriors fighting the Soviets, enforced strict rules on women around the country.

In the years of the Soviet occupation, RAWA's activities inside Afghanistan, and in refugee camps in Pakistan, increased. For the purpose of addressing the immediate needs of refugee women and children, RAWA established schools with hostels for boys and girls, a hospital for refugee Afghan women and children in Quetta, Pakistan with mobile teams. In addition, it conducted nursing and literacy courses and vocational training courses for women<sup>88</sup>.

During the disastrous regime of the Taliban, many women in big cities and in remote areas took immense risks and protested. Many started secret schools for girls or

---

<sup>87</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh Huma. "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4, no 3, (2003): 14.

<sup>88</sup> Melody Ermachild. Chavis. *Meena: Heroine of Afghanistan* (London: Bantam, 2004). 147.

secret literary circles. Many brave women continued the fight for equality by educating young girls. The Taliban caused yet another phase of emigration, and this time, in particular, women activists and educated young women, fearing assassinations and violence, left Afghanistan. Many of them continued their activism in neighboring countries, Europe or the United States. This new diasporic group started a new chapter of women's rights movement through the new media. By removing the barriers of distance and geography, the web has made activism easier than ever, facilitating public dialogue and creating a platform for awareness and change.

In the film *Passing the Rainbow*, there is an interview with a RAWA representative.<sup>89</sup> The question is about the media activism<sup>90</sup> the group undertakes and whether RAWA works with other feminist media organizations. The response is as follows:

We have no direct organizational contacts with them in the sense that they can force their views on us and we have to conform to them. Unquestionably, a person's thoughts and mentality depend on his or her social environment. In less developed countries, of which Afghanistan is one, women have been told for years that they should only perform certain activities. In Europe, women already engage in all these activities. I will give a little example. It doesn't apply to everyone, but some people here think like this. Above all, those men who have a backward and misogynistic mentality. They say: "Women can neither do agricultural work nor work as an engineer!" But that is simply not true! What a European woman can do, an Afghan woman can do, as well. There are no mental

---

<sup>89</sup> In the film she preferred to stay anonymous, like many other participants in this film.

<sup>90</sup> Since 1992, RAWA activists have been recording incidents of human right abuse by the Mujahideen, the Taliban and provide them to U.N. and media outlets and also post them in their website and YouTube channel. Their most well-known footage is the public execution of Zarmeena by the Taliban in Ghazi stadium in Kabul in 1999.

or anatomical differences between us. A European woman, for example, has very different expectations and ideas. Maybe her notion of equality is different. A European woman who works in a factory demands the same wages as a man. But the Afghan woman doesn't even think about such demands. And why not? Because in Afghanistan there aren't even the factories in which women could work. Even if some women in Afghanistan do not yet have the self-confidence, for some the main issue is finding work!<sup>91</sup>

Krista Geneviève Lynes, in her book, *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits. Feminism in a Globalized Present*, sees the RAWA representative's comment on "equality" as it is defined in Western feminism, which in the Afghan context is a misguided perception, since within distinctly different economic, political and social frameworks, the terms of their exchange may be unequal, as may be their access to resources, and their political weight at the national and transnational levels. She writes that this "cannot be basis for feminist politics in Afghanistan where unemployment, poverty and lack of access to basic necessities cross gender lines."<sup>92</sup> The demands for equality may be articulated along different axes, or equality may not serve the interests of feminist struggles at all here.

Progress in Afghanistan, in human rights, in women rights, must evolve from the grassroots level upwards, despite this requiring time and effort, and not through implanting a foreign structure where its point of departure is the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them,' with an implicit suggestion that non-Western cultural and political norms are uncivilised and a threat. Solidarity requires true communication. Imposing a voice on

---

<sup>91</sup> RAWA Representative, *Passing the Rainbow* DVD. Directed by Brandenburger, Elfe and Schäfer, Sandra (Mazefilm Berlin, Germany) 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Lynes Krista Geneviève. "Diffracted Mediation: The Framing of Gender in the 'War of Terror'" In *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 139-171.

Afghan women through the lens of Western normative standards is not solidarity when it fails to acknowledge the cultural and historical contexts of Afghanistan and ignores the deeper issues that are the cause. Collective actions from the local level, movements that are led by the communities most affected, sustain the most meaningful changes. Afghan people and Afghan artists are the ones best suited to speak to, and to lead, discussions about combating gender inequality, the clash of tradition and modernity, and any social and cultural subjects they are working on.

### The Reception of Roya Sadat's Films

Local filmmakers who don't have the support of foreign or local investors don't see much circulation for their films after production. It was mentioned that *Three Dots* (2003) was bought and distributed by Human Rights Committee, and that Sadat's second film, *Playing the Taar* (2008), was well received among Western audiences. While her films are not accessible to everyone in Afghanistan, they are available to anyone who has access to the Internet.

The visual tropes applied by Sadat throughout her films transcend a narrow sense of belonging to Afghan culture and reveal Afghanistan's diversity. By using audio-visual elements such as Turkmen music, traditions of rug weaving, and folksongs sung by women, that are particular to Afghanistan, she gives form to the national imaginary in an attempt to inhibit cultural imperialism within the orbit of national culture. Fanon addresses this ability to reclaim and transform the "narrative of liberation":

The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for-hope. But to ensure that hope and to give it form, he must take part in action and throw himself body and soul into the national struggle. You may speak about everything

under the sun; but when you decide to speak of that unique thing in man's life that is represented by the fact of opening up new horizons, by bringing light to your own country, and by raising yourself and your people to their feet, then you must collaborate on the physical plane.<sup>93</sup>

Sadat's cinema is not entertainment, but rather a tool for learning about the past and present, and the causes of the condition of the Afghan people. However, I see a need to correct the interpretation of her films by Afghans who criticize their narratives as targeted towards festivals and fame. This is not to ignore the exploitative endeavours of some Third World filmmakers, who try to sell Third World poverty and misery at festival sites in Europe and North America, and who do not approach their craft as a tool for social transformation.

The film *Playing the Taar* (2008) presupposes a homogenous notion of Turkmen, one whose local histories, culture differences and practices are not often taken into account. Sadat said the reason she made the film was that she met a Turkmen girl, and nothing about this girl revealed her cultural background, while as Turkmen, she herself comes from a remarkable and rich culture.<sup>94</sup> Although the Turkmen are one of Central Asia's major demographic groups, they are a minority in Afghanistan. Beside their impressive design and tradition in rug weaving, which is more than utilitarian, or even an art form, carpet weaving is integral to Turkmen culture, as are their textiles.

Textiles have a unique language all their own that cross most barriers whether it's language, politics, even status. Textiles adorn bodies and homes, even animals. They are frivolous and utilitarian, they keep the body warm or cool, they reveal age and status within the community, and they tell where someone is from. The language of textiles is

---

<sup>93</sup> Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 232.

<sup>94</sup> Roya Sadat. Interview with Soraya Ata. Personal interview. Kabul, September 9, 2018

excitement, curiosity and respect. It is spoken in the cities and the countryside. In the movie, *Playing the Taar*, Aya Nabat wears a black chador over her colorful clothes while she is outside of the house. When she comes in, she exchanges the black fabric for a colorful scarf. We see her costume and her jewelry. Every shot in the house is framed with elements of Turkmen culture and art that is hanging on the walls, or placed on the ledge, or spread on the floor. The architecture of Aya Nabat's parent's house in itself shows the distinct design characteristics of that geography.

