CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Cinematic Islamic feminism and the female war gaze: Reflections on Waad Al-Kataeb's For Sama
Authors	Mincheva, Dilyana
Publication date	2020-11-01
Original Citation	Mincheva, D. (2021) 'Cinematic Islamic feminism and the female war gaze: Reflections on Waad Al-Kataeb's For Sama', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 20, pp. 54-70. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.05
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.20.05
Rights	© 2021, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-10-30 20:55:38
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/11000

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 20, 2020, pp. 54–70
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.05

Cinematic Islamic Feminism and the Female War Gaze: Reflections on Waad Al-Kateab's *For Sama*

Dilyana Mincheva

Abstract: *One of 2019's most acclaimed documentaries, Waad Al-Kateab's* For Sama *is an extraordinary feminist representation of the Syrian civil war (2011–present). Al-Kateab impressively documents five years of the most traumatic contemporary conflict in the Middle East by focusing on personal confessions to Sama, her new-born daughter. Raw, dramatic, and sometimes unbearable to watch, it is a poetic tribute to a micro-level, "singularly unmanly", and painfully intimate portrayal of war and hope (Montgomery). A mixture of love and horror unfold through a kaleidoscopic personal narrative that broaches macro-political and religious subjects without centralising them in the cinematic experience. This article discusses how Al-Kateab's documentary is a novel and risky experiment that intermingles the female war gaze with a subtle, image-based Islamic feminism. Capitalising on Svetlana Alexievich's "female war gaze", which represents the invisible stories of women in war, I show how Al-Kateab's cinematography expands the scope of the female war experience through carefully selected visual refences to Islamic ethical praxis, as interiorised by the camerawoman.* For Sama *is simultaneously an intimate motherly confession and act of both "listening" and "remembrance" (as the praxis of the Sufi Samāʿ suggests). In short, it mediates an ethical truth about the human condition in ruins.*

Introduction: The Horrors of the War and the Female War Gaze

My argument about the significance of *For Sama* (Waad Al-Kateab, 2019) is developed in two parts. First, I put Al-Kateab's sensibility in conversation with another feminist dissident, activist and intellectual who is also a pioneer in trying to resurrect and validate the unique war experience. Belarussian documentary filmmaker Svetlana Alexievich's work on Russian women during the Second World War offers a useful lens through which to examine the work of Al-Kateab. There are cosmopolitan affinities and odd similarities between contexts, histories and spaces, which (when put in comparative perspective) also constitute novelties in feminist thinking about the macro topics of war, history and memory. Second, I describe the distinct workings of Al-Kateab's camera (via Joey Soloway's understanding of the female gaze) through the ethics of Sufism and the praxis of *Samāʿ* arguing that they complicate Al-Kateab's feminism by expanding it into a novel mode of Islamic feminist seeing/feeling.

The widely acclaimed 2019 Syrian war documentary *For Sama* contains a variety of iconic, chaotic, and brutally honest scenes that are sometimes unbearable to watch. Details unfold through the surreal and intimate narrations of Waad Al-Kateab, whose words often come like thoughts recorded in a diary. Hospital staff chat, laugh, and warm themselves on a projectile that has punctured the roof and landed on the floor. Children wander around carrying the dusty and motionless bodies or body parts of their siblings. Many stare blankly at the ruins of Aleppo while

© Dilyana Mincheva
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

reminiscing about their lost friends and relatives. Images of body bags containing children are shown. Old men play chess inside the bombed remains of a bizarre pink building. Pre-schoolers recognise the differences between missiles and shell bombs with disturbing detail. There are long takes of falling mortar and chaotic roaring sounds in a surgery room where a wounded patient's death is delivered in an overwhelming, out-of-focus shot. A blast of noise emerges, with scattered limbs and blood. Bombed busses have been turned into rainbow playgrounds for toddlers. The piled bodies of tortured and executed civilians are identified by the loud, dignified chants of their relatives, "our dead have gone to paradise!" Aleppo seems like a vast and ghostly mass grave. Meanwhile, Al-Kateab's quiet, whisper-like narrations bring a testimony of truth to these painful images: "Even when I close my eyes, I see the colour red. Blood everywhere. On walls, on floors, on our clothes. Sometimes we cry blood."

Still, other scenes depict moments of precious and fragile warmth, happiness, and resilience. These include amateurishly shot glimpses of the euphoric student protests at Aleppo University in 2011, marking the beginning of the Arab Spring in Syria. There are also images of doctors and volunteers who enthusiastically create a makeshift hospital in the midst of falling bombs. Such acts provide emotional shelter while projecting normalcy within the war routine. Al-Kateab and Hamza fall in love and get married. Their daughter Sama is born. The young family is determined to live, work, and raise their newborn in Aleppo. Hamza and Al-Kateab grow a garden. Some scenes show them in their bedroom and living room. Their friend Afraa cooks in her kitchen. The makeshift hospital becomes a refuge, shelter, and home-space for Al-Kateab's young family. In an extraordinary moment of intimacy and war, Al-Kateab plays with her cooing baby daughter while mortar bombs provide an extra-terrestrial soundscape: "There's lots of airstrikes today, right? But we haven't been hit, yay!" Al-Kateab's joyful exclamation is at odds with the noises of technologically sophisticated and impersonal bombs amid wistful sirens. It is the sound of human fragility in the face of war. Her gentle motherly hug is a counterpoint to the noise of the bombings; it is humane, joyful, and symbolic. It is a reminder that Al-Kateab, in all her vulnerability, is also someone who is present, breathing, and laughing, not against the bombs, but *with* the bombs. Her indefatigable love for Sama is the most defiant resistance to a regime of violence and atrocity.

