

From Visceral Style to Discourse of Resistance:

Reading Alka Sadat's Afghan Documentaries on Violence Against Women

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An Afghan Auteur?

Since the fall of the Taliban numerous Afghan women from different professional backgrounds have actively engaged in making documentaries.¹ Very few of them, however, have managed to turn their filmmaking activity into effective international careers. This is why Alka Sadat, a self-taught documentarian from Herat stands out as one of the most dynamic Afghan female directors of factual films. At first glance Sadat's output does not differ from other documentary footage coming from Afghanistan. Just like her contemporaries', her camera focuses on social problems and human rights in the war-torn country. Yet, she enjoys a strong reputation as an influential activist who in her shorts has skilfully unveiled, if not shrewdly analysed, the dark side of gender inequality in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Sadat's dedication to victims of violence against women—for whose legal defence she has openly campaigned—has formed the staple of her documentary method. Several festival trophies, which the filmmaker has collected since her debut in 2005, have helped her achieve an eminent position on the international festival circuit. Cutting across social divisions and speaking with, rather than for her filmed subjects, Sadat resists international audiences' impressions, which tend to essentialise gender dynamics in her country. Her half-observational, half-analytical storytelling strategies constitute the quintessence of her documentary method.

Given the relative consistency of Sadat's style and her global visibility, it may be tempting for western critics to discuss her output as that of an emerging world cinema auteur. In western film scholarship, dating back to the mid-twentieth century publications in *L'Écran français* and *Cahiers du cinéma*, authorship has played a significant role in critical recognition of filmmakers, including many non-western directors. Auteur theories, which have undergone several shifts from

emphasising creative agency to textual approaches,⁴ evolved into what Timothy Corrigan labelled ‘the commerce of authorship,’⁵ a tactic of promoting individual directors. When feminist film scholars—including, among others, Claire Johnston,⁶ Kaja Silverman⁷ and Judith Maynes⁸—joined authorship debates, they observed that, however varying, auteur criticism typically favoured male directors. The thought-provoking feminist push to recognise women filmmakers as auteurs was born out of political necessity to acknowledge marginalised gendered perspectives and to give the original messages and styles of female directors an equal status in male dominated film history.⁹

In her documentaries, Sadat offers a unique view from inside her country, serving as a catalyst for her filmed subjects’ voices, which in some respects qualifies her as a female auteur. However, aware of reaching international viewers she develops a specific oppositional discourse, which unlike many feminist films in the West, is not orientated at challenging the male dominated film culture. Sadat’s key shorts about violence against women frequently provide viewers with visceral documentation of current outcomes of the gender situation in Afghanistan, paying attention to multiple markers of social difference and exposing plurality of female identities and experiences. With her anti-essentialist stance the director resists Eurocentric¹⁰ categorisations of the Islamic female other. Her films are intended for non-gender specific audiences, implicitly defying simplistic western assumptions about Afghan society, including victimisation, romanticisation and Islamophobia.

When for the first time approached from a critical perspective Sadat’s work needs to be placed in contexts from which she originates, as well as those she addresses. Considering the director’s messages, authorial analyses of her films seem counterproductive, if not inappropriate. In her seminal article, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Gayatri Spivak advises against discursive assimilation of cultural products from outside Europe and America.¹¹ She suggests that to engage with non-western voices, critics and audiences must first acknowledge global power structures with their ensuing symbolic hierarchies. Spivak also warns that reception of ‘the subaltern’ is often clouded by schematic ideological surface judgements. With their Eurocentric background, theories of authorship can hardly open critical exploration of Sadat’s documentaries. Their routine

application to her work would result in superficial commodification of non-western subject to fit Eurocentric ideologies.

However, in her book, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, Patricia White demonstrates analytical potential of looking at world cinema directors through the prism of authorship. Her study focuses on female directors of narrative productions and aims at examining as well as publicising their outputs in western film culture. Following Catherine Grant's suggestion that authorship 'help[s] organise the fantasies, activities and pleasures of those who consume cultural products,'¹² White examines both production and reception of female filmmakers to interrogate their visibility, agency and power.¹³ Her questions could perhaps also illuminate Sadat's output once solid lines of critical engagement with her documentary messages were established. At this stage, however, it seems more productive to situate Sadat's films in local, national and transnational contexts to initiate a dialogue with her onscreen realities. Authorial analysis of her yet critically unexplored films would subject her work to the parameters of western discourse, which she herself resists. It would increase her visibility and satisfy western audiences' appetite for the next big thing, an object for the spectator to consume, but not a speaking subject worth interrogation.

Sadat's Success

To please English-speaking viewers, Sadat's biography could open like a traditional fairy tale: Once upon a time there lived a talented Afghan girl, Alka Sadat. Under Taliban regime she was secretly schooled by her mother. When democracy returned to Afghanistan, in 2005 she attended two weeks of film workshops that were organised in Kabul by the Goethe Institute.¹⁴ Shot that year, her debut documentary, *First Number* (2005)¹⁵—in which close-ups of calm faces are crosscut with images of battlefields—received the Peace Prize from the Afghan Civil Society Organisation.¹⁶ Soon Sadat was offered a scholarship to participate in 2006 video course at Fabbrica in Treviso,¹⁷ where she completed her first narrative short, *We are Postmodern* (2006).¹⁸ With its slow pace, this meditative story of human kindness in barren Afghan mountains challenges

western media imagery of manic crisis in Sadat's country, in itself evoking a fairy-tale ambiance of the location.

