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For Western Eyes: Nelofer Pazira's Accented Returns to Afghanistan

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Abstract

Appropriating relevant elements from Iranian film scholar Hamid Naficy's formulation of an 'Accented Cinema' (2001) that addresses various aspects of diasporic filmmaking and filmmakers 'situated in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices' (4) as guiding tropes for analysis, this paper focuses on the depiction of the post-Taliban period through a contextual and critical reading of Nelofer Pazira's first documentary film *Return to Kandahar* (2003) and her debut feature film *Act of Dishonour* (2009) on the topic of 'honour-killing.' The paper examines how these films portray 'accented' images captured and relayed by a diaspora Afghan woman filmmaker to appeal to distant and unversed Western/foreign audiences and film festivals. In addition to Naficy's formulation of the 'accented cinema', I argue that Pazira uses a formulaic accent and variances (also to be read as her emphases) in her depictions that are aimed specifically at appealing to Western audiences.

Keywords: Afghanistan; women filmmakers; accented cinema; diaspora; Taliban; 'War on Terror'; gender; honour-killing; religious fundamentalism

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For Western Eyes: Nelofer Pazira's Accented Returns to Afghanistan

Rahat Imran

Introduction

The devastation wreaked during the Soviet invasion and the jihadist Mujahideen era (1979-1989); the ultra-puritanical Taliban regime (1996-2001); and the US-led so-called 'War on Terror' (2001), and US occupation and continued presence (2001-2021) have remained key periods for foreign media and filmic interest in Afghanistan.

In the absence of an indigenous Afghan film industry that had been destroyed during decades of conflict and the ultra-orthodox and authoritarian Taliban rule (Nasr, 2020), it was largely Iranian, Pakistani, and Afghan diaspora filmmakers, significantly young women, who began to focus on the plight of Afghan women in particular, gaining wide international recognition at film festivals.[1] One such name was the Canada-based Nelofer Pazira, a journalist who turned filmmaker as she visited her native country to film her debut documentary.

Appropriating relevant elements from Iranian film scholar Hamid Naficy's formulation of an 'accented cinema' (2001) that addresses various aspects of diasporic filmmaking and filmmakers 'situated in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices' (4) as guiding tropes for analysis, this paper focuses on the depiction of the post-Taliban period through a contextual and critical analysis of Pazira's first documentary film *Return to Kandahar* (2003) and her debut feature film *Act of Dishonour* (2010) on the topic of 'honour-killing.'[2] A close reading of both films tracks and examines how they portray what I argue is a shrewdly crafted *formulaic* accent to capture and relay images by a diaspora Afghan woman filmmaker to appeal to distant and unversed

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Western audiences and film festivals. I argue that Pazira's *formulaic* accent and variances (also to be read as her emphases) at various points in her filmic depictions are aimed at distancing herself from her native subjects, and appealing to Western audiences as a liberated and progressive 'Afghan-Canadian' woman who shares their shock and disbelief at the backwardness of her country of origin. Hence, Pazira aims to secure their trust and reliance on her account as a 'native informant' who is also on the same page as her target viewers, particularly regarding women's freedoms, while overlooking the socio-cultural, historical, class, and political ground realities applicable to Afghan women's predicament, and also contrast with her own privilege and subject position as an Afghan Muslim woman now safely residing in Canada.

Correspondingly, through a contextual reading of both films I explore if it is the quality of Pazira's filmic portrayals or, rather, her *formulaic* accent and representations and the novelty of the filmmaker and her subjects (i.e. Afghanistan/war-torn country; 'oppressed' Muslim women; Muslim/minority woman filmmaker; issues of patriarchal domination; *burqa*/veiling; honour; Islamic fundamentalism) that serve as the impetus for the production and success of her films, that garnered them international acclaim, and Pazira a film career. In conclusion, how is quality compromised when exoticized novelty dominates to attract foreign funding, screening opportunities, inclusion at film festivals, and recognition and popularity among remote and uninitiated audiences?

I begin with a discussion of relevant perspectives from Hamid Naficy's formulation of the 'accented cinema' that lays the premise for a critical analysis of Nelofer Pazira's films, *Return to Kandahar* and *Act of Dishonour*. I argue that capitalizing on what Naficy (2001) defines as an 'opportunistic identity politics' (269), Pazira uses her accented subject position to develop a *formulaic* accent and emphases that permeate her return journeys to Afghanistan in both films.