Al-Kateab, with her hand-held camera and phone, records the experiences of activists and professionals as they work through the war, which unfolds in the emergency department at the sole intact hospital in the city, and on the nearby streets of Aleppo. Hamza, Al-Kateab's husband, is one of only thirty-two medical doctors who did not leave when President Assad's army, equipped with Russians weapons and support, crushed the Arab Spring in 2011. The war that followed, and continues to this day, generated the largest displacement of people (as migrants and refugees) since the Second World War (Reid). Al-Kateab, who has a degree in economics, has acknowledged during interviews that she never saw herself as a filmmaker; rather, she grabbed a camera and simply began to record. Her first subjects were the student protests, and later she turned her focus to the devastation around her. The desire to film was not borne out of vocation, but of necessity (Montgomery). "I really didn't feel we were going to make it out of Aleppo alive […] so, I thought, the least I can do is leave a record so one day when Assad is brought to justice, there will be proof of all his crime", she said (Aziza). Al-Kateab's original footage consists of more than 500 hours documenting the vicissitudes of the Syrian uprising, including the atrocious bombing of Aleppo by Assad's armies. The city was beaten into submission with cluster bombs, barrel bombs, airstrikes, and chlorine gas. Radical Islamists then attempted to appropriate the ensuing street riots.

Al-Kateab's narration is directly addressed to her daughter: "Sama. You are the most beautiful thing in our life. But what a life I've brought you into. You didn't choose this. Will you ever forgive me?"

Al-Kateab's moving narration and visualisation of what I term the "female war gaze" could be seen as genealogically related to existing documentary feminist representations of atrocity. Documentary filmmaker Halla Alabdallah Yakoub's filmography is among the first feminist work on issues of dissidence and political repression in Syria. Her iconic experimental documentaries *I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave* (*Ana alati tahmol azouhour ila qabriha*, 2006), *Hey! Don't Forget the Cumin* (*Hey! La tensi el kamoun*, 2008) and *As If We Were Catching a Cobra* (*Comme si nous attrapions un cobra*, 2012), present a vociferous critique of the Ba'ath regime through poetic and deeply personal portrayal of exiled women and artists (Van Der Peer 193). In Alabdallah's experimental films the arts seem to be presented as the only enlightened alternative to fear and oppression. However, made through the eyes of someone who has left Syria for France more than 20 years ago, Alabdallah's documentaries are not interested directly in representing war violence and physical devastation. Alabdallah's camera is reflective and elegiac, but it is also somewhat detached from the physical devastation of Syria, prioritising the exilic experience and melancholic pain of the women and artists she portrays. Citizen journalists and video activists, on the other hand, have represented in visceral, timely, and gut-wrenching ways both the violent and mundane aspects of the uprising, turning the Syrian war into the first "YouTubed war" in history (Koettl). The Syrian footage representing the conflict as it unfolds, estimated to amount to more than 300,000 videos shared on YouTube, Vimeo, and LiveLeaks, and described as "emergency cinema" by scholars and artists (Wessels 40–1; Boex), perhaps best captures the indefatigable will of Syrians to provide testimonies and thus create a digital archive of audio-visual collective memory of the uprising. Some of Al-Kateab's unedited footage, for example, first appeared on YouTube and later in edited pieces on Channel 4 in the UK. Josepha Wessels's comprehensive and first of its kind study on the creation of documentary evidence of the Syrian revolution outlines the emergence of numerous amateur, semi-professional, and professional media collectives and initiatives, both in English and Arabic, that formed as a response to the war, and currently exist with various, and sometimes competing, political, religious, existential, and identity-building agendas (Wessels, 193–231). This, of course, comes to confirm the extraordinary complexity of the Syrian context within which *For Sama* emerges.

Situated on the nexus of personal and aesthetic testimony, a feminist and motherly confession, an amateurish video-production and professional video editing, *For Sama* is a documentary, which challenges established forms of documentary production. Al-Kateab is not a professional journalist or videographer at the time of reporting. Yet her emotional tone and raw visuals communicate "a truth", *her truth*, which is so profoundly personal and heartfelt that it is difficult not to acknowledge its humanity and validity. Al-Kateab's documentary—with its overt emphasis on the female gaze—is also different from the documentary productions and testimonies about the Syrian war that received considerable public attention in the West in recent years: Feras Fayyad and Steen Johannessen's *Last Men in Aleppo* (*De sidste mænd i Aleppo*, 2017), Feras Fayyad's *The Cave* (2019), Matthew Heineman's *City of Ghosts* (2017), and Talal Derki's *Of Fathers and Sons* (*Kinder des Kalifats*, 2017). Unlike these acclaimed documentary texts, Al-Kateab's *For Sama* does not discuss geopolitics, religion, heroism, or duty in any direct way. Yet, it does have a stake in these topics through the subtle unfolding of a particular type of feminist

approach to filming and narration that I define in this article as the ethical gaze of Islamic cinematic feminism.



Figure 1: Al-Kateab shooting *For Sama*. 2019. Screenshot.

Cosmopolitan Affinities: Svetlana Alexievich, Joey Soloway, and Waad Al-Kateab

In the *Unwomanly Face of War,* Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Noble Prize for Literature, uses documentary prose to present hours of intimate interviews (conducted between 1978 and 2004) with women who experienced the Second World War, either as soldiers in the Red Army, or as caretakers (3–19). Alexievich suggests that women have unique and widely unrecognised ways of interiorising and dealing with war experiences. Regardless of the fact that 800,000 Soviet women were sent to the frontlines and fought to defeat Nazi Germany, no significant attention has been paid to their voices during the war or its aftermath (Novikau 314–26). Alexievich identifies two intersecting reasons why women have been erased from the official war records. The first is macro-political and involves the hyper-masculine historical narrative of militarised societies. In the Soviet context, a public normative prescription typically frames war as "unwomanly" business. Women have historically been excluded from what Alexievich refers to in Russian as *muzjestvo,* a type of masculine bravery. This notion is inscribed in the Soviet post-war nationalistic narrative of heroism. Within that framework, women had much fewer opportunities to start families, become respected mothers, or settle on career paths if their femininity was publicly undermined through involvement in the Great Patriotic war (Alexievich 109). The second reason is micro-historical and relates to the differentiated ways in which women and men process grand historical movements. While war historiographers are interested in the rationale for tactical battles and therefore focus on key commanders and celebrated heroes—that

is, narratives populated with men's names and achievements—Alexievich's project is concerned with uncovering the everyday experiences of ordinary and mundane voices while capturing the emotional landscape of the war. In this context, women are the emotional—and therefore widely disregarded—storytellers of the war: "Women's war has its own colours, its own smells, its own lightning and its own range of feelings. There are no heroes or incredible feats, there are simply people who are doing inhumanly human things" (Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face* xvi).