Upon her return to Afghanistan Sadat worked at her sister's studio, writing and directing *1,2,3?* (2006), her first documentary on violence against women.¹⁹ Over the following years the director completed a few more films dedicated to women's rights, including award-winning *Half Value Life* (2009),²⁰ which chronicles the career of Maria Bashir, a public prosecutor from Herat. For her commitment to improving the position of the female in Afghanistan, Sadat was noticed by both domestic and international women's rights organisations. Her next film, *After 35 Years* (2012)²¹—an account of arduous Kabul campaign for ratifying the Family Law—was funded by the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation.²² Owing to the quality of all her previous work Sadat received her next, even more substantial commission from the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, to produce a series of films summarising social developments since the fall of the Taliban. In separate shorts, her ensuing trilogy, *Afghanistan: 10 Years On* (2012-2013)²³ examined violence against women, children and police.

Sadat has worked hard to internationally promote her documentaries. With no long-term support from western distributors, her shorts have been screened at several international festivals, including Women's Voices Now Film Festival in Los Angeles, Al Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival, Bilder von Film Festival and International Trevignano Film Festival, to mention just a few.²⁴ Nearly every festival screening has left the filmmaker with an award in hand. Her relatively high professional standing also earned Sadat invitations to join juries for 2013 Afghan Contemporary Art Prize and 2013 Asiatica Filmmediale.²⁵

It is worth noting that the Internet has played a vital role in Sadat's professional growth. She uses YouTube, Vimeo, and Culture Unplugged, posting English-subtitled copies of complete shorts and trailers for new projects. Not only are the latter displayed online to reach viewers, but also to attract funding, as was the case with *Afghanistan Night Stories* (2015),²⁶ her recent film about Afghan soldiers fighting Taliban commandos. Its production was supported by volunteers

from Bpeace—an organisation for developing entrepreneurship among violence-torn populations²⁷—and a grant of 17,500 Euro from IDFA Bertha Fund in Amsterdam.²⁸

Entering a Dialogue with Sadat's Films

If described as above, Sadat is a self-made woman, a talent that was fulfilled against all odds. Her biography becomes a journey of a heroine climbing up from a background with little privilege to higher levels of professional hierarchy—yet another sought-for inspirational fable set in an exotic remote location. Although it is an attractive story, there are at least a few reasons not to chronicle Sadat's achievements in such a sensational way. With emphasis on her success, the director's biography reads as a prototypical Eurocentric narrative of a non-western achiever who despite her origin has managed to meet western capitalist measures of individual progress, much like that of Jamal Malik from the Academy Award winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Even without any such intention, similar practices of narrating non-western creative biographies by accentuating one's result in terms of popularity or critical acclaim in the West, tend to emphasise otherness and thus always verge on discursive colonisation of the non-western subject and her cultural production.

Framing Sadat as a successful director or an auteur instead of entering a dialogue with her onscreen realities would mimic what Mark Graham describes as 'the rhetoric of the empire.'²⁸ Having analysed a range of available narrative titles including, among others, *Rambo III* (1988), *Kandahar* (2001), *In this World* (2002), *Osama* (2003) and *The Kite Runner* (2007), Graham concludes that to date western appreciation of Afghan film stories has often been marked by a Eurocentric mindset. Most popular films from and about Afghanistan include those that English language viewers find exotic, shocking or ideologically accessible. Told in narrative frames that appear familiar to western audiences, such productions either promote values, which comply with western symbolic order, or justify western politics toward the distant nation. Graham demonstrates that such readings of onscreen Afghanistan are often rooted in superficial judgements lacking in-depth contextualisation. At the end of his book, he advocates a change in critical perspective, 'To

look at Afghanistan in film, one must be prepared for Afghanistan to look back ... in an exchange based not on domination, but on reciprocity.’²⁹

To enter a dialogue with Alka Sadat, western viewers need to discard their measures of success and failure, as well as preconceptions regarding social dynamics in Afghanistan. Only by straying away from subjugating Sadat’s shorts to the rhetoric of the empire, can her western audience emotionally and discursively ‘engage with reality’³⁰ of her documentary subjects. Although incomparable in terms of analytical depth, in some respects Sadat’s film practice is reminiscent of arguments coming from globally renowned scholars and cultural critics.

Revealing the then-existing practices of patronising and fictionalising non-western cultures to fit western ideologies, in his 1978 seminal work, *Orientalism* Edward Said called for informed and multidimensional portrayals of ‘the other’ to contest inaccuracy of the dominant white gaze.³¹ Thirty-five years later, Spivak’s book, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* points to ‘the contamination of the subject’ with sociocultural and political ideologies, which still impede western ethical and epistemological engagement with multicultural or non-western works.³² When discussing Sadat’s output, to overcome this contamination, we need to pay close attention to the subtle dynamic between her seemingly effortless gaze at Afghan women and her documentaries’ power of engaging the viewer in critical dialogue.