The Turkmen have a unique musical culture that is tied into the oral literary tradition. Traditional Turkmen songs feature every aspect of life, which include lullabies, songs children sing during their games, maiden's songs and wedding songs, the work songs sung during camel milking and carpet weaving. Each shot of the film *Playing the Taar* is filled with motifs of and elements of Turkmen culture; when one sees the film first, it shows the influence of *The Colour of Pomegranate* (1969) by Sergei Parajanov.

The illiterate Afghan society has a living tradition of oral storytelling and poetry; many poems are known by heart among the many various layers of the population. Oral history, folktales, story-telling in the form of song are all very important and practiced by every tribe in Afghanistan. The short poem form of the landay, Elisa Griswold points out, is "a Pashtu popular poem, a folk couplet - an oral and often anonymous and aphoristic, satiric against power and superiority, a scrap of song created by and for mostly illiterate people when recited by women - against men. Traditionally, landays are sung aloud, often to the beat of a hand drum [dayereh]."<sup>95</sup> Oral communication includes the ability to remember "it" (the injustice) and therefore functions as a weapon, as a means of defense. The truth and accuracy of the spoken words is guaranteed by the personal experience of the speaker. Moreover, there are many famous stories that have been

---

<sup>95</sup> Elisa Griswold. "Landay" in *Poetry Foundation*.

<https://static.poetryfoundation.org/o/media/landays.html#intro> Accessed June 5, 2019.

transmitted orally from generation to generation over hundreds of years, mostly told at small gatherings in private houses during long winter nights by a good storyteller, often an older man or woman in the family. They deal with honesty and revenge, oppression and courage, honour and love. The aim is to have fun and sing, to keep the young boys and girls busy by educating them in good manners, to caution them against bad habits. Pia Karlsson and Amir Mansory tell us that "In the end of the 19th century many of these stories were compiled in a book called Mili Hendara, National Mirror. This book was available in almost every village (in Pashtun populated areas) and was read by a literate person while others were listening."<sup>96</sup>

Many Afghan filmmakers incorporate oral tradition, folktales and poetry into their narratives, not always in a romanticizing manner. Atiq Rahimi, in *The Patient Stone* (2012), uses oral storytelling to interpret the experiences of the female character as contingent and relative to those of others. The woman narrates her life story with her husband who is wounded and unable to talk. She opens up her deepest desires, pains, and secrets without restraint. She has knowledge of the validity of her experiences and life decisions living with him, and in turn, she interprets these experiences and decisions as valid and meaningful in the context of life stories. The woman as the narrator recalls experiences in the past, how she was treated by her husband, denied opportunities, or when she acted as an independent person, making the decision to sleep with the young man. Through her narrative, she is able to interpret those experiences from a critical and reflexive stance, rather than from a position of subordination.

Siddiq Barmak, in *Osama* (2003), uses not only oral storytelling, but also folk songs that are appropriate to the current situation of the time. There is a wedding scene

---

<sup>96</sup> Pia Karlsson and Amir Mansory. "Islamic and Modern Education in Afghanistan - Conflictual or Complementary?" In *Educational Strategies Among Muslims in the Context of Globalization: Some National Case Studies*. ed. Holger, Daun And Geoffrey, Walford. (Brill Leiden Boston 2004), 89.

where two women sing and play dayereh.<sup>97</sup> The tone of the song is very sad, though people are clapping and two girls are dancing to the rhythm of dayereh. The song is about the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul, and how their presence changed the life of the people. The women describe the Taliban as addicts and gamblers, young men that are going to keep losing. Barmak uses a folktale in *Osama*, when the grandmother suggests disguising the little girl's appearance to look like a boy in order to accompany her mother to work and make living. She relates a fable to the girl about a magical rainbow, telling her that when one passes under it, they change gender. Boys become girls and girls become boys. The grandmother repeats the same story another night when the girl is traumatised by a Talib following her into her home. This time the story acts as way of escape for the girl, a distraction from the split roles she plays inside and outside of the home.

Roya Sadat, in *Three Dots*, also uses folk songs as a way to escape and dream. A group of young girls is travelling a long distance to a spring to fetch drinking water. Away from their life in the village, they tease and joke with each other. On the way back, they sing about the fate of a girl in her father's house, and in her husband's house after marriage. By using storytelling or singing a folk song as a magical power that can wash away the people's misery and pain, the act of telling becomes their agency in these grim situations. Even though the grimy reality of the outer world denies the possibility of the relief that folktales may provide, still, these female characters take refuge in folk songs and tales to soothe their wounds.

Since not many people are able to read and write, this traditional way of transporting and transferring information is regularly practiced. The female narrator of folklore is expressive of women's sorrows, hopes, attitudes, values, anxieties, and

---

<sup>97</sup> Dayere is a wooden circle frame drum instrument that in wedding used mostly by women accompanying folk song. The instrument is popular in the Middle East region and comes in different designs that is used to accompany both popular and classical music.

worldview in moments of distress. She relies on these folk stories as sources of education for a generation of children whose lives and the world around them have been shaped only by violence and war. Not only children; people in their 30s have seen nothing but war and its disastrous consequences for the world around them.

Returning once more to education, in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire looks at how to create an education system with oppressed people, for oppressed people, that will help them become freer - concrete action to change consciousness. He talks about the theory of "cultural action,"<sup>98</sup> or the methods that people use to create cultural change, "dialogical action."<sup>99</sup> For Freire, the key to an effective revolution is dialogue. In my own opinion, folktales and folk songs provide this dialogue, with the past, with opposite genders and among different generations. They can be a window on a culture, but they can also encourage insights into students' cultural identities and deeper understandings about their own cultures and perspectives when they encounter alternative possibilities for thinking about the world

In *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that through storytelling, alongside everyday communication and shared experience in his mother tongue, African culture is able to be transmitted to and through communities and across generations. Children not only learn better in their own heritage language, as opposed to one of the societally dominant languages, but also develop a more positive view of themselves, and a healthier view of their ethnic group and identity. When a child from a minority loses her or his heritage language, it is not only a loss for the child and the family, but a cultural tragedy that threatens the very existence of the group. Using the heritage language in both formal education and media coverage is essential for the success of this decolonization process.

---

<sup>98</sup> Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum. 2000). 127.

<sup>99</sup> Freire. *The Pedagogy of Oppressed*. 127.

People write in order to communicate ideas and writing in a major world language communicates the author's ideas more widely than doing so in a small regional language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, however, argues for targeting a primary audience - speakers of marginalized languages - through language and its particularity of a specific social/historical context. In addition, each language embodies enormous elasticity and emotional sensitivity; of quick and hilarious banter and a welter of references both historical and mythological; it is an instrument of imaginative depth and scope, which has been tempered by the community for generations. Each dialect in a language has a distinct musicality that is lost in translation, and that would be forever lost were the language to die.

Teshome Gabriel, writing about the reception of Third Cinema in his essay "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films," foregrounds "The audience: the active interrogation of images versus the passive consumption of films."<sup>100</sup> What he means by 'the active interrogation of images' is a relation which allows the spectator to create new relations, and open new horizons and new possibilities of engagement with the work - in whatever format it may be - between filmmakers and film viewers. For Afghan peoples in general, this means that we, too, have not been vanquished. In spite of all that has happened, and the scars we all carry as a result of colonialism and imperialism, we have managed to survive with our memory intact - the memory of an ancient homeland, a memory where language is not the burden of defeat, but the value of constant struggle.