In one regard, Alexievich's gathered testimonies show that there is no such thing as a monolithic Soviet woman, despite the fact that her own magnum opus consisting of five books titled *Voices of Utopia* (encompassing the time after the end of the Second World War through communism, the Chernobyl crisis, and the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union) capitalises on a generalised version of the Soviet subject, which she terms *Homo sovieticus*.[1] The women that Alexievich carefully documents and whose truths she wanted to preserve are multiple, dispersed, and infinitely differential in their memory and appraisal of the war. On a different level, though, there is something that unites these women: specifically, a shared belief in the magnificence and justness of the Soviet project. Much of this was a product of both its own time and the industrial-military complex of the Soviet state. While Alexievich's women were never officially celebrated as part of the masculine narrative of courage and bravery, their polyphonic perceptions of the war still allow them to justify the unthinkable sacrifice thus required in the name of the utopian (and historically unfulfilled) Soviet promise.

While Svetlana Alexievich's war narrative is certainly cinematic and testimonial, this is not what is typically understood as war cinema war cinema (Chapman; Cunningham and Nelson). Likewise, Al-Kateab's narrative of besieged and war-torn Aleppo is cinematic and testimonial, but it is not a classic war documentary in the way the aforementioned documentaries representing the conflict in Syria are (i.e., focused on battles, tactics, clearly identifying enemies and heroes). Yet, *For Sama* is also not precisely a YouTube type of testimony—unfiltered and unedited; short and uncalculated. Al-Kateab's voiceover (added in the process of editing) and raw aesthetics, indeed, evoke Alexievich's approach to testimony where after many long hours of listening, Alexievich would synthesise the women's stories and tell them in a narrative that she owns and directs.

Belinda Smaill makes a fascinating claim about the unique capacity of documentary film to represent pain and emotion (through a process of "narrativization of the self") in no less evocative and tangible ways than fiction films, which are considered the primary domain for that type of representation (Smaill 153; 161). The 1999 classic *Beau Travail*, directed by Claire Denis, provided a look into the French Foreign Legion in Djibouti. Rachel Morrison (the director of cinematography for *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018) was nominated for an Oscar in 2018 for her work on *Mudbound* (Dee Rees, 2017), a film focused on history and positioned at the intersection of race, war, and nationhood at the end of the Second World War. In 2020, Nadine Labaki became the first Arab woman-director to be nominated for an Oscar for her work on the movie *Capernaum* (*Capharnaüm*, Nadine Labaki, 2018), which provides a detailed exploration of the trauma of war and devastation of poverty in Lebanon through a feminist lens. However, one may ask whether something particular unites storytelling and filmmaking from the women's perspective. Such a question would make the analytic category of the "female gaze" plausible.[2]

Claire Denis, for example, even through her unique aesthetic approach to war and sexuality—soldiers in *Beau Travail* are shown in uneven rhythmic sequences of training, doing laundry, and dancing at a local nightclub—denies the existence of the female gaze:

> The gaze is a decision. It's not a gender. It's a little disgusting to accept the female gaze. […] But in asking myself if my way of starting a script is feminine, sometimes I feel it and I don't know why. As if something in me was slightly refusing too much fiction. Maybe this is feminine? (qtd. in Walker)

Joey Soloway, who directed both the award-winning Amazon Prime series *Transparent* (2014–19) and *I Love Dick* (2016–17) (as Jill Soloway) expands on the concept of the female gaze by making it distinctly intersectional and emancipatory.[3] Soloway politicises the use of the term "female gaze". The term in Soloway's description does not function simply as a corrective to the male gaze but, rather, it has its own political function. During a Master Class at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016, Soloway spoke of the challenges one may confront when defining the female gaze in cinema. Following the tripartite structure of the male gaze, as developed by film theorist Laura Mulvey (6–18), Soloway defined the female gaze first as "a way of feeling seeing", and a "subjective camera" that takes the perspective of embodied female emotions, then making them central to the narrative and visual representations within the filmic frame.[4] The female gaze is not about women dominating the screen in an attempt to objectify the male body by presenting it as a female source of phantasmatic pleasure. Rather, it is a political lens that prioritises the experiences and emotions of women by revealing them in their incredible complexity and ambiguity. According to Soloway, the other two components of the female gaze are the visualisation of how it feels for women to be objects of the male gaze and the "socio-political justice demanding way of art making", which inevitably works to include more female directors, cinematographers, writers, and producers who create stories from the female point of view. This last side triangulating the female gaze, of course, transcends the work of individual artists. Indeed, it begs a revolutionary rethinking of the industrial structures making up the cinema business:

> I want you to see the female gaze as a conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool. It is a wrestling away! Perhaps a wrestling away of the point of view, of the power of the privilege propaganda for purposes of changing the way the world feels for women when they move their bodies through the world feeling themselves as the subject. (Soloway)

It is perhaps reasonable to suggest that Al-Kateab was not familiar with Soloway's address, as she was working in war-torn Aleppo in 2016. Yet, she gave an interview response that nearly echoed Soloway's articulation of the female gaze when describing her attempt to portray war in *For Sama*:

> I feel that it is my perspective as Waad, and I am female, so of course it is [female]. I knew that most of the war reports like news or documentaries, or whatever, even if [they were] from a female perspective, [they were] all limited by male power or rules. (Montgomery)

This female gaze is evident in Al-Kateab's interest in the mundane, trivial, and non-heroic details of war. Just as Svetlana Alexievich, Al-Kateab registers the micro-perspective on war as a deeply

felt emotion; that is, as a kaleidoscopic sensation of smell, colour, and sound. Where Alexievich's project intended to excavate the female perspective on war, which in her words amounts to writing a "history of human feelings" (Alexievich, *A Search*), Al-Kateab's camerawork provides an account of the war, which is not centred around grand events or political analyses. Instead, it focuses on the seeing/feeling aspects of being a woman and mother in that particular moment of history. The cacophonic scenes of the hospital's emergency room come in sequences interspersed with scenes from Waad's garden and close shots of cuddling her baby or looking at Afraa's rice. Towards the end of the documentary, when the loss of Aleppo is final and Waad is expecting another child on her way to England as a political refugee, she still addresses Sama by saying: "I thought we lost everything when we lost Aleppo. But we didn't. We have Taima now. I can smell Aleppo on her skin".

To borrow a metaphor from Soloway's address, the whole experience of watching *For Sama* is like a "heroine journey", in which the camera itself is not simply capturing images but playing a *feeling action* by blurring the focus, oozing, shaking, or melting—sometimes it is exquisitely still and lucid. The result is a visual and narrative structure that reveals the eruption of the war world—in front of us and in us—as the camerawoman comes to an increasingly vivid awareness of her own metaphysical presence as the documentarist of this particular world. To be clear, Al-Kateab's practise of the female gaze exceeds a simple response to the male gaze. Even so, interview responses reveal that male journalists have told her she "was wasting her time […] because she's female and she can't be out" (Montgomery). The female gaze in Al-Kateab's documentary is a subjective statement on war, the Assad regime, the West's lack of action, the despair of motherhood, and the fragility of dreams and imagination in the face of a ruined human condition. Al-Kateab's female gaze is both melancholic and enraged. In mediainterviews, Al-Kateab has specified her overtly female approach to filming: "Being a woman I felt, *I want to speak about this*. *I don't want to ignore my feelings*" (Roy, emphasis added by author). The female gaze is cast against a world of desperation and loneliness seen through Al-Kateab's camera. In one of her darkest moments, she addresses her daughter Sama with a most painful confession: "I wish I'd never given birth to you".

For Sama: The Ethics of the Female War Gaze

Of the visual and narrative plenitudes defining the emotional range of the documentary, there are two scenes that I believe constitute novel aspects of feminist war cinematography. Each captures the unspeakable horrors of war from both the female and maternal perspectives. In these scenes, Al-Kateab's cinematography expands the scope of the female war experience through the inclusion of visual refences to Islamic ethical praxis, as interiorised by the camerawoman. These are not conscious or deliberately political modes of the camera, as the documentary is not delivered as a religious or political message. As mentioned earlier, the documentary is a diary; it is an intimate confession, a motherly whisper. Yet, in its graphic depiction of war "from below", Al-Kateab's testimonial camera is also a way of "listening" and "remembrance", a way of mediating an ethical truth about the human condition in war. In this regard, it is an uncanny coincidence that Sama in Arabic means "sky", but also sonically evokes the praxis of the Sufi ritual *Samāʿ*, which is precisely built on the transcendental approximation to the divine via listening and remembrance (Lewisohn 1–33). The ritual, deviating from Muslim Sunni orthodoxy, involves chanting and the

reaching of ecstasy through dance that transports the worshipper into a mystical trance, particularly when practiced by women (Abbas).[5] The praxis of *Samāʿ* literally captures the effort of preserving "that which is heard" while putting the worshipper in a pronounced affective mode (Arab. *aḥwāl*) (Diaz 160). As such, the title of the documentary evokes an interplay between the reference to "sky", which in the present Syrian context denotes bombs and devastation while providing a reference to human aspiration towards divine unity and justice. The exceptional originality of Al-Kateab's cinematography is that she manages to translate this sonic complexity of *Sama* into visual and affective language.

In the first scene, a woman dressed in all-black enters the hospital asking for her son Muhammad. The camera follows her closely when she finds her son's covered dead body. "This is my son, don't take him away from me", the weeping woman says, attempting to leave the improvised hospital premises while holding the corpse with her bare hands. She refuses to leave the body there, even though the hospital staff urges her to do so. As camerawoman, Al-Kateab interferes by telling the doctors and nurses to leave the mother alone. The viewers thus become immediate and intimate witnesses of this woman's last moments with her son; that is, of her pain, shock, and numbness, which words fail to describe. Nevertheless, the camera implacably records the moment. The woman moves while clutching the dead body in what she perhaps wishes to be an eternal embrace while wandering the barren streets of Aleppo. The camera moves with her so that the viewer feels they are walking alongside, not through a city, but through a graveyard. There is no context attached to this scene—it is not a political slogan, nor is it a religious promise of redemption or enlightened lecture about war atrocities and violence. There is simply pain, seemingly without hope. Even though the event described in the scene has been shown many times in cinema including in other Syrian documentaries (*Last Men in Aleppo*, *The Cave*, *City of Ghosts*, *Of Fathers and Sons*), the close proximity of this anonymous woman's face, the silence between her movements, her unpretentious devastation, and the dull despair of the camera to make sense of what is portrayed, amplifies the personal tragedy into a powerful war testimony. In its sweeping minimalism, the scene is also about a silent encounter of two mothers. One is in front of the camera, confronted with the most horrific loss. The other is behind the camera. She is observing, documenting, and in some ways anticipating this loss. When Al-Kateab speaks, she addresses her new-born daughter: "I am suffocated, Sama. I keep seeing you as that boy; and me like his mother."

