

OSAMA

Director: Siddiq Barmak
Writers: Siddiq Barmak
Release Date: 2003
Running Time: 83 minutes
Language: Pashtu, English, Dari
Country: Afghanistan

Synopsis: A single mother and her 12-year-old daughter lose their jobs when the Taliban closes the hospital where they work. Because she is a woman, the mother cannot walk alone in the streets and cannot seek other employment. Lacking any male relatives who might care for them, the mother disguises her daughter, Osama, as a boy and finds a job for her. While disguised as a boy, Osama is taken by the Taliban to join a school and given military training. Another boy, Espandi, takes her under his wing and tries to help protect her identity.

Eventually Osama is outed. She stands trial for the crime of impersonating a boy. Her life is spared, and instead of punishment she is given in marriage to a man who already has three wives.

This was the first film to be made in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. The actors are all amateurs living in and around the city of Kabul. During the Taliban regime, women were not allowed to work or to leave their homes without a male relative. This meant that widows with no brothers or male cousins could not go out in public, not even to support themselves and their families. The film examines this issue primarily, but also gives insight into the lives of the Afghan people.

It is helpful to know that “Osama” is a common male and female name in the Middle East.

More information:

Official Film Website <http://www.unitedartists.com/osama/>

“Who are the Taleban?” http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/144382.stm

“The Taliban” http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/the_taliban

Al-Jazeera <http://english.aljazeera.net/English>

run a search for “Taliban” or click on South/Central Asia to see the latest news

Characters:

Osama: *Marina Golbahari*

Espandi: *Arif Herati*

Mother: *Zubaida Sahar*

A Note from the Writer/Director:

“When the Taliban took control of Kabul, after two weeks, I was obliged to escape from Kabul to the north through the Shamali Plain. After two and a half years, I immigrated to Pakistan.

“While in Pakistan, I was looking to make a short fiction film and was trying to find special subjects and characters. At first I wanted to collect as much information as possible, combining my real-live events with others’ recollections and experiences. Coincidentally, I read

a letter from an old Afghan teacher about a little girl with a burning desire to attend school during the Taliban regime when it was forbidden for girls. She changed her appearance to look like a boy by cutting her hair and wearing boys' cloths. Of course, it was a story which shocked me and my friends. That story inspired my film *Osama*.

“*Osama* is a bitter and tragic story of Afghan life under the Taliban regime, a terrible time when no one could make their own decisions. It's a story about those who lost their identity and rights, using the little girl, Osama, as the conduit for their story. It is a story about fear in a time when people fear even the sounds of the shadows. It is a story about the seemingly endless injustices wrought unto women. And it is the story of a little girl and the injustice and religious extremism she's forced to carry on her small shoulders.

“The first two short action films I made were with non-professional actors and actresses, mostly children. Those films were helpful when it came time to cast *Osama*. In order to get the children to play the way they did, I had to use many different styles and methods. Also, considering the current situation and the fears still present today, it was difficult to find the actresses for *Osama*.”

Background: (from: <http://www.unitedartists.com/osama/>)

Introduction

Though Afghanistan is known today primarily for the atrocities committed against women by the now deposed Taliban regime (as well as for their destruction of the statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan and their links to Al Qaeda), Afghanistan has a rich 5000-year-old cultural heritage. Some time during the 4th century B.C., the world's largest Buddhas (175 feet by 120 feet) were carved into a cliff at Bamiyan in the central mountains of Afghanistan. Other structures – palaces, mosques and gardens – were built by various rulers over the centuries. The country's literature is one of the richest in Central Asia, and it is the birthplace of Rumi and a place from which much poetry and philosophy emanated.

However, Afghanistan has also had a continual history of wars and strife. Its position along the most important trade routes connecting southern and eastern Asia to Europe and the Middle East made it a coveted piece of land that many nations fought over for centuries. And it is the people of Afghanistan that have suffered the consequences.

Landlocked and covered with mountains (mountains make up 75% of the country), the topography of Afghanistan has dictated its social structures. The ethnic people outside of major urban centers (mostly villagers) subsist mainly through herding cattle and live within ethnic groups. They are separated by the mountains surrounding them. These groups generally fail to see themselves as sharing one Afghan identity and rather identify themselves by their ethnicity or clan.

The four primary ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the Pashtuns, the Hazara, the Uzbeks, and the Tajiks. The Pashtuns, Sunni Moslems, are by far the most numerous of these ethnic groups. The instability that has characterized the country's history has been in great part a consequence of these ethnic divisions and a lack of success at creating anything resembling a centralized governing body with legitimate authority across the country.

Modern History

By creating an arbitrary border between Afghanistan and India in the late 19th century (known as the Durand Line), the British, in effect, while not colonizing Afghanistan, created a buffer zone between the Russians and their own interests in India. In doing so, they also applied a solution that suited their needs to the problem of Pashtunistan, a region in dispute between Afghanistan and India. By dividing the region this way, the seeds were sown for what was later to be a flight of Pashtun refugees to what is today Pakistan. There they were trained and eventually returned to Afghanistan as the Taliban.