The constant struggle of Afghanistan is against the dominance of a neo-colonial economy, where the different forms of exploitation and systematic plundering of natural resources, along with deteriorating security, have had grave consequences on the

---

<sup>100</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films." In *Questions of Third World Cinema*, ed. Pines, Jim. (British Film Institute. 1990), 48.

economic, social, and cultural levels. As I have argued throughout this thesis, cinema is one of the victims of the situation, where a filmmaker is unable to reach her or his audiences inside Afghanistan, and the distribution of independent films is not possible without foreign help; this help often comes with specific agendas that are tailored to benefit the donors. Additionally, the issue of gender is another subject that weighs heavily on any artistic or cultural activity.

With all these issues and obstacles along the way, I believe that filmmakers, such as Roya Sadat, perhaps see art as a unique path helping us to become more fully in touch with our identity, and thus, with our future. It is in this sense that we sustain ourselves. The primary inspirational aim of art is to trigger the imagination and ignite a new awareness, which in turn makes memory more accessible to our consciousness. Third Cinema is a relational art with aspirations toward audience participation and interaction. Third World filmmakers want the social context of their work to be included within the spectators' life situation. They want distribution environments that are more varied and more open and accessible.

The search for oneself, the journey of imagination, seeking each other, is an alternative "third space" provided by Third Cinema, where we can engage in ideas about imagination, about dreams, tales, and magical visions. Teshome H. Gabriel continues:

[...] In films, the visual field is defined by the frame. When we go to the movies our attention is generally focused within this frame; it is like a funnel that draws our eyes into the screen. [...] it defines the world depicted on the screen. Yet, at the same time, the frame also inevitably implies something outside itself; it suggests a relation to something that exists outside of the frame. That which lies outside of the frame, outside of our immediate view, provides a means through which multiple meanings can enter the frame. In every framing of a given field of

vision, there is inevitably a shading out of that which is outside the screen. Yet, when something is not on the screen, it does not mean that it is not active within the cinematic relationship, within the minds of the audience. [...] it is an active presence that is open to the process of interpretation by the spectators. In other words, the area outside the frame provides a "blank space" that the spectator helps to fill in. This "blank space" is not only where the magic of cinema takes place, it is also the place that provides the spectators with multiple options to participate and even to assume a role as co-authors of the work. The "blank space" is a crossroads where we discover movements -- of spreading out, of moving in many directions at once -- not towards the center, but towards the margins.<sup>101</sup>

The margins: where the people's language, costumes, ways of living are allusive, imagistic, poetic, and magical. They are ideas with a life of their own, beyond anything the filmmaker might have imagined.

Concerning the making of films regarding marginal communities, it would be possible to argue on purely artistic grounds that a local language is simply better at describing certain things - the rhythms of daily life, say, or regional wildlife - than another. What makes Sadat's decision to produce films in Turkmen and Dari so powerful is that her reasons for doing so are not only artistic, but also political. In terms of reaching out to people, one has to use their language, because a language is the expression of an identity. Third Cinema aims to "decolonize the minds" of its viewers by focusing on Third World historical, social, and political realities. This incorporates the impact of film

---

<sup>101</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel. "Third Cinema Updated: Exploration of Nomadic Aesthetics & Narrative Communities," Teshome Gabriel Articles and Other works. Accessed May 28, 2019. <http://teshomegabriel.net/third-cinema-updated>

either on individuals or an entire audience, the influence of film on the formation of social roles and interaction in Third World communities, and the use of film in endorsing or changing existing power structures within a nation or between ethnic groups or political factions.



## Chapter Four

---

### Education in Afghanistan - Is it a Key for Escape or a Trap?

Throughout this project, I have consistently referred to education in relation to film and language. While film is a suitable tool for educating the masses, the majority of whom are unable to read and write, I believe filmmaking education itself to be a highly important component of Third Cinema. Education in the broader sense is the pillar of any successful country. Its influence is undeniable, and it should be thought of as an investment in and for the society. Education equips young people with the skills they need to develop a secure livelihood and to participate in social, economic and political life. Education is a tool for social promotion as it allows for greater and better employment opportunities and thus stimulates economic development. Education is also a mean of national development with its potential to foster national unity.

Before Islam entered Afghanistan, there was no central administration in this geographical location. Each corner of the country was ruled by several local rulers who had different languages and cultures. After the arrival of Islam, there came an emphasis on scientific as well as religious education. The foundation of modern education was laid in 1875, but the number of established schools didn't exceed four until 1919. King Amir Habibullah Khan (1901- 19), who introduced cinema to Afghanistan, built two schools that ran, appropriately, more or less according to today's modern education system. The department of education was established, and school supplies were provided free of charge to all students. In addition, a small stipend was awarded to students as an incentive to pursue an education.<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat. "History of education in Afghanistan". *ReliefWeb*. (2004). <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/history-education-afghanistan>

His son, King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) made attendance of primary schools compulsory for everyone. The Ministry of Education was established and the number of high schools was increased, which broadened the curriculum beyond that of the traditional schools. German and French teachers were also employed in Kabul high schools along with Afghan teachers. In this period, for the first time, schools were opened outside of the capital. Amanullah Khan, with the help of his wife, Queen Suraya, for the first time, established schools for girls. Her mother, Rasmiya, served as one of these school's first principals and a number of female students were sent to Turkey for higher education after they graduated. Hundreds of male students have been sent by the Ministry of Education to study in Russia, Italy, Germany, as well as Turkey.<sup>103</sup>

King Amanullah Khan tried to improve domestic affairs, to transform Afghanistan into a modern country with a program of Western-style modernization in a short span of time. He was challenged by tribal chiefs and religious authorities, who ultimately brought him down from power, which finally led to his exile. The ruler that came after him (Habibullah Kalakany, ruled 9 months in 1929) closed the girls' schools and recalled the female students who had been sent abroad. In addition, he closed schools that had been opened by foreign countries such as Germany and France.<sup>104</sup>

After him, Muhammad Nadir (1929-33), with strong tribal preference, was sympathetic to the Pashtuns' interests in all aspects, and formed close ties with certain clergy and tribal chieftains. In order to please the religious and tribal conservatives, the new regime adopted drastic regressive reforms, limiting modern education in favor of more traditional education. Finally, in 1931, in a progressive move, women were allowed to take classes at the Masturat Hospital in Kabul.

---

<sup>103</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat. "History of education in Afghanistan".

<sup>104</sup> Mehtarkhan Khwajamir. *History and Problems of Education in Afghanistan*. (EDP Sciences 2013) 3. DOI: 10.1051/shsconf/20162601124

The first core of higher education in Afghanistan was established in 1932 as the Medical Faculty.<sup>105</sup> The development of education, though moving slowly, made some progress in the 1940s. More primary, secondary and vocational schools, were opened, and one teacher training school. Kabul University was established in 1946, as the first university in Afghanistan. Also the same year a women's institute was founded in Kabul. A year later, two girls' high schools were created and a women's faculty of education was inaugurated. This was preceded by the establishment of other faculties: law, science and letters. Later on, the departments of theology, agriculture, and economics were founded. However, entrance to these faculties was reserved mainly for members of the aristocracy and the family members of top bureaucrats.<sup>106</sup>

During the Cold War, with the aid of East and West, education started to advance and many more faculty departments were established and Kabul University became one of the premiere universities in the region. Some departments were affiliated with foreign universities in Germany, France, America, and the Soviet Union. According to Mir Hekmatullah Sadat, "In the 1950s, Afghanistan tried many times to strengthen its relations with the United States but was rejected by American presidents. This was mainly due to the US-Pakistani coalition, thus Afghanistan turned to the Soviet Union for military assistance and later social, economics, and political assistance. From 1957 until 1974, the Soviets trained more than 60,000 skilled Afghan workers and 5,200 technicians. During this period, dozens of treaties and contracts were signed between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union."<sup>107</sup> This training included provision for filmmakers and film technicians, because Afghanistan still offered no formal education within the field of cinema. People who were working during this period were either Soviet educated or

---

<sup>105</sup> Yahia Baiza. *Education in Afghanistan: Developments, Influences and Legacies Since 1901*. (London ; New York : Routledge, 2013) 31.