The theoretical works of Susan Sontag and Judith Butler offer a foundation for further conceptualisation of the female war gaze as practiced by Al-Kateab. In her famous 2003 essay *Regarding the Pain of Others,* Susan Sontag reflects on the representation of pain in war images and film. Her main dilemma is how to resolve the distance between the representation of suffering and the spectator. On one hand, both the framing and captioning of the images provide a perspective through which one perceives the horror of war images (Sontag 11–14). The perception of Muhammad's death is already impregnated with political, regional, and cultural meanings, which may resonate more with certain spectators than others. The empathy that this human tragedy elicits is not universal in Sontag's line of thought. She herself gives multiple examples supporting the claim that images of suffering Palestinian, Bosnian, or Jewish children reach audiences in limited ways; usually, any emotional reactions to them are already conditioned by micro- and macropolitical frameworks that exist within the spectator. To reference a phrase coined by Judith Butler, however, images come within an economy of meaning that determines which life is "grievable" and which one is not (*Frames* 7). On the other hand, the tragedy of a dead child *is*

universal because it emphasises an unbearable and universally shared pain. While Sontag engages this as an internal contradiction of photographic representation, Butler asserts that the affective force of images is also their strongest political value, in favour of those lives who may otherwise be excluded from their grieving by state bureaucracies and media machines ("Torture" 956). In Sontag's words, this lies in the ability of images to "haunt" us (71). Although neither Sontag nor Butler connect their ideas about the representations of suffering to the female gaze except for the opening paragraphs of Sontag's essay, where she quotes Virginia Woolf by asserting that "the killing machine has a gender and it is male" (8)—their focus on affect echoes themes of feeling/seeing, which Soloway explores in her "Female Gaze" master class and Al-Kateab further explores in *For Sama*. Laura Marks' work on Arab experimental cinema and media arts in the period between 1990 to 2014 can also help with the formulation of the female war gaze. It provides a philosophical and cultural-historical justification for the emphasis on affect and experimentation that we witness in Al-Kateab's *For Sama*. What Marks defines as a "haptic relation" between text, filmmaker and audience is a structure of affect (25), which mediates "political pressures, fraught histories, divergent narratives, and competing notions of where the truth is founded and can be found" (4). These complex political economies of affect, which define much of the experimental works from the region, crystallise in Al-Kateab's interpretation into a cinematic message, which is profoundly subjective yet fraught with "affective empathy" that transcends the personal story and raises universal questions of justice, redemption, and hope.

As camerawoman, it is perhaps the case that Al-Kateab most accurately visualises these complex intersections of suffering, meaning, and ethics, thereby turning the female gaze into a cinematographic praxis through the scene capturing the dead body of Mohammad and his grieving mother. In a hopeless scene, which may otherwise have been politicised in order to further violence, division, and direct political gain, the viewer rather encounters silence and motherly compassion. In an interview, Al-Kateab said that she could have included many more scenes of dead children in her documentary. For example, the original footage shows "a pile of very young children's bodies" (Kellaway). Yet, she chose to focus on Muhammad's speechless mother. The ensuing hopelessness is precariously redeemed by the gaze of another who is co-feeling, co-breathing, and co-experiencing such human tragedy. The meditative camera eye in that particular moment reveals the profundity of the grieving mother's interior world. We are aware of her presence; we move with her through nothingness. The film encourages the spectator to get into the frame, to abandon the cognitive world, and to enter into a world of pure movement and feeling. The camera also acts in that way as a mediator of justice. It acts as the invisible and compassionate eye of God, who is the ultimate guarantee that beauty and justice exist in a desperate world. It is not coincidental that, without being overtly religious, the documentary mentions "God" thirty-eight times. Indeed, Al-Kateab repeats it on several occasions with the despondent phrase "Oh God, Oh God". The sonic quality of this incantation traversing the documentary attaches a metaphysical dimension to the visuals. "Film me! Film me! Let the world know what is happening!" shouts another mother of a dead child. She is caught on camera in a moment of disorientation and denial just after bringing milk to her dead toddler. The camera is in a *Samāʿ* trance, a dancing and singing dervish performed for God. Is He listening? In another moment of both beauty and despair, Al-Kateab exclaims: "The sounds of our song were louder than the bombs falling outside."

The second scene exploring the paradoxical embrace of life and death, which defines the war experience in Syria, occurs in an improvised surgery theatre, where an emergency Caesarean section is performed. The unconscious woman has sustained injuries from shelling while in the advanced stages of pregnancy, with shrapnel piercing her belly. After a few long and chaotic seconds, the baby is finally outside the mother's womb. He is graphite grey in colour, motionless, dead. Doctors hold him upside down like a lamb, shaking him, trying to bring him back to life. Among other feelings, the film provokes anger against Al-Kateab's camera at this point. Why show us another dead child? Should there not be a limit to the amount of film dedicated to human suffering? And then, a miracle happens; the motionless baby moves and screams. Al-Kateab soothingly, modestly, and unpretentiously assures us that the baby and mother are both fine now. The scene turns redemptive and hopeful, even though it emerges from the darkest moments of the war. In the previous scene, Al-Kateab's camera serves as a mediator between the expectation of justice and legitimate outrage mixed with grief, as the viewer watches Mohammad's mother experience tragedy. However, justice seems restored when the baby survives in the next scene. After all, God seems to be listening. The resurrection of the stillborn echoes an earlier moment in the documentary, when Al-Kateab reflects on beauty, first with regard to the small garden at her and Hamza's new home, and then when talking about Sama's first appearance on the ultrasound: "God created this beauty […] Look how pretty this looks. It looks beautiful." The viewer is again overwhelmed by "feeling – seeing", experiencing this unexpected and affectively played turn of events.