Afghanistan was ruled by Mohammed Zahir Shah from 1933 to 1973 (in 1953 he was ousted by Daud Khan in a coup and then reinstated again in 1963). He ruled cautiously attempting to modernize the country. Daud Khan, who ousted Zahir Shah in 1953 and ruled until 1963, successfully introduced several far-reaching educational and social reforms in the country such as allowing women to wear the veil voluntarily and abolishing purdah (the practice of secluding women from public view). In 1964 Zahir Shah instituted an experiment in constitutional monarchy, but failed to promulgate laws voted in by his parliament.

In 1973 another coup deposed Zahir Shah for good. In 1977 the new regime was ousted by a coup, and The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was born. The coup had been effectuated by an alliance of two opposing left wing factions: The Banner Party and the People Party. Once in power, the People Party quickly established its power over the Banner faction. Purges followed. While the party in power denied being a Soviet puppet government, it attempted to institute Marxist-Leninist programs throughout the country. These were in opposition to the mostly Moslem population's beliefs and practices.

A civil war broke out. In 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. The Russian occupation and the ensuing civil war added to the harsh conditions experienced by most of the Afghan population. Famine and death by starvation were rampant. Other deaths were a result of the conflicts and fighting. There were also innumerable deaths caused by the myriad landmines strewn all over the country. The casualties multiplied. In 2001 [sic] 10% of the country's population had died and 30% were refugees to Iran or Pakistan.

In the course of the civil war and thereafter, many refugees had fled Afghanistan to Pakistan. Concerned about protecting its own interests in Pashtunistan and believing secular Afghan nationalist resistance movements, once in power, might attempt to dispute the Pashtunistan territory, Pakistan provided training to the mujahideen (those fighting a jihad or holy war) religious activists, large numbers of whom were Pashtun refugees in Pakistan.

Although the Russians were ousted in 1989, chaos ensued. Urban neighborhoods and villages were terrorized by warlords who laid claim to them. Women were frequently raped by fighting rabble. A short-lived communist regime was in place that fell in 1992 when a coalition of mujahideen parties formed a government. This, in turn, was ousted in 1996 by a movement based in Kandahar that called itself Taliban. the Taliban quickly established its power over all but a small corner of Afghanistan (which remained under the control of the Northern Alliance). The Afghan people's utter war-weariness and the Taliban's ability to restore a semblance of order account for the group's ascension to power in Afghanistan.

The Taliban were eventually toppled by a coalition of Afghan forces supported by the United States in 2001 after the September 11 attacks and the Taliban's refusal to cooperate in turning over Al Qaeda members to the U.S.

The Taliban

At the time the Taliban seized power, there was massive instability, crime, and chaos in Afghanistan. Even those who opposed them were at first pleased with the security they instated. Public disarmament and draconian punishments – such as amputating thieves' hands, stoning to death those accused of adultery, and executions – brought back a relative public order in sharp contrast to the chaos prevalent before the Taliban.

What followed, however, as a result of the fanatical rule of these fundamentalists, was a tragedy for Afghanistan. The Taliban established the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Its precepts governed every aspect of life, and the tyranny that ensued damaged no one as much as it did women.

Prior to the arrival of the Taliban, Afghan women had enjoyed rights equal to men. In the 1960s wearing a veil had been made voluntary. Women found jobs in offices and stores and some were university-educated. While more traditional roles prevailed in villages, in the urban centers there were women working as teachers, doctors and engineers.

With the advent of the Taliban, virtually overnight, women were prohibited from working or receiving an education. The burqa – a garment that covers a woman from head to toe with only a grid in the fabric to allow her to look out – was announced as being mandatory, the only acceptable outfit in public for all women at all times. No woman was allowed outside her home unaccompanied by a man. A woman was not to speak to a man unrelated to her and was to face the wall in the presence of any such man.

The male population in Afghanistan was decimated because of years of unrest and civil war, the flight of many men as refugees or in search of work to other countries, and the deaths of many others. With many men gone or dead, the Taliban's decrees rendered day-to-day living impossible for the women left behind. They were in effect being told they must starve to death. Under the circumstances, many women found it preferable to be married to a man who had three or four wives, for at least they could survive. Without a man, they had no hope of subsistence. Polygamy thrived under the Taliban, and was condoned and advocated by them.

Over a period of several years, 10,000,000 women were forced to live under burqas. Countless Afghan women – women who had been leading active lives prior to the arrival of the Taliban – committed suicide or were killed by the Taliban during the years of their rule, even for the most minor infractions against the rules laid out by the authorities.

All forms of entertainment were banned, as were all images, photographs, paintings, and, of course, films or television. Music was prohibited as was Western clothing. Men were not allowed to shave their beards; it was considered a crime to shave. Turbans were mandatory for men.

These laws were not practiced in other Islamic nations, Sunni or Moslem. The Taliban interpreted the Shari'a or Islamic law to their own liking and administered it to the people of Afghanistan. In the spring of 2001, the Taliban militia used explosives to bring down the soaring statues of the Buddhas at Bamiyan.