<sup>106</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat. "History of Education in Afghanistan". *ReliefWeb*. (2004). <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/history-education-afghanistan>

<sup>107</sup> Sadat. "History of Education in Afghanistan," (2004).

they learnt the trade in apprenticeship and mostly operated by improvisation. Antonio Giustozzi notes that "Higher education attracted a rising share of the education budget, until it reached over 40% in 1969"<sup>108</sup> However, all of these educational institutions were located in the urban centers, with only a small number in rural areas, and still 90% of the population were living in rural areas, the majority illiterate. For the most part, they were farmers and saw little need for non-religious education.

Michel Foucault has described knowledge as a productive power. Education is a disciplinary technique, with potential to shape individuals' thinking processes, setting their desires, their fears and their values, within the specific limits set by the discourse. Eventually this disciplinary technique produces subjects that think and act in a predictable fashion, a specific manner, which he refers to as the "disciplined body". He writes:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And individuals [...] are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application.<sup>109</sup>

With the expansion of university education, came political progress and student politics in the 1960-70s, both of which had an important influence on the development of

---

<sup>108</sup> Antonio Giustozzi. *Between Patronage and Rebellion Student Politics in Afghanistan*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), February 2010). Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b9668be2.html>

<sup>109</sup> Michel Foucault. ed. Colin Gordon. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. (Harvester Press. 1980) 98.

political parties, which in turn shaped Afghanistan's entry into mass politics in the late 1970-80s. The new generation, modern and educated, represented a different way of being or living, a different way of interpreting what was widely accepted as the norm. This generation that was undergoing training became politicised in the universities. Leftist political texts, smuggled from Iran or India, were being read clandestinely in some Kabul high schools. The more open climate in universities favoured political debates, that later coagulated into political parties. At the universities, particularly in the Islamic law faculties, Islamist texts in Arabic started circulating too.

Throughout 1950s and 60s the number of female students didn't grow much, even though, during 1960s, as the more conservative provinces increasingly gained access to university. There were only during the 1980s did the percentage of girls among students rise steadily, as a result of the military conscription of many males, and the fact that university recruitment was now mostly restricted to the cities.<sup>110</sup> Although not on the same scale as among males, during the 1960-70s there was significant political activism among female students in Kabul.

After the coup in 1973, in which the former Prime Minister, Mohammed Daoud Khan, overthrew the monarchy and declared Afghanistan a republic with himself as president, international aid declined and unemployment rose. But it was not a case of inflation in education as more families were sending their children to school. In 1977, the education infrastructure could not support the educational demands, and, to reduce pressure on both the education system and the labor market, the government instituted an examination, the Concord, at the end of the eighth grade.<sup>111</sup> This French-derived Concord entrance exam is still being practiced to this day, and the main purpose of the

---

<sup>110</sup> Antonio Giustozzi. *Between Patronage and Rebellion Student Politics in Afghanistan*. 2010.

<sup>111</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat. "History of education in Afghanistan". *ReliefWeb*. (2004).  
<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/history-education-afghanistan>

exam is to weed out potentially successful university students from the rest of the student population.

President Muhammad Daoud was replaced by Nur Muhammad Taraki, head of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), in 1978. This became known as the April Coup. Taraki was born into a rural Pashtun family and attended night school while working as a clerk. While in power, he instituted Marxist style reforms, which emphasized literacy and educational opportunity expanded to farmers, rural dwellers, and women, and, like the previous government, these measures were very much in alliance with the Soviet Union.

As previously mentioned, from the 1950s, the educational system became increasingly indoctrinated and funded by the USSR. This trend increased after the Red Army invasion; an increasing number of scholarships and further academic exchanges were established with Eastern Bloc countries as the American and Western exchanges stopped.<sup>112</sup> One interesting fact was that the Islamic Studies Department at the university of Kabul, the Dar-al-Olum, and the religious teaching in primary and secondary schools remained intact. Religious madrassas and other learning centers became part of the modern educational system.<sup>113</sup>

One important form of progress was the attention to minorities in the education system. In the 1980s, as the government placed more emphasis on adult education, literacy programs and higher education, some of the Turkic languages (Uzbek) merited recognition by the Ministry of Education, given that Turkic language speakers (Uzbek, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz) constituted 10% of the population.<sup>114</sup> However, with the Soviet Union withdrawing in 1989, the already weak education system was paralyzed.

---

<sup>112</sup> Misbah Abdulbaqi. *Higher Education in Afghanistan*. Policy Perspectives, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July - December 2009), pp. 99-117 : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909239> Accessed: 22-05-2019.

<sup>113</sup> Pia, Karlson and Amir, Mansory. *Islamic and Modern Education in Afghanistan - Conflictual or Complementary?* (Institute of International Education, Stockholm University. 2008).

<sup>114</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat. "History of education in Afghanistan," (2004).

From the mid-1980s, Mujahideen-sponsored education inside the country and in refugee camps in rural areas bordering Pakistan attempted to oppose the Marxist influence and to conserve traditional culture. Islam was used as a pedagogical vehicle to inspire and mobilize resistance during the war. Actors belonging to very different Islamic traditions and ideological positions pronounced the rhetoric of 'Islam against the West,' 'holy war against imperialist occupiers' or 'believers against non-believers'. The Taliban, a group of Islamist students and former Mujahideen, is the bi-product of the radicalization of political Islamic education in some madrassas.

During the 1990s, when the Mujahideen came to power, some of their sponsored higher education institutions were transferred from Peshawar to Afghanistan, such as the University of Dawat and Jihad. This university was established in the refugee camp of Hijrat Qala, Peshawar, under the guardianship of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf in 1985 and was generously financed by Saudi Arabia. The second university, the Islamic University, was established by Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan (Hikmatyar) in 1989. The third institute was Abdullah Bin Masoud University: Jamiat-e-Islami Afghanistan (Rabbani), launched in 1991. The last one is the Academy of Islamic Education and Technology, which was established by the International Islamic Relief Organization (URO) of Saudi Arabia in Hayatabad, Peshawar.

All these universities were funded and supported by the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. They mostly offered degrees in Sharia and Law, Usuluddin (Islamic Studies), Medicine, Engineering, Education and Agriculture.<sup>115</sup> Each one of these institutions represents one of the Mujahideen factions. It is interesting to note that their leaders used to attend Kabul University and some of them, such as Sayyaf and Rabbani, continued their education after at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, before

---

<sup>115</sup> Misbah Abdulbaqi. *Higher Education in Afghanistan*. 2009. 101.

returning to Afghanistan and organizing resistance groups against the communist government.