Since her debut not only has Sadat acquired stronger directing skills, but also more substantial budgets and crews. Her latest productions strike as much more polished than those from the past. Yet, she has always consistently highlighted the complexity of contexts behind the social issues she chooses to explore. This pattern of providing a multi-layered insider perspective best manifests in Sadat’s three productions on violence against women. The earliest of these titles, *1,2,3?* interrogates circumstances of domestic violence victims in her province. Sadat patiently listens to her onscreen subjects reproducing the frame of mind of the disempowered, impoverished female, whose well-being is ignored by the law. In *Half Value Life* the filmmaker again focuses on the fate of the female victim, but this time her camera follows the Chief Prosecutor from Herat.

This broadens the outlook and introduces the figure of the male oppressor, allowing for multidimensional analysis of Afghan gender situation.

In *After 10 Years: Elimination of Violence Against Women*, Sadat continues to employ some of her tested discursive strategies, even if this film appears formally different from her two earlier shorts. Observational shots now only feature as a background for interviews with Afghan officials, scholars, and activists. Sadat's commentators discuss factors contributing to cruelty toward women, showing that its causes go deeper than religion or tradition. This film is symptomatic of Sadat's creative progression. Shifting from the local to the national, she started to cut across Afghan social classes. Her style also evolved. Now with more reliance on logically constructed arguments, she is much less confident in the power of visceral imagery. To examine Sadat's discursive and stylistic trajectory, it is best to start with a detailed look at her first film on violence against women.

As Complex as 1,2,3?

1,2,3? examines harsh realities of Afghan women who have experienced domestic violence. The short is divided into three parts. Each centres on wretched lives, marked by constant fear and an absence of hope. Subsequent digits from the title serve as headings for these sections, signifying that no words can describe the traumas of the victims. Sadat first dwells on desperation of several young women, who found self-immolation to be their only available bolt for freedom. The following two segments of the film respectively explore underage marriage and runaway wives who seek legal help. The physical agony of suicidal women from the first part later turns into anguish that is competently communicated by the filmmaker toward the end of the third section. In a few long shots we watch some of the abused wives—who entrusted representatives of the law to protect them—being escorted by men. Seeing them returned to being under the control of their abusers forms a harrowing conclusion. Absence of legal sanctions enslaves and dehumanises many among Afghan female population. It is a situation without resolution or end.

At the beginning of the film, Sadat pays a visit to a hospital in Herat. Her hand-held camera pauses on wounds and faces that are matched in visceral duality. As the director talks to the patients, she exposes burns all over their bodies. Interviews reveal that men caused many of these grave injuries. Some patients, however, admit to self-inflicted harm. In a shocking open declaration that is interrupted by heavy breathing, one young girl says that she burnt herself to get away from her abusive older husband, whom she had been forced to marry before her puberty. Numerous tracking shots amplify the aura of omnipresent violence. There is no privacy in this setting. Accompanied by their children, the patients share overcrowded rooms and corridors. The uncomfortable condition of the ward and the appearance of many prematurely aged women make the viewer aware that the majority of these female victims come from impoverished backgrounds.

By persuasively editing words of her interviewees, Sadat emphasises that financial dependency on men often becomes a significant factor contributing to social acceptance of violence against women, as well as to helplessness of its victims, whose fear stops them from pointing fingers at their abusers, or from speaking about their experience. This is implied in the first ten minutes of the film, where to the director's off-screen question, 'Who burnt her?' close female relatives of convalescent teenage girls reply, 'Jinns' or 'Lantern fuel.' As the narrator in the film states, these women spend their whole lives under the roof of their fathers and husbands. Their abusers convince them of their low status. Besides death, they see no escape from domestic violence.

Later the director moves to a police station and a prosecutor's office, where the fate of other abused women is being decided. Quite a few say to the camera that they had to run away from home, because they were afraid of further torture. One mother and her daughter declare, 'We'd rather be killed than be returned to our fathers.' Some women present their scars from wires and ropes on their necks and shoulders, showing the scale of cruelty they experienced. When Sadat grants these victims space to voice their fear, she provides emotionally charging evidence for statistics that at the time were often publicly cited in support for the implementation of the

Elimination of Violence Against Women Law. Withheld for a while in the Afghan parliament, this legal act was eventually enacted by President Hamid Karzai in 2009. A part of the campaign for this law, *1,2,3?* is illustrative of the director's emerging style, which cuts deeper than the alarming statistical data.