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Further, a brief historical background to the troubled history of Afghanistan during the Taliban era and the post-9/11 US-led so-called 'War on Terror' contextualizes the transformations that took place in the Afghan society, particularly the erosion of women's rights and freedoms under the authoritarian regime. Leading on, a discussion of the surge in media interest in the plight of Afghan women in particular, and the hype surrounding US military intervention as a significant justification for their liberation, is followed by a contextual examination of Pazira's two films to locate her *formulaic* accent. Additionally, the paper draws attention to Pazira's *formulaic* and exoticized filmic depictions as pre-packaged to appeal to Western (unversed/distant) audiences and film festivals in particular, indicating their allure as novelty over quality. A viewing of Pazira's films is strongly suggested to follow the arguments in this paper.

Hamid Naficy's Framework of the 'Accented Cinema'

Hamid Naficy identifies 'accented cinemas' (2001) as those representing multiple aspects of portrayals, including 'subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement… and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers' (4). He points to their diaspora makers as '"situated but universal figures" who work in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices' (10). Naficy elaborates further on diaspora filmmakers:

> A majority are from Third World and postcolonial countries (or from the global South) who since the 1960s have relocated to northern cosmopolitan centers where they exist in a state of tension and dissension with both their original and their current homes. By and large, they operate independently, outside the studio system or the mainstream film industries, using interstitial and collective modes of production that critique those entities. As a result, they are presumed to be more prone to the tensions of marginality and difference. (10)

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Hence, for a critical analysis of her filmic representations, it is important to consider Pazira's own 'self-inscription', location, and positioning as reflected within her films and her exilic/refugee experience of leaving Afghanistan with her parents at an early age that speaks of circumstantial displacement from her roots to a safe life and space that guarantees individual freedom and independence in the West (Canada). Her physical displacement places her ethnicity and identity within the Afghan Diaspora, leading to multiple identities and her 'interstitial location' as a filmmaker whereby she claims the agency to speak to her intended Western audience as an Afghan-Canadian (native/diaspora/returnee) (Naficy, 2001: 20). In this case, through two separate filmic journeys to Afghanistan, navigating and criss-crossing between a 'homecoming', a 'border-crossing' and 'identity crossing' (222) through different modes of performativity (documentary and feature).

The commonalities in Pazira's films under discussion reflect shades of all three aspects of 'accented cinema' that Naficy draws attention to: 'It is helpful, when mapping the accented cinema, to differentiate three types of film that constitute it: exilic, diasporic, and ethnic.' (2001:11). However, as Naficy incisively elaborates further, these positions can be fluid:

> Diaspora, exile, and ethnicity are not steady states; rather, they are fluid processes that under certain circumstances may transform into one another and beyond. There is also no direct and predetermined progression from exile to ethnicity, although dominant ideological and economic apparatuses tend to favor an assimilationist trajectory—from exile to diaspora to ethnic to citizen to consumer. (17)

Although she may make the above fluid, hybridized and stage-wise journey, Pazira is neither an exilic nor émigré filmmaker. One must consider that Pazira was raised as an immigrant to parents who had migrated/sought refuge/found exile in the West and is *herself* not an 'exilic' filmmaker. Instead, she can be seen as a *returnee* rather than an 'insider' (Minh-ha, 1991: 81), who launched her filmmaking career using her country of origin at an opportune period in terms of the post-9/11

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media interest in Afghanistan's troubled history. Hence, appropriating an 'opportunistic identity politics' (Naficy, 2001: 269), Pazira's development of a *formulaic* accent and emphases is clearly shaped to play her filmic journeys and border-crossings to Western eyes that now constitute her main target audiences.

While Naficy (2001) points out that 'accented films are personal and unique, like fingerprints, because they are both authorial and autobiographical'(34), and that 'exilic and diasporic accent permeates the film's deep structure: its narrative, visual style, characters, subject matter, theme, and plot' (23), I argue that *Return to Kandahar* is deeply reflective of an authorial style that hinges on a *formulaic* approach that centers primarily on the topicality of post-9/11 Afghanistan and Western media interest wedded to the filmmaker's own exoticized position as a Muslim Afghan woman, while *Act of Dishonour* is immersed in perpetuating exoticism and a superficial pathos despite its horrific topic of honour-killing.

I begin with a brief historical background to the fundamentalist Taliban period in Afghanistan that transformed the country's socio-political landscape, and the post-9/11Western media interest in the country that served as the backdrop for the emergence of Afghan diaspora women filmmakers such as Nelofer Pazira.

