

ANALYSIS ON ISLAMIC WOMEN'S RIGHT AND LIBERATION IN AN IRANIAN FILM: OSAMA

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Abstract: Osama speaks about a girl who disguised herself as a boy in order to survive in Taliban's era. Not only has this film talked about survival, this masterpiece also exposed women's struggle to get education under the oppression of Taliban. This article will analyze how the filmmaker discusses feminism from the point of view of Islamic women in a very delicate way.

Keywords: women's right, Taliban, Osama

As the "first feature film to be made in the post-Taliban era" (IMDb), Osama is a magnificent and brave work of Siddiq Barmak. Starred by the real Kabul residents (IMDb) who suffered from Taliban period, this film presents as a depiction of the tyrannized women's position in Afghanistan. Not only do they live under the oppression of a radical religion force, but they are also ruled by strong male domination of Taliban regime.

Osama is inspired by a true story (IMDb) about a girl who changed her appearance to look like a boy in order to get an education during the Taliban era. During this period women were banned from attending schools as one of the de-

crees of Taliban's gender apartheid (Femi-nist.org). Women who tried to fight against the domination received harsh punishment from the Taliban. Feminist Majority Foundation cited that "women were brutally beaten, publicly flogged, and killed for violating Taliban decrees" (Feminist.org).

Juxtaposing between the facts and symbols in Osama, this paper will analyze how the film functions as a mean to engage the world's attention toward women's right and liberation in Afghanistan.

Synopsis

The film starts with a boy, Espandi,

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who guides a journalist to film the women's strike in Afghanistan. These women, who demand that the Taliban give them jobs, are widows who have no male relatives to be their breadwinners or legal companions. This demonstration occurs as a result of the Taliban's rule which forbids women from leaving their homes for any reason, without any companionship from their close male relatives.

Later, the Taliban who arrive gush these women with water. Some women are beaten, locked in a chicken coop, and jailed for their demonstration. Among these women are Osama and her mother. They are not involved in the strike; instead, they are on their way home from a hospital where Osama's mother used to work. The mother has just lost her job as a nurse after the Taliban closed the deprived hospital. Both Osama and her mother arrive safely at home before the Taliban notice them.

Osama's mother, who is desperate with the condition of not having any male relatives and regrets of having a daughter, is comforted by Osama's grandmother. The old lady says that men and women are equal. A man can be a woman if he wants, and the other way around. The old lady comes out with an idea of disguising Osama as a boy by cutting her hair and dressing her with boy's clothes. Although Osama is afraid that

the Taliban will catch and kill her, the girl has no choice but to save her family.

Besides her mother and her grandmother, there are two other people who know of her secret. One is Espandi, the boy who first blackmails her, but later protects her from other boys who disturb her. The other one is the shopkeeper that she works for, from whom Osama learns to do Shalat like a man.

One day, the Taliban come and take all the boys to the military camp. Osama is one of them. Osama manages to mingle with other boys until one of the teachers mentions that Osama is like a nymph. The teacher's statement causes other boys to mock her. Espandi, who is also taken to the military camp, protects her from these boys. He even convinces them that Osama is a boy because only boys can climb trees. Osama reaches the top of the tree, but she can not go down.

The Taliban punish her by tying her up and lowering her down into a well. When she is raised, the Taliban see blood running down her legs because of her menstruation. The Taliban then put her in jail. While she is in jail, Osama sees other women who are previously seen on strike. All of them are waiting for punishment.

In the end Osama is saved from punishment, she is forced to marry the old

teacher from the camp. She is brought to the man's house where she learns how sorrowful the man's wives are.

Women's Liberation in Afghanistan

Howland says that "religions have traditionally promoted, or even required, differentiated roles for women and men." (MONSHIPOURI) In the implementation of religious life, the different roles are then unconsciously led to unequal positions between men and women. The inequality which results in the limitation of certain gender rights sometimes worsens because of the radical interpretation of the religion itself.

Women in Afghanistan are real examples of this case. Since the country was occupied by the Taliban, all women were forced into "home imprisonment". This locking up is one of the results of the radical interpretation of Islamic laws which eventually puts women into a very difficult situation.

