

ONE DAY IN AFGHANISTAN

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Last night we went to the Cinema Nova for a fund raiser for the Revolutionary Afghani Women's Association. Marianne, a member of RAWA, spoke first about life in her country. After that we watched *Osama*, by first time director Siddiq Barmak. This multi-award winner is the first entirely Afghani film made since the rise and fall of the Taliban. Marianne forewarned us that though the film makes no mention of resistance, it does in fact exist. I was glad to hear this, because otherwise this relentlessly bleak film would have been almost unbearable to watch. As it was, it left me winded.

I'd intended to write about *Osama* before I saw it, but afterwards I had second thoughts. I wanted to forget about it as quickly as possible. Why prolong the experience by spending one of my precious writing days focusing on Afghanistan? But even as I said that to myself I realized that no Afghani woman has the luxury of such a choice. So here goes

The film opens with a protest - unexpectedly - of a crowd of women dressed in burkas. They are covered from head to toe; even their eyes obscured by lattice-like panels. The burkas are predominantly blue and so the women are indistinguishable. They chant and carry signs proclaiming: "We're not political. We're hungry." We quickly learn that these Kabul widows are unable to work because they can't go outside the house unless accompanied by a male family member. Without a male walker or provider, they are stranded and destitute.

Before long the march is disrupted by the arrival of the Taliban, who fire guns and then attack the women with water canons. The women, some with young children in tow, run panic-stricken through the water, their burkas becoming increasingly saturated as they do so. Some run round in circles and are headed off by Taliban members. Others are arrested and thrown into trucks.

At the end of the protest, amidst all the debris, we see a lone burka being hosed along the road. It twists and turns from side to side under the power of the spray. Watching this, we begin to truly understand the women's plight.

The two main characters, a girl about 12 (Marina Golbahari) and her mother (Zubaida Sahar) are accidentally caught up in the protest, but escape. We never learn the women's names. The only time we hear any of them addressed personally is when the girl is called by her male name – Osama.

With no men in their household and the prospect of starvation looming, her mother and grandmother make the heart-rending decision to disguise the girl as a boy so that she can go out to work. When she awakens in the morning the girl finds that her hair has been cut off and she is dressed in her dead father's work clothes. Her new secret life has begun. Before leaving the house, she plants several tufts of her hair, bolt upright, in an old flower pot.

Taliban members are rarely shown in the film. Instead, we frequently hear them speaking off camera. There is nothing to distract our attention from the reaction of the listeners. Somehow those depersonalized voices, so capricious and powerful, and our unrelieved focus on the reaction of the victims makes our identification with their plight irresistible.

Not all the males in this film are portrayed as evil. An old army friend of

the family, at considerable risk to himself and despite his poverty, gives Osama a job in his tiny general store. He even takes her to the mosque for daily prayers. But unlike the other young lads surrounding her, the girl doesn't know the drill. Adrift in this sea of bowing, kneeling and standing males, she hesitates momentarily too long in each position. And our sense of foreboding grows.

It is a street urchin, Espandi, who gives the girl her male name, and in the school to which he and the girl are herded by Taliban members, he becomes her protector.

In one scene, he encourages her to climb the lone tree in the yard to prove herself to her bullying class mates. The tree is leafless, with branches that climb high in the air. In her terror, the girl scrambles up. Seeing her silhouetted against the skyline, spread-eagled on the tree, made images of Calvary come to my mind. I wondered if the film makers intended that association or whether it was inadvertent. Yet, despite her courage she has no where to go. And as the mob of boys braying at the bottom of the tree increases, she slowly descends.

One of the few hints of resistance in the film occurs when some women organize a marriage feast. We see the women singing and clapping, all dressed in their best, with the bride beautifully adorned. Then the alarm is sounded - the Taliban are on their way. They are intercepted at the door by the man of the house, and we hear the singing turn to keening. The man tells the Taliban that the women are there because his mother has died! We next see the group of women, all sitting demurely in their disguise as mourners, totally unrecognizable under their burkas. In the midst of such oppression, the human craving for celebration means people take huge risks.

The mullahs or religious elders are shown as all-powerful. They lie on couches, making life and death decisions, like Roman emperors. In another key scene, an elderly mullah instructs the semi-naked boys on the religiously-prescribed way to clean their genitals. The interweaving of religious fundamentalism and lasciviousness is captured brilliantly. This foreshadowing of the girl's ultimate fate is compelling.

The power of religious fundamentalism and misogyny, absolute in this film, would be bad enough if we could see it as belonging to a terrible historical era that is well and truly past. But this is not the case.

Marianne, the representative from RAWA, explained that despite the Taliban being ousted, oppression of women and other calamities still beset Afghanistan. She made the point that there are and have always been pockets of resistance - RAWA has a membership of 2,000 and has been active for 25 years working with the poorest of the poor. I can only imagine that these women must be incredibly ingenious to even manage to meet, let alone to persist with the many activities in which they're involved. At present these activities include working with orphans and assisting women to develop handicrafts skills.

The Afghan people have had a hellish 25 years. They have been at war with the Soviets. They've been ruled by the Fundamentalists and the Taliban. They've been subjected to air strikes as part of the 'war on terrorism'. As a consequence, the country has the largest number of refugees per head of population, and the most landmines in the world. The country's economic, cultural and political structures have been destroyed by a succession of different aggressors.

Marianne concluded her talk by reiterating that resistance does exist. In particular RAWA believes that education for Afghani women is the basic revolutionary act, and that's why it has always been one of RAWA's primary activities.

Because RAWA does not receive support from mainstream aid agencies, but is dependent on a network of feminist organizations, members of the group periodically leave their country to tour the world on fund raising campaigns. The bulk of their funding comes from events like the one at the Nova. It was particularly pleasing that that evening's event was totally sold out so that another evening had to be arranged.

This was the second time I had heard a member of RAWA speak. And I marvelled at their courage and modesty. I wondered what it would be like to leave your country, where you have no freedom of speech, and to step up in front of hundreds of people to plead for funds. Both speakers were attractive women, dressed casually and neatly in pants and jumpers – it was unthinkable that they typically spend their time in public totally covered up, unrecognizable, nullified. They looked so comfortable.

It's one thing to know that such terrible situations exist and quite another to see them depicted so vividly. I kept thinking that if it was me and my loved ones, as it could well have been except for an accident of birth, how would we cope trapped in a such a society, with no possibility of escape?

Just as Osama innocently planted her hair, symbolically hoping for a chance at new growth, the future of this ravaged country depends on support from people like us. A day spent walking in their shoes made me realize that we

need to use our freedom and privilege to help the Afghan people in whatever ways we can.

If you'd like to be contacted next time a film night is organized for RAWA please call Honi on 98 228858.