The filmmaker offers visceral imagery in support of frightening facts from female experience in her country that have been confirmed by both domestic and international research. According to UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, women's life expectancy in the country is 44 years, much shorter than that of the male population. Next to poor health care and war, the contributing factors that influence such a short female life span include forced marriages that constitute between 60% and 80% of overall marriages, poor education with 90% female illiteracy in rural areas, as well as the fact that circa 57% of girls get married before the age of 16.³³ Pushed by their families to become mothers and wives before they reach puberty, without any education, Afghan women frequently become totally dependent on their husbands. Maria Bashir—the Chief Prosecutor of Herat Province, who briefly appears in the third segment of *1,2,3?* and later becomes the main character in *Half Value Life*—confirms, 'The top issues facing women in Afghanistan are weak economy and limited access to income. Women are mainly suffering from illiteracy, joblessness, and lack of knowledge about their rights.'³⁴

Informed by these facts, Sadat transports her viewer to a real life setting, where violence is experienced first hand. The careful display of local details with all underlying emotions awards her short with an unusual appeal. The oppressed female gains her own identity. Facial close-ups often engender intimacy between the viewer and the onscreen women, whose eyes meet those of the audience, as though, in Graham's words, 'Afghanistan look[ed] back at us,'³⁵ not asking for help, but for understanding. According to Ib Bondebjerg documentaries in the globalised world are 'powerful human and emotional stories with characters which we can identify strongly with or distance ourselves from.'³⁶ *1,2,3?* provokes emotional response thanks to its balance between unsettling proximity to the abused women, which builds on physical closeness of the camera to the

filmed subjects, and distancing tactics, such as voice-over, brief excerpts from interviews with doctors, prosecutors and activists, as well as long/medium observational shots.

Formally imperfect because of its abrupt cutting, *1,2,3?* emits an aura of chaos mimicking the disorderly social and legal situation that contributes to the oppression of women. English subtitles on the YouTube copy of the film are at times difficult to read due to unusual phrasing. Elsewhere they appear totally missing, as if the words of the women defied any translation and could only echo with sounds of their original native tongue or with uncomfortable silence. Intentional or not, these unpolished formal aspects of Sadat's film match her subject matter. The viewer is trapped between close engagement with the stories of the women and the inconsistent mixture of documentary styles, from interactive, through observational, to authoritative. The latter is yet another distancing technique, with voice-over that speaks for 'you and me' and our disempowerment to assist the onscreen victims.

The authoritative tone of the filmmaker's commentary and the calm off-screen music complement the rough naturalistic nature of the rest of the film with a meditative mood. Rather than calling for intervention, Sadat invites her viewer to ponder over Afghan reality. *1,2,3?* starts and ends with shots of a woman covered in a traditional burqa who wanders around ancient-looking walls. These frames are accompanied by a female narrator, who asks rhetorical questions about the violence. At the end, the anonymous woman disappears in a tunnel. We only hear her last words, 'You and I can't answer this. The law can... but it is silent.' The tranquillity of the opening and closing sequences is contrasted with fast-speaking, distressed women in the main three sections of the film. This is how Sadat highlights the difference between her own privileged social position that offers space for critical thoughts on the position of disenfranchised and that of uneducated lower class women.

As the last line of *1,2,3?* implies, responsibility for the gender situation in post-Taliban society does not rest with individual men or with Islam. To free Afghan women from violence would require a long-term legal, economic and educational reform, developed by the government

in collaboration with western organisations and politicians. The UN Women Country Representative in Afghanistan, Elzira Sagynbaeva admits, 'There needs to be effective implementation of the laws ... women and girls [must] feel safe and ... provided with an opportunity for development[.]'³⁷ This is what Sadat continues to inspect in her following films on violence against women.

Half Value Life of the Afghan Female

The core story of *Half Value Life* consists of an edited record of Maria Bashir's daily routines. More than once we see her at home with three children and then in her prosecutor's office, where she conducts interviews with female clients and their abusers. Here, for the first time in Sadat's documentaries, the viewer meets the violent male. In an uncomfortable arrangement three female victims are sat next to their oppressive husbands. The scruffy appearance of the couples quickly contrasts with the well-groomed female lawyer. This visual juxtaposition provides the first characteristic of the abusive men, who tend to come from impoverished backgrounds. What further contributes to their descriptions are the stories anxiously told by their wives, one of whom is underage.

The prospects of gradual erosion of traditional Afghan gender structure, as advocated by international activists, may play a role in prevalence of violence against women in lower class families. Lina Abirafeh reminds that, 'While [some-AM] women may benefit from increased emphasis placed on them by aid agencies, men tend to feel emasculated as a result.'³⁸ In failing to provide for their families in difficult economic circumstances, men may become psychologically disturbed; just like one of Bashir's interviewees who is a drug addict forcing his wife to collect opium for him and his companions. Another woman in the film mentions that her abuser is aged and disabled, whereas yet another, who was severely beaten by her husband while pregnant, admits that her family has no financial means to survive.