When war or conflict breaks out, education is one of the first things that falls by the wayside. In April 1992, the Mujahideen entered Kabul and took over the Afghan government. Within days, the various factions collided, and Kabul was engulfed in urban warfare, which cascading throughout the country. This had immense impact on education. Due to fighting and the security situation, the universities and schools were frequently closed. Buildings sustained damages and the lack of security affected school attendance as teachers, administrators, and students became displaced. The physical and administrative infrastructure broke down when schools and universities became the stages for warfare and pillage. Even laboratories, furniture, and the electric wiring from inside the walls of classrooms were stolen.<sup>116</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat reports that "The rival factions targeted the libraries, and thousands of volumes were either looted or burnt, and rare titles smuggled and sold off for high prices in the antiquarian book markets of the United States, Europe and Japan."<sup>117</sup> The dark era, especially for education, began.

With the Taliban coming to power in 1996, the regression of modern education sped up, with restrictive reformatory views on art, music, the role of women, and other sects of Islam. Because of the war that continuously raged for three decades, the basic infrastructure for education had been completely destroyed. Misbah Abdulbaqi catalogues how "There were fourteen institutions of higher education in Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power, but they were reduced to seven during their reign, namely: The Kabul University, the Poly Technical Institute, Medical University Kabul, Herat

---

<sup>116</sup> Mariam Alamyar. *Education in Afghanistan: A Historical Review and Diagnosis*. (College & University;, Vol. 93 Issue 2, 2018.) 55-60.

<http://0search.ebscohost.com/mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=129743746&site=eds-live>. Accessed May 23, 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Mir Hekmatullah Sadat. "History of education in Afghanistan," (2004).

University, Nangarhar University, Kandahar University, the Academy of Islamic Disciplines and Technology with campuses in Herat and Jalalabad."<sup>118</sup> The Taliban completely closed down schools, especially those for girls. Only religious studies in religious schools were allowed for boys. Still, many Afghans schooled their children illegally at home according to modern educational curricula. Throughout this misery, Afghans retained a pragmatic and optimistic approach.

After the 2001 Bonn Conference, the steps for resurrecting the modern educational development started to be taken. A large part of the discussion on education took place within government policy. The government assigned by the international community aimed to promote education at all levels, including education for women, to improve the education of nomads and to eliminate illiteracy in the country. Free education is granted to all Afghans until the level of the bachelor's degree (B.A.)<sup>119</sup> One of the other development policies regarding education was that the citizens of Afghanistan and foreign powers can also establish higher, general, and vocational private educational institutions and literacy courses with the permission of the state.

In a post-conflict situation, children's return to school is a clear sign of hope, a sign of a possibility to build a brighter future, of peace and safety and a sign of the end of brutalities. With aid from the international community, the water and electricity supply systems, along with other facilities, were improved for the main big institutions. Some of the buildings were reconstructed so that the process of education could proceed. Thousands of non-governmental organizations started to rebuild the infrastructure of the education system nationwide. These non-governmental organizations (primarily The United States Agency for International Development, USAID, The United Nations

---

<sup>118</sup> Misbah Abdulbaqi. *Higher Education in Afghanistan*. 2009. 102.

<sup>119</sup> Bonn Agreement. *The First International Bonn Conference on Afghanistan*. Bonn, December 2001. <https://reliefweb.int/>

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, World Bank, and Save the Children) have since developed and modernized the education system, most importantly by providing opportunities for women to attend school. However, there are two important things of which to take note. Funding has been unstable and poorly coordinated, and as a result, the process has been slower than expected. There are varying opinions regarding the new curriculum, an educational framework enforced through text books, which continues processes of assuring a hegemonic Western discourse, and Western cultural domination, through the imposition of imperial structures of power within contemporary social, political, economic and cultural practices.

In 2001, many Afghans returned to Afghanistan, bringing with them various and different experiences, along with new ways of doing things and different interpretations of the political upheaval of their country. Among them were young people who were interested in film and cinema. Aziz Deldar, who fled Afghanistan during the Taliban era, came back from Iran with the hope of studying cinema. He says that, after passing the Concord exam in Fine Arts, he went to Kabul University to register for cinema studies. There he arrived at a half-burned building, with rooms empty of furniture, and marks of bullets on the walls. He says that he was told that there was no cinema studies in Afghanistan. But he was encouraged to register for theater courses instead, which he did. He says that the participation was very low as the first year comprised under 16 students, the number of attendees of the second year was under five people, and only two older students were in the third year, who were from the Mujahideen period and now there to finish their studies.<sup>120</sup>

Aziz Deldar relates that their cohort was a generation of hope, and resilience, coming out of tyranny; they wanted to bring changes. They were enthusiastic and the

---

<sup>120</sup> Aziz Deldar. Personal interview. Interview with Soraya Ata. Kabul, August 28, 2018.

out-dated education they were receiving did not satisfy them. Every day, they went to the university administration office and the Ministry of Education, searching for and requesting classes in the field of film and cinema. Thanks to the students' continued efforts, the university provided them with classes with Siddiq Barmak, Engineer Latif and Abdul-Wahid Nazari (the filmmakers from the communist era).<sup>121</sup> Later, the university, under pressure from students, added the word 'cinema' to the theater department. As well as the university, the students have encouraged the NGOs<sup>122</sup> to provide them with classes, and Ateliers Varan was one of these that has continued years of activity in partnership with the Faculty of Fine Arts since 2006. They provided workshops from 2006 till 2011, by bringing professionals temporarily from abroad. On Ateliers Varan's website, it reads, "Since 2006, more than 30 young Afghan filmmakers took part to the workshops in Kabul. 33 films were made there and initiated the resurgence of documentary films in the country."<sup>123</sup> Aziz Deldar says that these workshops introduced them to a different cinema, different from the Bollywood films and American action films that they knew as cinema. Also, another NGO provided them with a digital camera and a computer with an editing suite, and, with this equipment, they made several short films. Beside film, they also worked on several classical theater productions, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and work by Bertolt Brecht, which the university used as effective advertising for inviting diplomats and foreign organizations staff to public shows.<sup>124</sup>

After this first class graduated, the university hired three of them to teach for the Cinema Department, which was still in conjunction with the Theater Department. Aziz

---

<sup>121</sup> Aziz Deldar. Personal interview. 2018.

<sup>122</sup> The Yellow House Jalalabad, <https://yellowhousejalalabad.com/>. The Afghan Film Project, <http://www.afghanfilmproject.com/> Afghan Academy International, [www.afghanacademy.org.uk](http://www.afghanacademy.org.uk) These are only some of the foreign NGOs that have several years of activity in Afghanistan. Some left and some still there, but not as active as they have started in early 2000s.

<sup>123</sup> *Workshops in Afghanistan*. Ateliers Varan. <http://www.ateliersvaran.com/en/dans-le-monde-atelier/workshop-afghanistan>

<sup>124</sup> Aziz Deldar. Personal interview. 2018.

Deldar says that every year the number of applicants is increasing. It was started with about 16 students for his class and increased by over 90 applicants by the time he graduated. Since there were no job opportunities outside the university, except working in private radio and television stations, they agreed to start and built the foundation for film and cinema studies alongside the new curriculum. Aziz Deldar says that, with no experience of the profession, he was asked to teach such subjects as script writing, film and play directing, and he was teaching 36 hours per week. He reveals that "because we had no materials, especially on script writing and film directing, cinematography, film history and film analysis, we had to start from the scratch and gather everything. Every night we stayed at the university to use the Internet in search of information, then typing and assembling reading materials for each subject." He says the first year was the hardest because they started with nothing and they learned along the way. Based on law and regulation, they were in a training period and they wouldn't receive a salary, only a small stipend for the whole year.<sup>125</sup>

Education is such an imperative and sensitive affair in any society as it leads nations towards higher stages of development. Higher education is considered a yardstick of a country's development. Graduates of higher education play a key role in determining the characteristics of a future for a society. As has been laid out, the international community took special interest in Afghan education, and the new government was conditioned to take certain steps towards improving higher education. But still the basic problem is the lack of standard and quality education, especially in higher classes. Some of the reasons for this deplorable situation are the syllabi, which are quite old, and the availability of textbooks in the native languages of Afghanistan for the students and teachers who do not have the ability to consult work published in other languages. This latter problem resides not only in higher education, but in primary and

---

<sup>125</sup> Aziz Deldar. Personal interview. 2018.

secondary levels too. There have been revisions to school text books in these years, but still, because of the existence of corruption, the appointment of insufficient people in the compilation and translation department of the Ministry of Education and, of course, NGOism in this ministry, all the efforts were next to useless and a waste of time and money when the low quality of the new printed books, containing a lot of mistakes, became not only apparent, but also very costly.