The Taliban, who claim themselves as Sunni Puritanical Muslims, released strict law that:

1. Banished women from the work force
2. Closed schools to girls in cities and expelled women from universities
3. Prohibited women from leaving their

homes unless accompanied by a close male relative

4. Ordered the publicly visible windows of women's houses painted black and forced women to wear the burqa (or chadari) - which completely shrouds the body, leaving only a small mesh-covered opening through which to see

5. Prohibited women and girls from being examined by male physicians while at the same time, prohibited most female doctors and nurses from working.

These edicts clearly eliminate women from any social interactions which limit them from possibilities to improve their lives. Furthermore, the doctrine that "a wife is to be obedient to her husband" (MONSHIPOURI) in Islam has promoted more vulnerable positions for women which continues their domestic abuse. Men can also practice polygamy since women literally need them to survive. This dependency leads to the assumption that women are like objects/belongings that can be treated however the owners want. The religion itself provides no shelter for these women because it is interpreted that "changes in women's condition (in the Afghanistan's case can be interpreted as position) were a direct attack on Allah's realm and order." (Mernissi) As a result, women's rights have no value at all.

Oppressed and upset by the social and religious injustice, frustration has caused the women's liberation to strive for equality and freedom. The liberation is shown in Osama through three signs:

1. The Strike

A strike can be one of the most visible signs of women's liberation. Shown early in this film, the strike facilitates the anger and desperation of these women toward their conditions. Messages that they bring along with them, like "WE ARE HUNGRY, GIVE US THE RIGHT TO WORK," serve as the tools to express their needs.

The strike also functions as an introduction to the overall problems faced by the Afghani women. They react against the Taliban's decrees which virtually "kill" their lives. The Afghani women are banished from any social activities and locked in their houses so that they have to depend on their husbands.

These women face larger economic problem because they have no jobs and they are widows with families to support. The Taliban themselves, when they released the decrees, ignored the fact that there are many widows in the country who have no other men who can be their breadwinners.

The only way out for these women is to marry any men who can support them. The wedlock might be a tempo-

rary answer for their economic problem. However, it causes other issues. These women must be willing to marry men that they do not love, share their husbands with other women, suffer from other wives' competition to gain the husbands' attention, and accept to be treated anyway the husbands like. As a result many women in Afghanistan suffer from mental and sexual abuse. Thus, many of those who can not stand the agony choose suicide as their escape. Survey done by UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) proves this fact. It is reported that "65 percent of the 50,000 widows in Kabul see suicide the only option to get rid of their miseries and desolation." (Rawa.org)

To end these women's misery, supports from many people are needed. The Afghanistan government has to be more serious in solving the women's problems. Laws dealing with these problems have to be applied properly so that women get both protection and justice from the country. Support from the world can also give influential impact for better and respectful lives for Afghani women. The world through women organizations, human rights associations, and the United Nations can also enforce Afghanistan politically to make deliberate improvement or changes for these women.

2. Removing Burqa

In almost all scenes of *Osama*, women always appear with their blue burqas ("Freedom Or Theocracy?: Constitution-ism In Afghanistan And Iraq"). In Islam, wearing burqa supposedly symbolizes honor and modesty ("Voice From Behind The Veil"). However, Shirvani (2002) explains that the fact that women wearing burqa are treated differently in Afghanistan is a result of the religious interpretation of the society's male leadership. So later when the subjugation against Afghani women is exposed, burqa suddenly has a new meaning for the Western: "a familiar trope of oppressed womanhood." ("Voice From Behind The Veil") Therefore, removing or rejecting to wear burqa can be categorized as a form of liberation (Mernissi).

Osama, on the contrary to other women in the film, does not wear her veil until almost at the end, when the Taliban finally find out her identity. Even when she is waiting for punishment, she opens her burqa twice. One of the Taliban closes her burqa every time she reveals her face.

Her rejection toward wearing burqa can literally means rejection toward the uncomfortable nature of wearing the veil. However her rejection can also be interpreted as a symbol of a girl who tries to liberate herself from the Taliban's oppression. She rejects to be treated unjust like other women.

Osama is the only girl who appears "open" without her veil, mingles with other boys, and experiences body contact with the other gender. For a while, when she sees other boys playing happily during the break, she looks pleased. Nobody notices her as a girl, and nobody treats her differently because she looks similar (read: equal) to other boys.

Symbolically, her being pleased represents the dream of the Afghani women. They wish to be in equal position as men, so that they are not treated differently and unjust. Afghani women also wish to be free so they are able to involve themselves in social interaction, and be independent like men.