In all these cases, the female victims are scapegoats blamed for what otherwise results from the poor economic situation. Where traditional gender roles cannot be met, women whose needs and ambitions are denied by customary practices, pay the highest price; violence becomes part of a struggle for social authority. Bashir also mentions that many demoralised men, some of them husbands of her clients, join Taliban forces to escape from justice, indicating that the post-Taliban heritage that reinforces violence against women. Sadat comments, 'We have two problems that stand in our way... the Taliban and family pressures from people who believe their daughters should stay at home until they marry. We have a lot of underage marriages and we have girls who are out working on the street to earn income for their families.'³⁹ Although *Half Value Life* was released in the year when the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law was passed, the film clearly suggests that Afghanistan is still characterised by insufficient means to prevent violence and to protect its victims. Bashir's office seems overloaded with work, a lot of which is wasted due to lack of justice codes to prosecute abusers, who tend to be manipulative: using threats, they manage to discourage their victims from further testimonies.

Sadat shows that no woman can feel safe in Afghanistan, even if her domestic setting is free from abuse. Several times in the film Bashir speaks to the camera disclosing that her family lives in constant fear of revenge from those whom she prosecuted. Her children are schooled at home, not to invite any potential attackers. Incidentally, towards the end of the film we witness an explosion in Bashir's home. Although there are no casualties, this act of terror intensifies the dark aura surrounding the female in the country. However, subsequent shots reveal that the social position of the Prosecutor allows her to hire guards that escort her from home to the office—means of protection that are unavailable to lower class women.

Sadat openly contrasts the educated professional woman and the impoverished victim of domestic violence. The distinction is formally reinforced by the compositional frame of *Half Value Life*, which similarly to *1,2,3?* starts with shots of a woman in a desert-like setting, a place reminiscent of an old citadel. This time her face is fully visible. The viewer quickly recognises the

director. Sadat is first filmed in an empty claustrophobic room putting on her makeup and then walking outside in high heels. Although the shoes perhaps symbolise western-like female empowerment, the lyrics of the traditional song that plays from an old radio remind women's problems in Afghanistan, 'It's spring and I am still a cloud. Oh, Lord... I am full of anxiety and pain.' With this blend of western and non-western signifiers, Sadat points to the displacement of women in Afghanistan, where western activists call for mobilisation of women, while traditional forces oppose them.

The shots of the director in her desert reclusion are later intercut with factual material. Sadat's character, separated from the city, can only listen to its sounds played on her radio, which, by the way, was often the only means of communicating with the world for women forced to stay at home during the Taliban era. When Sadat returns to her isolated chamber and gazes through bars in the window, she again listens to the radio that is now hanging from the ceiling on a piece of barbed wire. The chamber becomes this woman's prison and the metaphor for her helplessness. The sequence reaches its climax with Sadat shedding tears over the news of the explosion in Bashir's house. At the end of the film she walks away from the camera through a tunnel, with only little sparkle of hope in the form of a proverbial light at the end. We hear the last verses of the traditional song, this time playing off-screen as a reminder of the forced silence of Afghan victims of violence, 'Grow mother to daughter generation... Where is your voice?'

The reflective mood of this staged sequence re-positions the progressive Afghan female by transporting her to the traditional dwelling. When intercut with images of the attack on Bashir's house, this de-contextualisation serves as a chilling reminder of the potential danger of returning to conservative gender roles. It is also an allegorical commentary pointing that Afghan women are often forced to negotiate between two ideological standpoints: the western calls for their social advancement and the conservative voices pushing them back to their domestic settings. What adds to their despair, Sadat seems to suggest, is the potentially temporary character of any of their emancipation. With all these interpretative contexts, Sadat produces a discourse resisting

simplifications of female identity that often circulate in the West, where Afghan women are either seen as victims of their social settings or individual success stories shroud issues that the rest of the female population faces on day-to-day basis.

The first approach has been most often visible in western news, as well as in some documentaries, including *Beneath the Veil* (2001) and *Lifting the Veil* (2007), *Burqas behind Bars* (2013) and *Love Crimes of Kabul* (2011). The latter is symptomatic of a number of factual films that highlight the resilience of Afghan women, such as *The Boxing Girls of Kabul* (2012), *The Afghan Star* (2009) and *I am a Girl* (2013). The tendency of finding optimism in Afghan female experience has also been a guiding light for several western photographers, most notably for Katherine Kiviat and Scott Heidler who published their collection of portraits of strong female figures in *Women of Courage: Intimate Stories from Afghanistan*.⁴⁰ Showing Afghan women as high flyers, such publications spark inspiration for social workers, politicians and activists, without necessarily disagreeing with Sadat's vision.

Indeed, the director declares that focusing solely on victimised women is one, but not the only way to explore female experience in Afghanistan, 'I was tired of only showing poor women in Afghanistan and making a film about Maria was my chance to show a powerful Afghan woman to the world.'⁴¹ Despite her intention, Sadat hints that the lawyer's resilience exposes her to potential mistreatment. Although Bashir's biography matches all standards of a high achiever's journey, even her life is of half value when faced with violent male abusers.

Crosscutting factual footage with staged shots in *Half Value Life*, Sadat indicates that identities of Afghan females are fragmented and always context-specific. But she also suggests that some women's existence verges on enslavement, which cannot be resolved without government action. Inspirational stories in the country have their limits. Female identity, as well as her individual experience, depends on a variety of other markers of difference including tribal/regional belonging, economic status, levels of education, and even her family history. Such factors are also central when it comes to potential margins of personal freedom and respect that individual women

can receive. This is the underlying critical idea behind Sadat's third documentary on violence against women.