Skilled teachers are not available in sufficient numbers and the lack of other facilities such as laboratories, libraries and IT facilities are reasons behind substandard education and have negative impacts on the development of higher education in Afghanistan.<sup>126</sup> Most of the teachers in primary and middle education levels are unprofessionalized. After finishing high school, just to take a job, people tend to become teachers in one of the primary or middle schools even before attending university or teacher training institutes.

Also, education in Afghanistan is completely dependent on foreign assistance, which naturally has many disadvantages. The problem in an aid-driven system is that it is structurally vulnerable, given that it could go awry as soon as the funds dry out. Additionally, the donors' own priorities and goals attain the foremost importance, rather than the needs of the locals.

Now the Cinema and Film Department has detached itself from the Theater faculty and faculty members have obtained master's degrees from other countries. Aziz Deldar went to China for his master's and a few other professors that I met last year went to India, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. To raise the standard of education now the department is avoiding hiring teachers with only bachelor's degrees. In general, public and private higher education institutes in Afghanistan have limited numbers of master's

---

<sup>126</sup> Misbah Abdulbaqi. *Higher Education in Afghanistan*. Policy Perspectives, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July - December 2009), 107 : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909239> Accessed: 22-05-2019.

programmes, and, except PhD programmes in Pashto and Farsi languages, Afghanistan does not offer any others. The Cinema and Film Department offers four-year bachelor degrees on Directing, Script Writing and Cinematography.

A large chunk of Afghanistan's development budget, sometimes exceeding 60-70 per cent, goes to foreign companies and NGOs. For example, most of the schools have, so far, been built by national NGOs. Wahidi Mohammad Amin observes that:

A school project that is announced 100,000 dollars [sic] in reality only 20,000 dollars are spent on that project and 80,000 is being embezzled by two or three parties; representatives of Ministry of Education, the contracting NGO and even sometimes by the people in the donor organizations. As a result the project is very low quality and will not last for a long time. After two or three years, these schools get ruined again because of cheap construction materials.<sup>127</sup>

The budget allocated to education in general, and higher education in particular, is limited and this has led to a depletion of educational facilities such as libraries, laboratories and other resources. Like many other departments, cinema and film also suffers from a lack of equipment and financial shortages. In line with the broken cycle of film production in Afghanistan outlined in Chapter Two, the graduates from this program are usually hired by private institutions as instructors or they find jobs in radio and television, but not usually for their specific specialty - or they leave the field all together and take on odd jobs to survive.

Beside Kabul University, as a public institute, there are many foreign and local organization which offer courses in media, filmmaking, photography, editing, sound,

---

<sup>127</sup> Mohammad Amin Wahidi. "Afghanistan does not need terrorist training centers anymore!" *Deedenow Cinema Production Afghanistan*. (2008). <http://aminwahidi.blogspot.com/2008/05/afghanistan-does-not-need-terrorist.html>

and animation as very short-term projects. Roya Film House, which was mentioned before, is one of these private institutions that provide three months' worth of classes for young women. The majority of instructors in RFH are the graduates from Kabul University's Faculty of Cinema. Besides working at RFH, they also hold down other jobs in various places, since the income from one employment isn't enough to cover life's expenses. However, these classes are very basic, and only at the introductory level, and only those who have time, money and literacy abilities can join. Similar to the workshops that Aziz Deldar attended in early 2000s, some specialists have been hired from abroad and were brought in to teach at these workshops, or the workshops are led by a local artist or technician. Nevertheless, this counterproductive method does not build trained technical personnel or infrastructure. It can be argued that these methods are just wasting time and money without any positive results in terms of employment, igniting progress or development in the creative field, since only some of the students are able to make at most one short film. There is no other possibility for them to continue making films beyond this. If all this money and energy that is spent on specialist guest instructors, these scattered workshops and training courses, could be put towards one proper education centre with equipment compatible with today's technology, it would be much more fruitful than all these separated attempts driving in various directions. These workshops give only a first step, a start, but they are not successful in building the next film scene in Afghanistan. Creating a central community would override the lack of connection among the professionals. Such a connection is important, for it facilitates the acquisition of practical skills and knowledge, and also the development of networks for future generations of filmmakers.

In the current moment, like other developmental processes in the country, the education system is trying to survive and grow by any means. Young people believe that education is the key to a better life and better future for Afghanistan. The field of film

and cinema field also confronts the problems experienced more generally, including a budget deficit, the growth of private players (institutions that the Ministry of Education seems not be able to control, or oversee) and the level of corruption present in both public and private sectors. Nevertheless, young people are very interested in the audio-visual field and participation continues at a healthy rate.

Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, talks about narrative education, the banking concept of education where the teacher talks to 'fill' the students with the contents that are detached from the reality of students' lives. He calls this depositing. "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor."<sup>128</sup> When a communicational link is missing and words are emptied of their transformative power, education finds the capacity to anaesthetize and inhibit creative power, changing "the consciousness of the oppressed, but not the situation which oppresses them."<sup>129</sup> The education system in Afghanistan has suffered, been manipulated, and changed with every political climate change in the country. Its potential to implement levelling in most places around the world has instead been transformed into an exercise of prejudice and discrimination against minorities and women, teaching backward thinking, permission for violence and killing.

Finding and implanting communicative links between teachers and students creates knowledge. As Paulo Freire says, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."<sup>130</sup> Freire suggests "problem posing education" a concept that involves a constant unveiling of reality, not transferrals of information. Education as the practice of freedom, for women and men,

---

<sup>128</sup> Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum. 2000). 72.

<sup>129</sup> Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (2000), 74.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 72.

simultaneously reflecting on themselves and on the world, increases the scope of their perception, their awareness, and action.

Looking at the education system in Afghanistan through the two concepts that Freire introduces, confirms that it mostly operates based on depository methods. It attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world. Hence the absence of the Civil War in textbooks, who the Taliban really were, and how they came to power. This system inhibits creativity and domesticates students by isolating consciousness and denying their ontological and historical vocation.

Drawing connections between the education system and the three types of film production in Afghanistan laid out in Chapter Two, only the independent filmmaker in the third category can be seen to follow a problem posing education method. The films correspond to historical realities and they affirm women and men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future. These local filmmakers identify with movements which engage people as beings aware of their incompleteness—an historical movement which has its point of departure, its subjects and its objective. As Freire continues, in the problem posing education method the educator “does not regard cognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students.”<sup>131</sup> The Third Cinema filmmaker looks for a reliable reflection; they refuse both abstract man and a world without people, instead concentrating on people in their relations with the world. They echo Freire’s aspiration that “The teacher is no longer

---

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 80.

merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach."<sup>132</sup> The Third Cinema filmmaker is not a detached person, an outsider, but a local and native resident whose life is also shaped by the circumstances that the characters of their film are going through. They are a reflection of each other.