Conclusion: Cinematic Islamic Feminism in Al-Kateab's *For Sama*

Throughout the documentary, Al-Kateab's camera serves as a literal medium for what in the Sufi practice of *Samāʿ* is understood as ecstasy (Arab. *Wajd*) or the "finding of God" (Schimmel 179). This effort of demanding, searching, and recognising divine justice is not marked by eternal bliss. Unlike Islam's doctrinal scriptures and legal traditions, which promise divine justice by unpacking forms of transcendental reasoning, the Sufi approach to the metaphysical reality of God is aesthetic. It is based on a continuous mixture of spiritual and embodied effort. On an ethical level, Sufism perceives human life as embedded in a complex structure of cosmic relations, in which tragedy and beauty co-exist in natural unity. The Sufi practice outlines a path towards God that guarantees harmony, peace, beauty, and justice; furthermore, it is eternally open. It constitutes a struggle and journey towards an absolute being who is simultaneously present and distant, embodied and abstract. It is important to note that Sufism is not interested in sectarian faith divisions or worldly politics in the same way as strictly theological interpretations of Islam (or any other religion). In its preoccupation with the cosmos, Sufism is a macro-framework of universal aspiration towards justice, which operates beyond relative political contexts and, in some cases, also beyond gender divisions.[6] The "listening" and "hearing" inherent in the ritual of *Samāʿ* constitute a painful and ego-erasing yet ecstatic approximation to God, which is nonetheless rooted in the tragic human reality on earth.

Al-Kateab's cinematography champions similar ethical positions. Her approach to tragedy is rooted in a visual narrative in which the camera performs the "ecstatic dance" through acts of testimonial justice. The handheld camera phone aesthetic of the documentary reinforces the message that Al-Kateab's device is an immediate, intimate witness to all the inhuman suffering

that surrounds her. The narration, however, is a post-event addition. It is a humbly subdued reflection of the cost of war. Therefore, the whole cinematic structure of *For Sama* aesthetically explores the juxtaposition between immediateness and pre-meditation; that is, between the embodied experience of war atrocities and their reflective denunciation. Edward Watts, the British documentary filmmaker who helped Al-Kateab with the editing and production processes, says during an interview that the documentary aims to "capture that movement between light and dark, which is actually what this human experience of conflict is all about" (Martin).

My assertion is that Al-Kateab advances an ethical mode of representation where, through the mechanics of the female gaze, she also expands forms of Islamic feminism, which are primarily scriptural and academic. As a purely academic exercise, Islamic feminism lacks public popularity. Echoing the Sufi sensitivity of elegiac hope, Al-Kateab's cinematic semiotics capitalise on an overturning of the expectations of the war documentary genre; rage turns into a whispery dialogue between mother and daughter, the senselessness of the war is exposed through the suffering of children, women's reaction to the war dominates the frames of the documentary, heroism is found in the act of survival and resilience rather than in splendid fights and spectacular sacrifices. The incantations of "Oh, God. In the name of God" and "Please, God. Please, God" create a soundscape to the incredible and incredulous visuals of *For Sama*.

Still, the conceptual scope of the documented image is wider than the personal or communal testimony. In addition to creating a documentary that frames and emphasises a woman's perspective, Al-Kateab also creates a text that cinematically intervenes in the debates around Islamic feminism. In this regard, one can look to the term "Islamic cinematic feminism", which originally reflected the oeuvre of celebrated Iranian director Asghar Farhadi (Mincheva and Hooman 19–32). It indicates the deliberate directorial effort to portray feminism within Islamic societies—a contested and variegated concept that generates heated debate in multiple languages around the parameters of women's engagement with patriarchy—as a nuanced, female-driven negotiation between tradition and freedom.[7] While Farhadi's perspective is cosmopolitan, it is also rooted in the lived and legislated experiences of Islam in Iran. The argument is that the medium of film allows conceptual framings and a public reach that academic Islamic feminism aims for but continually fails to achieve. Most academic work in this area is based on feminist and hermeneutic re-readings of scripture. The jargon-heavy language of critical theory, Islamic legal discourse, and feminist exegesis often alienates public listeners from the message of Islamic feminists, who are also often accused of betrayal, either by orthodox Islamic clerics who see feminism as purely Western colonialist demands meant to erase authentic Islamic culture and praxis, or by Western feminists who claim religion is a patriarchal mechanism (Mestiri). However, cinema works through visual affects, thus reaching audiences that may be intellectually sceptical of the term "feminism", but sensually and intuitively open to its message and contradictions. As a time-based medium, cinema also presupposes a particular relationship to time itself; every frame is infinitely open to reinterpretation and renegotiation, as its perception is always conditioned by the precarious gaze of the viewer, which is rooted in time and space. Cinematic meaning is never fixed. Rather, it is always temporal and unstable, which are basic tenets of academic Islamic feminism in the area of understanding how misogynistic morals and behaviours are established. Yet, cinematic affect is not purely a deeply personalised, emotional response to a filmic frame. It is similar to feminist hermeneutics and exegesis in that it exposes an affective structure with a meaning that is always negotiated externally to the film's intentional realities. Therefore, cinematic affective

entanglements are neither purely textual nor entirely outside the filmic text; they are products of a complex relational encounter between the viewer, context, and text. What does this mean in terms of Al-Kateab's feminism in *For Sama*?