What Has Changed *After 10 Years*

Even though in *After 10 Years* Sadat slightly changes her documentary style—shifting her formal focus away from staged shots and observational footage to talking heads—the film still starts and ends with her signature images of a traditionally dressed Afghan female. This time the woman stands on a hill above metropolitan landscape. Turned backwards to the camera, with a street megaphone as her only companion and a visual reminder of conservative gender propaganda in the country, in the first shot she gazes towards the distant city. Her isolation from the vibe of the metropolis is highlighted in the following point of view shot, which is obscured by shadows that bring to mind the barred windows of a prison cell. This symbolic visualisation foreshadows the main theme of the documentary, which next to analysing the current gender situation in the country debates the impact of tradition on the slow process of delegalising violence against women. Sadat punctuates her series of interviews with statistics. More than once, written numbers appear on the screen and are read out by a female voice-over. This inclusion of shockingly high figures of rapes, immolations, and murders committed on women by their close male relatives adds to the tension of the debate.

Carefully selecting her interviewees, Sadat again shows social differentiation among Afghan women. Some of her interviewees are female members of Afghan parliament, and others are female university scholars. They are contrasted with shelter-seeking victims of domestic violence and women beaten by their beggar husbands who also momentarily appear on the screen. The director's previously subjective perspective on the link between social status and violence against women finds validation in the words of several experts, who confirm that the latter is more common in rural, uneducated communities than in metropolitan provincial capitals, where women are overall more emancipated.

To cover the full picture, Sadat invites conservative religious scholars to debate potential solutions to gender-based oppression. Although open to defend women, one of the traditionalist scholars refers the issue of protection back to the family, which as the narrator of the film informs is symptomatic among opponents to the reinforcement of legislation. Numerous shots from courts, however, reveal that prosecuted male oppressors tend to be as uneducated and helpless as their victims. The problems some of them face with articulating simple sentences may indicate that violence is the only outlet for their emotions and they use physical strength to control women whom the fundamentalist propaganda reduces to their reproductive and sexual functions. It is made clear a few times in the film that the post-Taliban legacy takes its toll where even religious education in rural environment is at its lowest level. Sadat observes, 'the Taliban... is present in the shadows and their brutal practices and policies towards women, especially in the countryside, are still profoundly visible.'⁴² This legacy finds its most fertile ground among the impoverished and the uneducated.

Overall, in this short Sadat implies that post-Taliban Afghanistan has seen significant improvements in terms of emancipation of women from privileged backgrounds. However, because of little government action, often hindered by conservative opposition, lower class women still pay the price for Taliban demoralisation of the Afghan male. In the film's pessimistic conclusion, Sadat returns to the traditionally veiled female figure on the hill, who stands still, separated from the potentially liberating city. Waiting in vain for the government to protect her, she becomes a symbolic representation of the rural female's condition.

Sadat's Discourse of Resistance

Ultimately, Sadat demonstrates that unlike in western democracies, in rural and lower class post-Taliban settings, gender identities are perceived not as negotiated,⁴³ but as imposed:⁴⁴ this is the main reason for the overbearing helplessness of many domestic violence victims. From the earliest days of their socialisation, poor women are being convinced of their traditional role. It is naturalised by reference to biological reproduction that reduces their choice and agency to the

domestic setting, whose walls are often the container of their entire lives. Brick and stone fences around Afghan households on one hand can offer comforting safety, on the other they reinforce the confinement of the female, become her prison and her chamber of torture. With unusually thin legal protection and the separation of women from any immediate channels to report potential maltreatment, even basic human rights of lower class Afghan females rest in the hands of men in their families.

Although to break their silence Sadat offers her onscreen women lots of opportunities to speak for themselves, she always serves as a catalyst for their voices. Her narrative voice-over is marked by an authoritative and educative tone helping those who lack the means to articulate their experience. Sadat's work may thus be compared to that of western feminists, who promote female rights and empowerment. Yet, as Fabienne Darling-Wolf warns, historically, western feminists' efforts to empower non-western women to self-represent have been problematic, because they 'frequently resulted in reductionist and essentialising notions of identity.'⁴⁵ Naturally distanced from the cultural baggage of whiteness, Sadat demonstrates that she is mindful of the potential dangers of limiting and homogenising identities of women, who appear in her documentaries. Yet, in her films she clearly shows that despite otherwise important social divisions there exists cross-class female solidarity to improve the gender dynamic in Afghanistan and to end violence against women. Even if her films only reach privileged women, their social mobilisation is still worth the effort, because it strengthens the overall position of the Afghan female.