---

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 80



## Conclusion

---

Cinema came into Afghanistan in the 1920s, but it took long time for the country to start to produce films and, for a long while, the government was the sole producer. Just as other production companies slowly came into play and going to movies become a regular activity in urban centers, political revolt impacted the development of cinema. When the communist government came into power, film became a propaganda tool in their hand. Soviets exercised enormous influence over the country, giving large amounts of aid and supporting education and the arts. Their scholarships and training resulted in a slew of beloved classics produced in the 1970s-80s. During the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets, the production cycle sped up and every year during 1980s when there were about 4 to 5 films produced. The Afghan film industry never came into its full existence, but, as the fighting between resistance groups and the communist government and the Red Army escalated, the speed slowed down, and, with Civil War, and radical Islamism, Afghan cinema was abruptly brought to an end: only one film was produced in the 1990s, celebrating Mujahideen fighters' victory over the Soviets. Looking at the overall history of cinema in Afghanistan, or Afghanistan itself as a country, the obstacles for cinema have to do with domination, the struggle for autonomy, spheres of influence, and a balance of power - crucial to grasp for any genuine understanding of the more general social and political frameworks for this new wave of filmmaking.

Since the Taliban were ousted in 2001 and the NATO-led war began, films have re-emerged and Afghan filmmakers have produced a number of films, some that have gained considerable praise globally. Looking at the films of Roya Sadat as a representative of the new generation of filmmakers, who grew up during politically unstable situations spanning different periods, we see filmmaking taking on a role an

instrument for social transformation through individual and indigenized themes which focus on the lives and struggles of people. Roya Sadat, as a Third World filmmaker, tries to mirror society. As Mike Wayne describes, third cinema is a political body of filmmaking "committed to social and cultural emancipation." He writes that third cinema films are political in the way that they "address unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources, and the hierarchies of legitimacy and status accorded to those differentials"<sup>133</sup>. Usually the subjects of Afghan films are not escapist in theme, not musicals, romances or comedies, the entertainment products which will generate profit. While making profit is important and necessary to vitalize the Afghan film industry, most filmmakers use film as serious social art, a podium to voice political and social issues. Not only are the subjects of these films political, but so too is making film in Afghanistan a political act, given the present condition of Afghan cinema right now, where conventional modes of filmmaking are not established, and where the Afghan filmmaker substitutes practical ways in order to complete a film.

There are of course roadblocks to growth, such as limited access to funding, lack of quality film education or training programs, which result in weak narratives and "b-films" that have recently flooded the market. Popularity, imitation and staunch following of foreign film vocabularies from Bollywood, Pakistani and, recently, Hollywood leave little space for filmmakers and activists who use film for communication and social change, relying upon the formation and transformation of subjectivity. This marks a shift from the cinema of Communism to the post-Taliban filmmaking environment. Despite these limitations, there exists a resilient community of artists working hard to re-establish an Afghan Cinema both within Afghanistan and outside of its borders. There are independent filmmakers whose goal is not to create 'spectacle', but to recall and remember the events. Filmmaking becomes a tool for stimulating the political

---

<sup>133</sup> Mike Wayne. *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (2001), 1.

consciousness and overcoming the impotence of thought, the moment of openness when the structural principles of society are called into question. The shift mentioned above happened in response to contemporary socio-economic conditions. The emergence of neoliberal economic policies, and the growth of networked information systems, restructured the film/media cultural industries. All the components of the filmmaking process, the contexts of production, distribution, and reception which are shaped by this economic model are designed restrict and limit the production of Third Cinema.

The constant struggle of Afghanistan is against the dominance of a neo-colonial economy, where the different forms of exploitation and systematic plundering of natural resources, along with deteriorating security, have borne grave consequences at the economic, social, and cultural levels. Cinema is one of the victims of the situation, where a filmmaker is forced into dependency. When the filmmaker is unable to reach her or his audiences inside Afghanistan, and the distribution of independent films is not possible without foreign help, this help often comes with specific agendas that are tailored to benefit donors.

The business of filmmaking in Afghanistan does not operate as it would in many other countries. There is no central organization that could oversee film production in the country, in terms of financial and technological resources or as an industry managed, operated and run for and by the people. It can also be called, in Gabriel H. Teshome's words, "a cinema of mass participation"<sup>134</sup>, where technical and artistic perfection in the production of a film cannot be the aims in themselves. Collective actions from the local level, movements that are led by the communities most affected, sustain the most meaningful changes. Afghan people and Afghan artists are the ones best suited to

---

<sup>134</sup> Teshome H. Gabriel. "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films." In *Questions of Third World Cinema*, ed. Pines, Jim. British Film Institute. 1990.

speak to, and to lead, discussions about combating gender inequality, the clash of tradition and modernity, and any social and cultural subjects they are working on. Third Cinema, after various crises – both political and economic in different geopolitical settings – sustains a project of decolonizing both a people and the imagination. Its combination of filmmaking and criticism, and, most of all, the ways in which it can turn the spectator into a guerilla resister and an ally, makes Third Cinema profoundly important for a cinematic history of resistance to neoliberalism.

Sadat's cinema is not entertainment, but rather a tool for learning about the past and present, and the causes driving the conditions endured by the Afghan people. Her films are the window on a culture(s), but also encourage insights into cultural identities and deeper understandings about one's own cultures and perspectives when one encounters alternative possibilities for thinking about the world. The key to an effective revolution is dialogue. Filmmaking is a relation which allows the artist and spectator to create new relations, and open new horizons and new possibilities of engagement. The new wave of Afghan cinema is a sign that we have managed to survive with our memory intact – the memory of an ancient homeland, a memory where language is not the burden of defeat, but the value of constant struggle and all this in spite of everything that has happened, and the scars we all carry as a result of colonialism and imperialism.

In ending, one question that arises is: what will be the future of cinema in Afghanistan when the country has entered a pivotal but highly uncertain time? What will be the situation of Afghanistan itself? A series of negotiations between U.S. and Taliban representatives, and the Afghan officials have furthered political instability. It seems that the possible political settlement that the U.S. is enforcing will result in the Taliban play a more central part in the country's political future. The security situation has worsened in recent years, with rates of civilian casualties reaching record highs. The humanitarian situation also remains dire, as the possibility of a prolonged drought and other resource

scarcity issues threaten greater levels of displacement and human suffering. The Afghan art and culture communities are very sceptical about this process, and, from their perspectives, the Taliban being part of the government will result in a regression of the developments that have taken place over the past 18 years. In any conversation among Afghans, when there is talk about the future in whatever context, they use the proverbial "Khuda Mehraban hast" (God is Kind and Giving) and "Inshallah" (God willing). This might show that Afghans are resilient people guided by hope. Throughout the modern history of Afghanistan, its people have had everything taken from them but their hope has remained unbroken. Maybe my years of living in a Western country, experiencing peace, sustenance, education, and prosperity, means that I do not share the same hope as the Afghan people, and I am very sceptical of the future that the big players are predicting and creating for Afghanistan.



