

***Osama*: a warning unheard?**

Shara Atashi

Osama focuses on Afghanistan's most sombre years under Taliban rule. It was filmed after they were defeated, back in 2003, as cinema was allowed to breathe again. *Osama* was adorned with many accolades, including the Cannes Film Festival's 'Golden Camera' and Hollywood's Golden Globe, but was shelved afterwards. On the 30th of July, only two months ago, the BBC Persian Service dusted down the film, brought it to the studio and asked its director, Siddiq Barmak, to reflect on the film's initial message. 'It was a warning for the future, a gong to awaken the sleeping conscience,' he said.

Osama is the tale of a pre-teen girl struggling to survive, to earn just a piece of bread for her mother and grandmother. The Talibs don't allow women to be on the streets unaccompanied by a man. The girl's father and uncle have been killed in the war; so, disguise is the only way. After her mother is forbidden to work, the girl dresses as a boy to be able to help out in a shop.

It is not just horror we see in Osama's face throughout the film. Close-ups study her expression: it is puzzlement mingled with disgust.

Like the entire town, the hospital where Osama's mother used to work is a ruin. The plaster crumbles from walls perforated by bullets. The Talibs storm the hospital and march off with the last female healthcare workers. The sick are left helpless, an abandoned toddler with bowed legs pulls himself along a corridor. Occasional elements of surrealism crystallise the absurdity of life under the Taliban. On the last day at the hospital Osama takes home a device for arterial infusions. Later on, her grandmother cuts her hair to prepare her for disguise. The girl plants her braids in a flowerpot, leaving only the top of a braid standing out like a flower's shoot, and she uses the infusion device to water it. In another scene, a man is carted in a wheelbarrow like a giant baby. At a wedding the bridegroom is only present as a photograph.

Osama has to play the part of a boy in a convincing manner, which proves to be more difficult than she imagined. The Talibs round up all the boys to instruct them in the Koran and about war. They collect the girl (now masquerading as a boy) from the shop and take her to their camp. Her shyness and noticeable fear make her conspicuous. The head mullah of the camp observes her through narrowed eyes, and the boys mock her and call her a girl. At this point, she is given her new name, Osama, by Espandi, an urchin who has recognised her and wants to keep her secret.

Because of all the commotion she has caused, the Talibs punish Osama by hanging her over a well for hours. After she is released, blood runs down her legs, revealing

that she is a girl. Just before she is due to be executed by firing squad, the old head mullah of the camp asks for her acquittal, and takes her home as his wife. He already has several other women, each locked in a different room. Before raping Osama he shows her his collection of padlocks, a whole range of shapes and sizes, and asks her to choose one.

Barmak turns to poetry and old-style storytelling to spare his audience. He does not show violence, stoning, public mass executions or the cutting of limbs. Instead, we are drawn into the tragedy with an overture of industrial composition, the rhythmic squeaking of a rusty hinge. The urchin Espandi swings his tin of fuming incense and, quoting a rhyme, begs money in return for dispersing bad spirits. A crowd of protesting women in pale-blue burkas floods the dust road like a tsunami, their screams are a choir: 'We are hungry, we are hungry...' They are attacked with water cannons; a toddler is washed away in the mud.

Barmak conveys his message innovatively, though his craft is the old-school language of Eisenstein, Leone, Bergmann. As in Iranian humanist cinema, the actors are all amateurs, the setting original. The invisible violence is felt more deeply through slow motion, quick cuts and sound effects, so the viewer won't look away in disgust, and can absorb the truth of such suffering. Dialogue is employed sparingly so that viewers unfamiliar with the language have the chance to really imagine themselves into that world, without words. Barmak has emphasised that his picture is not a dramatisation of real events. It is the absolute truth made bearable to watch.

What is the message of *Osama* today? Barmak thinks that Afghan people will stand up to any barbarity they face. The fear that was injected into their minds by the Talibs will be deflected back to the Talibs. The war will be bloody and disastrous. The Afghan people now better understand these men. Also the Talibs now realise that they will face great resistance. They know that people's basic needs are not reduced to food, clothes and shelter. People need culture and freedom, something the Talibs are not only incapable of providing, but are also strongly opposed to. Realistically, there will never be a reconciliation. Barmak does not believe that the Taliban are capable of change.

Watching the film on BBC Persian TV and listening to the talk afterwards, both in the original language, exposes the gap between East and West. When Iranians and Afghans refer to the Talibs, they use the word 'savage', a word I have not heard in relation to this in Western news. It was not only with heartfelt compassion that I absorbed the film. It felt like I was reliving history inside the ancient epic, the *Shahnameh*, which ends with the 'savage' Arabs conquering Iran for good. As the grandmother cuts Osama's hair, she tells a story in which she refers to Rostam, the major hero of the *Shahnameh*. In her tale, Rostam is the creator of the rainbow. If Osama passes underneath that rainbow, she will become a boy and be safe.

The truth Barmak has brought to the screen sends me back to relive the Muslim conquest of Iran 1,400 years ago, and from there to the 1980s, when we had to

accept that the second islamisation of Iran had really happened. Afghanistan is within the geographical area covered in the *Shahnameh*.

Reaching beyond rage over recent events, one cannot blame the Western powers for a lack of compassion, but there is definitely a lack of imagination. Stories like Osama's remain unnoticed because decision makers fail to imagine what's likely to happen. The poet Sa'adi, who is highly appreciated among the Afghans, too, notes: 'It's pointless to talk about a wasp's sting to someone who has never been stung by a wasp. To some salt is what they season their food with, to others it is what makes their wounds burn.'

The pain I share with the Afghan people is as specific as a wasp's sting. My grandparents and their grandparents knew what it meant to be under the rule of savage men. It means leaving your things behind when you have to run for your life, it means seeing your homeland return to the Stone Age. The oppressors cultivate poverty like weeds to devour people's freedom, to make them dependent. Civilisation, knowledge, innovation, are all evil in the eyes of men who have been fighting the progress of humanity for centuries. In the name of a faith, they also deprive many of their faith and hope.

The artist's job is to awaken and nudge people, including politicians, towards some imagination.

Shara Atashi

Shara Atashi is an author and translator based in Aberystwyth, Wales. She is the daughter of the Iranian poet Manuchehr Atashi. Her mother is a visual artist. In 1979, at the age of twelve, she travelled to Frankfurt, West Germany with her mother in the hope that the new cleric regime in Iran wouldn't last long. That journey became a life-long exile and Shara, who was an antifascist from an early age, enjoyed an anti-authoritarian schooling and later a liberal education at the Goethe University, where she read law under a number of influential leftist scholars involved in the work of Germany's Federal Constitutional Court.

Shara worked for lawyers representing prominent clients, including sympathisers of the Baader-Meinhof Group, and later witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall. After working for the European Patent Office in the Hague she relocated to London and settled down as a translator.

Her works have subsequently been published in several journals. In 2021 Shara was awarded a place at Literature Wales's campaign against racism and is now dedicating her entire time to writing and literary translation. Her most recent work, 'Large Glass', published by *WritersMosaic* earlier this year, is an extract from her upcoming memoir *Tomb at Bushehr*.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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