To engage with Sadat's complex analysis of Afghanistan's gender dynamics, not only do we need to acknowledge that she successfully makes and promotes her films, but also that she is a speaking subject situated in national and global power structures—a subject, who in both these contexts is heavily engaged in the discourse of resistance. Aware of western preconceptions about Afghanistan, Sadat constructs her documentaries to challenge western audiences. Her shorts force the viewer to suspend the rhetoric of the empire. To avoid reductionist traps, she capitalises sensitively on her privileged status by presenting the experience of Afghan women as

heterogeneous. Her gaze is always context-driven. In accordance with Graham's assertion, 'The real Afghanistan cannot be reduced to a few ... points of view. Rather, it may be grasped ... only by listening to plethora of different voices,'⁴⁶ Sadat gives her viewer access to a range of male and female voices to sample the complexity of the gender situation in her country. Opposing the oppression of women, she also resists Eurocentric approaches that essentialise Afghan culture.

Word count: 6034

Filmography:

1,2,3? dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, 2006.

Afghanistan Night Stories, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, 2015.

Afghanistan: 10 Years On: Children Rights in Afghanistan, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, 2013.

Afghanistan: 10 Years On: Elimination of Violence Against Women, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, 2012.

The Afghan Star, dir. Havana Marking, UK, 2009.

After 35 Years, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, 2012.

Beneath the Veil, dir. Cassian Harrison, UK, 2001.

The Boxing Girls of Kabul, dir. Ariel Nasr, Canada, 2012.

Burqas behind Bars, dir. Maryam Ebrahimi and Nima Sarvestani, Sweden/Afghanistan, 2013.

First Number, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, 2005.

Half Value Life, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, 2009.

I am a Girl, dir. Rebecca Barry, Australia/USA/Papua New Guinea/Cambodia/Cameroon/Afghanistan, 2013.

In this World, dir. Michael Winterbottom, UK, 2002.

Kandahar, dir. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Iran, 2001.

The Kite Runner, dir. Marc Foster, USA/China, 2007.

Lifting the Veil, dir. Sharmeen Obaid, USA, 2007.

Love Crimes of Kabul, dir. Tanaz Eshaghian, USA, 2011.

Osama, dir. Siddiq Barmak, Afghanistan, 2003.

Rambo III, dir. Peter MacDonald, USA, 1988.

Slumdog Millionaire, dir. Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, UK/France/USA, 2008.

We are Postmodern, dir. Alka Sadat, Italy/Afghanistan, 2005.

Notes

1. The most often mentioned Afghan female documentary filmmakers include: one of the winners of International Afghan Documentary Film Festival (ADFF) in Sweden, Mona Haidari (<<https://vimeo.com/16867644>> (last accessed 20 January 2015); <http://afghandocumentaryfilmfestival.com..2015/12/17/from-frame-by-frame-to-death-to-camera-3rd-afghan-documentary-film-festival-in-sweden/>> (last accessed 20 January 2015), Kabul based artist, Mariam Nabil Kamal <<http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/10576/1/venice-biennale-2011-denmarks-lilibeth-cuenca-rasmussen>> (last accessed 20 January 2015), the funder of Afghanistan Documentary House, Sahra Mosawi <<https://vimeo.com/user14450289>> (last accessed 20 January 2015), the well-known actress from Samira Makhmalbaf' *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003), Aqeela Rezaei <<http://csfilm.org/films/fruit-of-our-labor/>> (last accessed 20 January 2015) and many others who have participated in international film projects and festivals.
2. Alexandre Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-garde: Le Camera Stylo', in Ginette Vincendeau and Peter Graham (eds), *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks* (London, BFI Book, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31-36, trans. from *L'Écran français* 144, 30 March 1948.
3. François Truffaut, 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema', *Cahiers du cinema* 31, 1954, pp. 15-29, reprinted in Scott MacKenzie (ed.), *Film Manifestos and Global Film Cultures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2014), pp. 133-144.

4. See: Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on Auteur Theory in 1962', in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen & Leo Braudy (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 585-588
Roland Barthes [1968], 'The Death of the Author', trans. Stephen Heath in Barthes, R. *Image-Music-Text* (London, Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148; John Caugie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship* (London, Routledge/BFI, 1981).
5. Timothy Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auteurism: A Voice without Authority', *New German Critique* 49, winter 1990, pp. 43-58.
6. Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema, in Claire Johnston (ed.), *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London, Society for Education in Film and Television, 1975). Reprinted in: Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory. A Reader* (Edinburgh University Press 1999), pp. 31-40; Claire Johnston (ed.), *The Work of Dorothy Arzner* (London, BFI, 1975).
7. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988).
8. Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991).
9. See: Catherine Grant, 'Secret Agents: Feminist Theories of Women's Film Authorship', *Feminist Theory* Vol. 2, No. 1, April 2001, pp. 113-130; Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (London, Macmillan Press, 1991).
10. See: Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London & New York, Routledge, 1994).
11. Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak,' in C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988) pp. 271-313.
12. Catherine Grant, 'www.auteur.com?' *Screen*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2000, p. 107 (101-108).
13. Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC and London, Duke University Press, 2015).
14. Doniphan Blair, 'Afghan Filmmaking on the Edge: Interview with Alka Sadat', *Women's Voices Now: Advocating Gender Equality Through Film*,