## Bibliography

- A Flickering Truth*. Dir by Pietra Brettkelly. New Zealand: Umbrella Entertainment, 2015. DVD.
- Abdulbaqi, Misbah. *Higher Education in Afghanistan*. (Policy Perspectives, Vol. 6, No. 2 July - December 2009), pp. 99-117 : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909239>  
Accessed: May 22, 2019.
- Ahmad, Masood and Wasiq, Mahwash. "Water Resource Development in Northern Afghanistan and Its Implications for Amu Darya Basin," *World Bank Working Papers*. 2004. 8. <https://doi.org/10.1596/0-8213-5890-1>
- Ahmadzai, Khal Mohammad. "Food Security and Rural Poverty in Afghanistan." PhD diss. Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, 2014.
- Ahmed-Ghosh, Huma. "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4, no 3, 2003. 1-14.  
<https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol4/iss3/1>
- Alamyar, Mariam. *Education in Afghanistan: A Historical Review and Diagnosis*. College & University, Vol. 93 Issue 2, 2018. p55-60. Accessed May 23, 2019. <http://0-eds.a.ebscohost.com/mercury.concordia.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=923fa914-150a-477e-8b60b67e29549ce5%40sessionmgr4007&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#d b=eue&AN=129743746>
- Antonio, Amy and Tuffley, David. "The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries," *Future Internet*, 6(4), 2014. 673-687. <https://doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673>
- Baiza, Yahia. *Education in Afghanistan: Developments, Influences and Legacies Since 1901*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Brandenburger, Elfe and Schäfer, Sandra, dir. *Passing the Rainbow*. Mazefilm Berlin, Germany 2008. DVD.
- Cohen, Joseph Nathan, and Miguel, Angel Centeno. "Neoliberalism and Patterns of Economic Performance, 1980-2000." *The Annals of the American Academy of*

*Political and Social Science* 606, 2006. 32-67.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097817>.

Crofts, Stephen. "Concepts of National Cinema." In *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*. Eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 1-11

Dehnavi, Elahe. "Veiled Voices: Female Subjectivity and Gender Relations in Afghan and Iranian Cinemas" PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2017.  
<https://doi.org/10.7939/R3PV6BM81>

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1986.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2003.

Ermachild, Melody. *Chavis, Meena: Heroine of Afghanistan* London: Bantam, 2004.

Fanon, Frantz. "On Violence." In *The Wretched of the World*. New York: Grove Press. 2004.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.

Foreman, Dónal. *The Filmmaker-Activist and the Collective: Robert Kramer and Jean-Luc Godard*. <http://donalforeman.com/writing/kramergodardintro.html>

Foucault, Michel. Eds. Ed. by, Colin Gordon. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Harvester Press. 1980.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum. 2000.

Gabriel, Teshome H. "Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films." In *Questions of Third World Cinema*, ed. Pines, Jim. British Film Institute. 1990.

Gabriel, Teshome H. "Third Cinema as the Guardian of Popular Memory." In *Questions of Third World Cinema*, ed. Pines, Jim. British Film Institute. 1990.

- Gabriel, Teshome H. "Third Cinema Updated: Exploration of Nomadic Aesthetics & Narrative Communities," Teshome, Gabriel Articles and Other works. Accessed May 28, 2019. <http://teshomegabriel.net/third-cinema-updated>
- Giustozzi, Antonio. Between Patronage And Rebellion Student Politics in Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), February 2010. Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b9668be2.html>
- Grace, Jo and Pain, Adam. "Rethinking Rural Livelihoods In Afghanistan," *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Synthesis Report*. July 2004. <https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/14627>
- Graham, Mark. *Afghanistan in the Cinema*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Griswold, Eliza. "Landay" in *Poetry Foundation*. <https://static.poetryfoundation.org/o/media/landays.html#intro> Accessed June 5, 2019.
- Harmes, Adam. "The Rise of Neoliberal Nationalism," *Review of International Political Economy*, 19 no 1, 2012. 59-86. DOI: [10.1080/09692290.2010.507132](https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2010.507132)
- Heath, Jennifer and Zahedi, Ashraf. eds. *Land of the Unconquerable : The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Accessed May 27, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central
- Heidari, Karim, "Afghanistan Cinema in the Ray of April 7 Coup" *BBC* April 26, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-43893986>
- Higson, Andrew. "The Concept of National Cinema,". *Screen 1989 Autumn*; 30 (4): 36-46 DOI: [10.1093/screen/30.4.36](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.4.36).
- Hjort, Mette. "Introduction," In *Cinema of Small Nations*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Jawad, Nassim. "Afghanistan A Nation of Minorities." *Minority Rights Group*. 1992. <https://minorityrights.org/publications/afghanistan-a-nation-of-minorities-february-1992/>

- Kandiyoti, Deniz. *The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan*. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005.
- Karlsson, Pia and Mansory, Amir. "Islamic and Modern Education in Afghanistan - Conflictual or Complementary?" In *Educational Strategies Among Muslims in the Context of Globalization: Some National Case Studies*. ed. Daun, Holger, And Walford, Geoffrey, 81-103. Brill Leiden Boston, 2004.
- Khwajamir, Mehtarkhan. *History and Problems of Education in Afghanistan*. EDP Sciences 2016. DOI: 10.1051/shsconf/20162601124
- Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada, 2007.
- Lynes, Krista Geneviève. "Diffracted Mediation: The Framing of Gender in the 'War of Terror'" In *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Longueuil, Québec: Point Par Point, 2007.
- Natanzi, Paniz Musawi. "Art, Geopolitics, and Gendering in Afghanistan", *Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy* 2017.
- Nazari, Abdul-Wahid. *The Evolution Process of Cinema in Afghanistan*. Ministry of culture Press, 2011.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising The Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*. London : Portsmouth, N.H.:J. Currey. 1986.
- Oxforddictionaries.com, s.v. "Industry," accessed Oct 15, 2018  
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/industry>
- Payind, Alam. "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 21, no. 1 (1989): 107-28. Accessed Dec 18, 2018.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/163642>.
- Pickard, Victor and Yang, Guobin. *Media Activism in the Digital Age*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

- Popalzai, Mir Aqha. "Nangarhar Lacks Proper Cinema Halls to Display Local Movies," *TOLO News*, 27 JUNE 2017. <http://prod.tolonews.com/arts-culture/nangarhar-lacks-proper-cinema-halls-display-local-movies>
- Rastegar, Kamran. "Global Frames on Afghanistan." In *Globalizing Afghanistan*, 145-64. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2011.
- RFE/RL "Afghanistan's Herat Province 'Cleared of Landmines,'" February 15, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-landmines-cleared-herat-halo/29042145.html>
- Rich, Adrienne, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location." In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Sadat, Mir Hekmatullah. "History of education in Afghanistan". *ReliefWeb*. 2004. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/history-education-afghanistan>
- Sahar, Zobaida. *Passing the Rainbow* DVD. Directed by Brandenburger, Elfe and Schäfer, Sandra Mazefilm Berlin, Germany. 2008.
- "Social Media in Afghanistan - Users and Engagement", *Internews*, Altai Consulting, 2017. <https://www.internews.org/resource/social-media-afghanistan-users-and-engagement>.
- Tanner, Stephen. *Afghanistan: A military History From Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*. New York: Da Capo Press. 2002.
- Wahidi, Mohammad-Amin. "Afghanistan Does not Need Terrorist Training Centers Anymore!" *Deedenow Cinema Production Afghanistan*. 2008. <http://aminwahidi.blogspot.com/2008/05/afghanistan-does-not-need-terrorist.html>
- Wayne, Mike. *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, 2001.
- Workshops in Afghanistan*. Overseas Workshop. Ateliers Varan. <http://www.ateliersvaran.com/en/dans-le-monde-atelier/workshop-afghanistan>