Al-Kateab does not advance any particular reading of Islam in the documentary. Politically, she stands against the atrocities of the Assad regime and distinguishes herself and the people she represents on camera from the Islamic State extremists who have also occupied parts of Syria. This is evident through phrases such as "Our revolution is peaceful. Muslims and Christians together!" and "Islamic extremists were trying to take over the rebellion. But it was the Assad regime that was trying to kill us." Her vision of Syria is obviously one entailing a democratic coexistence of faith and ethnic communities, all united against a powerful dictator on one side, and Islamic radicals on the other. Al-Kateab's engagement with religion is rather subtle. It is contained in the continuous, whisper-like invocations of God throughout the documentary. Visually, the majority of women shown by Al-Kateab are modestly dressed; that is, in traditional Islamic attire with hijabs. Frames in which she appears are also curated by showing her both with and without the hijab, which is perhaps a symbol of her acceptance of the hijab as a generational and ethnic article of clothing rather than a devotional one. Yet, the documentary creates an affective structure that is confessional in nature. This is accomplished through the regular invocations of God, through Islamic feminist symbolism such as the hijab and Black abaya, and in the gentle insistence on maintaining hope and peace in the middle of destruction and chaos. Read as one macro-frame, the documentary may even be perceived as a gigantic, apocalyptic tableau of death, survival, and the denunciation of war. However, the analysis offered here suggests that Al-Kateab's deliberate aesthetic and sonic presentations point to feminist war identities, which cannot be contained normatively or politically within the self-sufficient languages of politics, religion, and feminism. Al-Kateab's message is not purely political, nor is it overtly religious or solely feminist. While it encompasses all such things at the same time, the cinematic world of *For Sama* exceeds the spheres of politics, scriptural religion, and feminism. In a novel and original way, it articulates a deeply felt Islamic feminist ethics of viewing and experience of the war. *For Sama* institutionalises the feeling/seeing aspects of the Islamic feminist war gaze.

The documentary itself invents a language of feminist multiplicity in which the female point-of-view is simultaneously an intersection of several positions (including motherhood, a war testimony, the politics of resistance, war care, and religion) and a horizon. Inasmuch as Al-Kateab and the women captured by her camera are rooted within Islamic cultural and religious praxis, Islamic feminism in the context of the film is not concerned with an ideological or ethical differentiation from their Western "liberated" sisters, neither is it about a blind repetition of feminist slogans that emerged through Western histories of female liberation. Rather, Islamic feminism reflects a particular affective inhabitancy of the film space, in which feminist agency involves a range of roles. Viewers may recall images of the grieving mother, or the rebellious camerawoman, caretaker, and anti-war activist. These exist in dialogue, "co-feeling", and mutual recognition. Al-Kateab's Islamic feminism is ultimately centred within the rapport of distinct feminist identities, which in other circumstances, political contexts, and non-cinematic discourses may be interpreted as divided, and even contradictory. Even after she and her family have left Aleppo to seek political asylum in the United Kingdom, the elements of "listening" and "remembrance" found in Al-Kateab's camerawork ensures that she is genealogically connected to

the many women and children still in Syria; their voices are hers. Her camera carries their existential condition of hope and despair.

Notes

[1] The books in *Voices of Utopia* include: *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985/2017), *Last Witnesses* (1985/2014), *Zinky Boys* (1989/2006), *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997/2005) and *Secondhand Time* (2013/2016). Details on Alexievich's personal website (*Voices*).

[2] A Lincoln Centre retrospective in 2018 interrogates the female gaze as a cinematographic technique (Sims).

[3] Soloway's engagement with the female gaze is not unique—both film theorists and filmmakers have reflected on the concept before them. Most notably, the Canadian academic and documentary filmmaker Zoe Dirse has theorised and practiced the female gaze in her own work (Dirse). I privilege Soloway's approach here first, because they are focused on the triangulated relationship between production, perception, and narrative (unlike Zoe, for example who is interested solely in production) and second, because I can find similarities between Soloway's and Al-Kateab's approaches to the camerawork.

[4] In her classic work, Mulvey defines the male gaze as a triangle of viewing including the camera, the characters, and the spectator, which privileges the male point of view and represents women as objects of male pleasure.

[5] For a brief overview of the practice, see Samāʿ.

[6] For interpretations of Sufism that are radically open to gender equality, see Saʿdiayya.

[7] The field of Islamic feminism as engaged with exegetical re-readings of scripture and legislature is currently populated by vast and exciting literature. Some of the main debates are captured in the works of Margot Badran, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir Hosseini, Soumaya Mestiri, among others.

References

Abbas, Shemeem Burney. *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual*. U of Texas P, 2002.

Alexievich, Svetlana. *Chernobyl Prayer*. Penguin, 2016.

---. *Last Witness: An Oral History of the Children of World War II*. Random House, 2019.

---. "A Search for Eternal Man: In Lieu of Biography." alexievich.info/en. Accessed 24 July 2020.

---. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Random House, 2017.

---. *The Unwomanly Face of War*: *An Oral History of Women in World War II*. Random House, 2017.
---. *Voices from Big Utopia*. alexievich.info/en. Accessed 7 Jan. 2021.

---. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1992.

As If We Were Catching a Cobra [*Comme si nous attrapions un cobra*]. Directed by Halla Alabdallah Yakoub, Les Productions de l'Oeil Sauvage, 2012.

Aziza, Sarah. "A Syrian Mother's Letter to Her Daughter, 'For Sama' Shows War in Unusually Intimate Light". *The Intercept*, 27 July 2019, theintercept.com/2019/07/27/syria-war-documentary-for-sama.

Beau Travail. Directed by Claire Denis, La Sept-Arte, 1999.

Black Panther. Directed by Ryan Coogler, Marvel Studios, 2018.

Boex, Cecile. *Books and ideas.net.* Emergency Cinema: An Interview with Syrian Collective Abounaddara, 2019. booksandideas.net/IMG/pdf/abounaddara_en.pdf. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.

---. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 25, 2007, p. 951–66, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1068/d2506jb.

Capernaum [*Capharnaüm*]. Directed by Nadine Labaki, Mooz Films, 2018.

Chapman, James. *War and Film*. Reaktion Books, 2008.

The Cave. Directed by Feras Fayyad, Danish Documentary Production, 2019.

City of Ghosts. Directed by Matthew Heineman, Our Time Projects, 2017.