- <<http://www.womensvoicesnow.org/interview-with-alka-sadat>> (last accessed 5 January 2016).
15. *First Number*, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, Roya Film House, 2005, <<https://vimeo.com/53772511>> (last accessed 10 January 2016).
 16. 'Alka Sadat: Biography,' Roya Film House, <<http://royafilmhouse.org/staff/alka-sadat>> (last accessed 30 December 2015).
 17. This date is cited after 'Alka Sadat: Biography,' Roya Film House, <<http://royafilmhouse.org/staff/alka-sadat>> (last accessed 30 December 2015). However, Fabrica website states that Alka Sadat was awarded their scholarship in 2008 and that the film was completed in 2009: 'We are postmodern,' Fabrica: The Benetton Group Research Communication Center, <<http://2009to2012.fabrica.it/project/we-are-postmodern>> (last accessed 2 January 2016).
 18. *We are Postmodern*, dir. Alka Sadat, Italy/Afghanistan, 2005. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWnnuAZaZWc>> (last accessed 10 January 2016).
 19. *1,2,3?*, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, Roya Film House, 2006, <<https://vimeo.com/81100047>> (last accessed 10 January 2016).
 20. *Half Value Life*, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, Roya Film House, 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwY-BDYoOk8>> (last accessed 9 January 2016).
 21. *After 35 Years*, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, Roya Film House, 2012, <<http://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/10438/After-35-Years>> (last accessed 19 January 2016).
 22. Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO)', Insight on Conflict, <<http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/afghanistan/peacebuilding-organisations/ahrdo/>> (last accessed 10 January 2016).
 23. *Afghanistan: 10 Years On: Elimination of Violence Against Women*, dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, Roya Film House, 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juVweKPjNdk>> (last accessed 20 January 2016); *Afghanistan: 10 Years On: Children Rights in Afghanistan*, dir.

- Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, Roya Film House, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQB_I-iAuOw> (last accessed 20 January 2016). The third film of the series has not been made available online.
24. For a full detailed list of Alka Sadat's international festival awards see: 'Alka Sadat: Biography', Roya Film House, <<http://royafilmhouse.org/staff/alka-sadat>> (last accessed 30 December 2015).
 25. 'Encounters with Asian Cinema', Asiatica Filmmediale, 20-28 November 2013, <<http://www.asiaticafilmmediale.it/?lang=en>> (last accessed 20 January 2016).
 26. *Afghanistan Night Stories* (Official trailer), dir. Alka Sadat, Afghanistan, Roya Film House, YouTube, 26 February 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UOHdg3FCnw>> (last accessed 10 December 2015).
 27. 'Welcome to Bpeace', Bpeace, <<http://www.bpeace.org/>> (last accessed 10 January 2015).
 28. Mark Graham, *Afghanistan in the Cinema* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. 8.
 29. Ibid. p. 167.
 30. Ib Bondebjerg, *Engaging with Reality: Documentary & Globalisation* (Bristol, Intellect, 2014).
 31. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, Penguin, 1977).
 32. Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2012).
 33. 'UNAMA Factsheet on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan,' UNAMA 2009, <<https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/UNAMAFactsheet%20VAW-Nov%202009.pdf>> (last accessed 10 December 2015).
 34. '*Half Value Life: A Documentary on Afghanistan's Only Female Prosecutor*,' Muslima: Muslim Women's Art and Voices, 2001, <<http://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/content/half-value-life>> (last accessed 26 January 2016).
 35. Graham, p. 167.

36. Bondebjerg, p. 9.
37. 'UN Press Release on The International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women,' UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 25 November 2015, <<https://unama.unmissions.org/un-press-release-international-day-elimination-violence-against-women>> (last accessed 5 January 2016).
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39. 'Half Value Life: A Documentary on Afghanistan's Only Female Prosecutor,' Muslima: Muslim Women's Art and Voices, 2001, <<http://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/content/half-value-life>> (last accessed 26 January 2016).
40. Katherine Kiviat and Scott Heidler, *Women of Courage: Intimate Stories from Afghanistan* (Salt Lake City, Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2007).
41. Yma de Almeida, 'Interview with *Half Value Life* Alka Sadat,' London Feminist Film Festival, 22 November 2013, <<http://londonfeministfilmfestival.com/2013/11/22/interview-with-half-value-life-director-alka-sadat/>> (last accessed 26 January 2016).
42. Quoted in Nupur Basu, 'Light at the end of the tunnel,' *The Hindu*, 24 March 2013, <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-sundaymagazine/light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel/article4543063.ece>> (last accessed 20 January 2016).
43. For more theoretical background on negotiated gender identities in the West see: Gail Hawkes, *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality* (Maidenhead, Open University Press, 1996); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, Routledge, 1990).
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Simone Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London, Vintage, 2010 [1949]).

45. Fabienne Darling-Wolf, 'Negotiation and position: On the need of developing thicker descriptions,' in P. D. Murphy and M. Kraidy, (eds.), *Global media studies: Ethnographic Perspectives* (New York, Routledge, 2003), p. 109.
46. Graham, p.166.