On the other hand, being similar like men in appearance, like what *Osama* has to do in order to get her equal position, is not the best answer for women's liberation in Afghanistan. Being similar to men in this definition is like denying the feminine side of women. This way seems to "force" women to throw away their womanhood and behave like men. So in the end, it is not the true equality of both genders that is achieved. Instead, it is the acquisition that being a man is better than being a woman.

3. Climbing a Tree

Osama climbing a leafless tree in the Taliban military camp is one of the most

important scenes in this film. Cornered when some boys accuse her of her identity, Osama is forced to prove that she is not a girl. Espandi, her only friend in the camp, tries to protect her by saying that Osama can climb a tree. Furthermore, he claims that only boys climb trees. Osama does prove that she can climb. She even reaches the top branches and makes other boys amazed. However, she finds it difficult to get down.

This scene is figurative in a way that it represents how far feminist movement can go. In male dominated countries like Afghanistan, society always have assumption that only certain gender can do certain thing.

The tree here can symbolize society's certain idea or assumption. As seen in the film, the tree is leafless. As dead as it looks, the society's assumption often appears similar. Meanwhile the act of climbing represents any activities/jobs that society assumes only men can do.

When Osama climbs the tree, she proves herself to others that she can do what people believe to be impossible for a girl to do. This symbolizes that women can also do what men can do, maybe even better. It is just a matter of opportunities. The opportunities are just what the Afghani women need to prove themselves.

Osama's fear of getting down from

the tree is like the fear of Afghani women to get down to the disrespectful lives. Before the Taliban occupied the country, women were educated and employed (Infoplease.com). Women's rights and position were more respected. They were independent and able to prove themselves. However, the brutal force from the Taliban which banished women from their works and schools has enforced women to get down from their former position. Women were placed in a very low hierarchy.

Osama and World's Participation

The Taliban might have lost their power over Afghanistan (Infoplease.com), but the religious fundamentalism which was indoctrinated during their period has taken root too deep in Afghani people (Rawa.org). The Afghani people still discriminate women after the leaving of Taliban (Infoplease.com). This current situation is symbolized by three events in the film:

a. Unjust Punishment

A woman is accused of advocating profanity. Without hearing from any witnesses, nor plea from the accused, this woman is acclaimed guilty and then stoned to death in front of Afghani men who attend the court. Some men who at-

tend the court rise from the ground and praise Allah for punishing the woman.

This scene represents the result of the corrupt religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism itself is known as an oppressive movement toward women within the religion (MONSHIPOURI). Since the fundamentalism in Afghanistan favors male domination in every action, and it is eventually influenced by the corrupted, rotten government, injustice toward women is continued. Women's rights are still subjugated.

b. Osama's wedlock

Osama, who is waiting for her turn to be punished in front of the Afghani men, is eventually saved by an old man who teaches in the Taliban military camp. She is wed to this old man without her consent.

Saving Osama from the punishment can be interpreted like saving women from the Taliban regime. When the Taliban left the Afghanistan, women were reported to throw out their burqas (Infoplease.com). However, this joyous moment did not last long. As represented by Osama's wedlock, Afghani women fall into another trap. The wedlock is a symbol of sexual enslavement in the post Taliban era. The current report from RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) mentions that crimes, including sexual abuses,

toward women have become the tradition in Afghanistan (Rawa.org). Women are raped, forced into prostitution, and married to old men (Rawa.org).

c. The padlock

The old man takes Osama to his house, where he in the end asks Osama to choose a padlock. When Osama does not give any answer, she is "awarded" the biggest padlock as her wedding gift.

Padlock is a symbol of male domination and imprisonment. Although the Taliban has lost their power, women still can not be free. Their rights and lives are still imprisoned by their own men's power.

The women's liberation in Afghanistan is still far away from success. Injustice and discrimination against women still exist. The male domination and corrupt government influenced by the Islamic fundamentalism have put women's position very low in the social hierarchy. As a result, many women are still tortured nowadays. Osama have carried some of Afghani women's bitter, painful messages to the world. It opens the world's eyes that Afghani women are hoping the world to pay more attention to their suffering. These women also dream for the equality like their Western sisters. It now depends on the world and the Afghanistan themselves, whether they are going to let this injustice to keep

continuing, or liberate these women so that they can also enjoy better lives. A nation can never survive only with men. A nation still has to remember that without women, there will be no men on earth.

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