Diaz, Marta Dominguez. *Women in Sufism: Female Religiosities in a Transnational Order*. Routledge, 2015.

Dirse, Zoe. "Gender in Cinematography: Female Gaze (Eye) Behind the Camera." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013.

Hey! Don't Forget the Cumin [*Hey! La tensi el kamoun*]. Directed by Halla Alabdallah Yakoub, Hala Alabdalla & Ammar Al Beik, 2008.

I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave [*Ana alati tahmol azouhour ila qabriha*]. Directed by Halla Alabdallah Yakoub and Ammar Al Beik. Hala Alabdalla & Ammar Al Beik, 2006.

Kellaway, Kate. "My Daughter Was Raised During the Siege of Aleppo. I Had to Make a Film for Her." *The Guardian*, 25 Aug. 2019, www.theguardian.com/film/2019/aug/25/for-sama-documentary-interview-waad-al-kateab.

Koettl, Christoph. "'The YouTube War': Citizen Videos Revolutionize Human Rights Monitoring in Syria." *Media Shift*, Feb. 2014, http://mediashift.org/2014/02/the-youtube-war-citizen-videos-revolutionize-human-rights-monitoring-in-syria. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.

Last Men in Aleppo [*De sidste mænd i Aleppo*]. Directed by Feras Fayyad and Steen Johannessen, Aleppo Media Center, 2017.

Lewisohn, Leonard. "The Sacred Music of Islam: Sama in the Persian Sufi Tradition." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, vol. 6, 1997, pp. 1–33, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09681229708567259.

Marks, Laura. *Hanan Al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. MIT Press, 2015.

Martin, Rachel. "A New Mother Stays in Syria: *For Sama* is the Movie She Made for Her Baby." *NPR Movie Interviews*, 24 July 2019, www.npr.org/2019/07/24/744193859/a-new-mother-stays-in-syria-for-sama-is-the-movie-she-made-for-her-baby.

Mestiri, Soumaya. *Décoloniser le Féminisme: Une Approche Transculturelle* [*Decolonising Feminism: A Transcultural Approach*]. VRIN, 2016.

Mincheva, Dilyana, and Niloofar Hooman. "Between the Averted Gaze and the Male Gaze: Women in Farhadi's Films as Tentative Harbingers of Islamic Cinematic Feminism." *The International Journal of the Image*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2020, pp. 19–32, DOI: https://doi:10.18848/2154-8560/CGP/v11i02/19-32.

Montgomery, Hugh. "For Sama and the Female Perspective on War." *BBC Culture*, 13 Sept. 2019, www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190912-for-sama-and-the-female-perspective-on-war.

Mudbound. Directed by Dee Rees, Armory films, 2017.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

Nelson, John C., and Douglas A. Cunningham, editors. *A Companion to the War Film*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

Novikau, Alexander. "Women, Wars and Militarism in Svetlana Alexievich's Documentary Prose." *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2017, pp. 314–26/, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635217694123.

Of Fathers and Sons [*Kinder des Kalifats*]. Talal Derki, Basis Berlin Filmproduktion, 2019.

Rata, Donatella D. *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria*, Pluto Press, 2017.

Reid, Kathryn. "Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts, FAQs, and How to Help." *World Vision*, 2020, Accessed 24 July 2020.

Roy, Jessica. "'For Sama' Is Unflinching Look at the Uniquely Female Cost of War." *Elle*, 18 Nov. 2019, www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a29832342/for-sama-movie-waad-alkateab.

Samāʿ. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, 14 Jan. 2018, www.britannica.com/print/article/520198.

Saʿdiayya Shaikh. *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*. The U of North Carolina P, 2012.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. The U of North Carolina P, 1975.

Sims, David. "The Value of the Female Gaze in 'Film'", *The Atlantic*, 2 Aug. 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/female-gaze-lincoln-center-series-women-cinematographers/566612/.

Smaill, Belinda. "Injured Identities: Pain, Politics and Documentary." *Studies in Documentary Film*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 151–63, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/sdf.1.2.151_1.

Soloway, Joey. "Jill Soloway on The Female Gaze | MASTER CLASS | TIFF 2016." *YouTube*, 11 Sept. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I.

--- [As Jill Soloway]. *I Love Dick*. Amazon Studios, 2016–2017.

--- [As Jill Soloway]. *Transparent*. Amazon Studios, 2014–2019.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003.

Van der Peer, Stefanie. "Halla Alabdallah Youkub: Documentary as Poetic Subjective Experience in Syria." *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary*, U P Scholarship Online, 2017, pp. 194–224

Walker, Mia P. "French Filmmaker Denis Gets Frank." *The Harvard Crimson*, 21 Nov. 2008, www.thecrimson.com/article/2008/11/21/french-filmmaker-denis-gets-frank-a.

Weaver, Matthew. "Katherine Bigelow Makes History as First Woman to Receive Best Director Oscar." *The Guardian*, 8 March 2010, www.theguardian.com/film/2010/mar/08/kathryn-bigelow-oscars-best-director.

Wessels, Josepha I. *Documenting Syria: Film-making, Video Activism and Revolution*. Bloomsbury, 2019.

Suggested Citation

Mincheva, Dilyana. “Cinematic Islamic Feminism and the Female War Gaze: Reflections on Waad Al-Kateab’s *For Sama*.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 20, 2020, pp. 54–70, DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.05.

Dilyana Mincheva is an Assistant Professor in Critical Media in the Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia at McMaster University, Canada. She is the bearer of two international awards for research excellence (2012 and 2015) granted by the *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* and the author of the monograph *The Politics of Western Muslim Intellectual Discourse in the West: The Emergence of a Western-Islamic Public Sphere* (Sussex Academic Press, 2016). Mincheva is currently at work on a second monograph focused on socially and cinematically mediated forms of Islamic feminism.