Historical background to the Taliban rule in Afghanistan

For decades now since the late 1970s Afghanistan has remained in a state of multiple socio-political transitions, and held hostage to a host of factors that have impacted its development and progress: foreign invasions and military interventions (Soviet-US Mujahideen era 1979-1989); internal strife and political instability; civil war; religious fundamentalist forces vying for state

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control; imposition of rigid Islamic Sharia laws; the insurgence of jihadist and extremist ideologies (Taliban regime 1996-2001); and the post 9/11 US-led so-called 'War on Terror' (2001) (Paracha 2018). And most recently, the re-emergence of a Taliban leadership following the US withdrawal on August 15, 2021 (Dawn 2021). Significant common factors under these turbulent phases have remained the devastation of the country's socio-cultural life, subjugation of women, mass internal displacement, forced migration, and the resultant refugee exodus of its population that also saw the emergence of Afghan-populated refugee camps in neighbouring Pakistan in particular (Ruiz 2002).

The 'Taliban', literally meaning 'students' trained in Islamic religious seminaries known as *madrasas* (pl. *madaris*) (Hussain, 2007: 78), usurped control after executing the deposed Soviet-backed President, Dr. Mohammad Najibullah (1986-1992), hanging him in the main public square in Kabul to enforce their rule (Griffin, 2001: 1). Led by Mullah Mohammad Omar as their elected *Amir-ul-Momineen* (Leader of the Faithful), the Taliban proceeded to declare Afghanistan as a 'completely Islamic state' after the capture of the capital city of Kabul, proclaiming it as the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA)' (Ibrahimi, 2017: 947).

The first victims of the new Taliban-led puritanical Islamic order and imposition of rigid Sharia laws in Afghanistan were women, who found their freedoms wholly curtailed under the Taliban's newly enforced national religious identity (Skaine, 2007: 61). Led by an extremist ideology, fiercely defended by Muslim fundamentalist pockets on the pretext of piety and Islamic identity, as the first symbol of their puritan rule the authoritarian Taliban regime vanquished women's social and legal status as equal citizens. Espousing militant anti-West *Al Qaida* ideologies, the Taliban imposed stern Islamic Sharia laws and gender-discriminatory practices which included public executions and stoning to death for alleged 'sex-crimes' (Marsden, 1998:

43). The very first *fatwa*,[3] a harsh religious edict issued on *Radio Kabul*, renamed *'Voice of Sharia,'* announced a strict 'Islamic' dress code for women that enforced the wearing of the *burqa*, while forbidding them to go out to work, or even to go out alone without a male chaperone.[4] The edict brought to a standstill not only the livelihood of the majority of the female workforce but also had a crippling effect on the country's educational and healthcare system as women students, teachers, and other employees suddenly found themselves out of a job and the right to pursue their professions (Griffin, 2001: 5). The rigid 'Taliban laws' imposed in Afghanistan included even a ban on white socks, perceived as an insult to the white Taliban banner, and were inclusive enough to place a ban on caged birds (Wahab, 2007: 218).

The 'War on Terror' and Media Interest in Afghan Women

Afghanistan, a country of scarce interest, too remote to matter, too unimportant to learn about, too backward to notice, for the West in particular, was again thrust into global limelight, albeit for horrific reasons: the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks on US soil. The global scenario had changed forever, accelerating 'terrorism' as a field of study as never before with Afghanistan at the heart of it.

The *al-Qaida*-ordered terrorist attacks in the US, masterminded by its Saudi chief Osama bin Ladin, believed to be sheltered by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, prompted the then US President George W. Bush to launch the so-called 'War on Terror' as decisive military action to oust the Taliban government. The US-led massive air-strikes and indiscriminate attacks initiated by coalition forces in October 2001 saw the toppling of the Taliban regime in December 2001, leaving behind chaotic conditions, large-scale civilian deaths, and countrywide destruction in an already war-ravaged country grappling for normalcy (Jackson, 2009).[5] Supported by new

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technologies and growing numbers in satellite networks, images of devastation caused by the 'War on Terror' and its aftermath dominated world media in the 2000s as 24/7 news coverage by TV channels such as CNN, FOX, BBC, and Al Jazeera flashed images of the deadly conflict that led to mass civilian casualties, and internal displacements of the Afghan population.[6] Philip Mosley (2004) elaborates on the evolving post-9/11 media scene:

The majority of Americans neither knew nor cared much about Afghanistan before the horrifying events of September 11, 2001. Thereafter they knew and for the most part cared considerably more, while the mass media quickly moved to saturation coverage in the aftermath of the disaster. Once American reprisals began against the accused terrorist group in Afghanistan and the regime that had harbored it, viewers soon grew familiar in word and image with such names as al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, Taliban, Northern Alliance, Kabul, Tora Bora, and Kandahar. For those curious to discover more about the Afghan situation and its broader context, however, there was little material available beyond the often predictable media discourse and a small number of specialized documentaries. (178)

To validate US attacks, President Bush encouraged an 'us' and 'them' confrontation, one that Sedef Arat-Koc (2002) explains as '"them" as victims of a "barbaric" culture, and "us" not just as liberated subjects of a civilized world but also as "saviours" of victims of culture'(55). The visual projection of Afghan women as imprisoned behind the *burqa* was to become synonymous with oppression and serve as fodder for Western media's obsession to validate the US-led war, while mounting Afghan civilian casualties as a result of indiscriminate US-led bombardments were strategically justified as part of collateral damage.[7]

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A neat media marketing formula that emerged to justify US and allied attacks became: war, women, and oppression.[8] Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) comments that the US First Lady's 'speech enlisted women to justify American military intervention in Afghanistan and to make a case for the War on Terror of which it was a part' (32). The single most saleable focus became the 'Afghan woman', a nameless, faceless creature conveniently best defined by her oppression, helplessness, and gendered-subjugation, walled behind a *burqa*, in dire need of Western help to be 'saved' from her own (27). Abu-Lughod notes:

> Instead of questions that might lead to the examination of internal political struggles among groups in Afghanistan, or of global interconnections between Afghanistan and other nation-states, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—re-creating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which first ladies give speeches versus others in which women shuffle around silently in burqas. (32)

No doubt, *burqa*, veil, *chador*,[9] Sharia laws, and honour had fast become saleable buzzwords that all pointed to the many facets of the same story of Afghan women's oppression, ringing an alarm for urgent help to save them. Ratna Kapur (2002) elaborates on the essentialist view of the veiled Muslim woman as an oppressed being in need of rescue:

> The image of the veiled woman has come to inhabit our imaginations in ways that are totalizing of the culture and its treatment of women. This image is nearly always simplistic as well as a misrepresentation of the practice as a subordinating practice that typifies Islam and its degrading treatment of women. It is invoked as a cultural artifact to distinguish us from them, to justify military or feminist interventions that could further aggravate rather than alleviate the situation of women...One must read the imposition of the veil in the context of the Taliban in the

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broader context of the denial of rights to women and men under an oppressive non-democratic regime. Conformity is a matter of survival in a political context where dissent means death. (217-218)

As the very image of the *burqa*-clad Afghan woman became her oppressed 'life story', an 'imported' self-serving media opportunism in the guise of feminism and activism emerged to choose sides in the 'Bush rhetoric of "good" versus "evil"' (Kapur, 2002: 213), flashing their impoverished images in the media on the pretext of endorsing their gender rights. Aspiring filmmakers were no exception.[10]

Notably, two young female journalists of Afghan descent who launched their filmmaking careers during this period were Saira Shah (Channel 4 UK), and Nelofer Pazira (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC). The topicality of Afghanistan offered a host of critical and sensational issues for them to address, particularly the novelty of depicting the impact of religious extremism and Sharia laws on women---a topic that appealed to Western funding agencies, commissioning networks, and film festival circuits at the time, while the Afghan population continued to pay the price in loss of life and property, displacement, and physical and economic devastation.[11] These Afghan diaspora women filmmakers, with roots in a conservative Islamic society and culture, exuded an exotic flavour made all the more appealing to Western donors and audiences through their own visual participation in navigating their expository journeys in the dangerous war-zone territories depicted in their films. Their fluency in the local language and head coverings and attire while on Afghan territory set them apart, adding further to their saleable appeal for funders and audiences alike. Shock-value seemed a sufficient operative strategy, the actual quality of their films, and their shifting, self-serving accents notwithstanding. The novelty of attractive young Afghan Muslim women, raised as refugees in the West, returning and risking their

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lives to capture what they believed to be crucial aspects of their ravaged homeland for their intended and unversed Western viewers guaranteed funding, screenings, and success, bestowing their work with a seal of authenticity and agency commonly associated with natives as 'insiders.' Largely catering to Western audience expectations, a common focus for these filmmakers remained Afghan women's issues, be it the *burqa* and veiling, cultural notions of honour, Muslim religious identity, or their marginalized social and legal status. In particular, riding on novelty, Nelofer Pazira was to fashion her 'accented' subject position as a displaced/refugee/diaspora Afghan Muslim woman into a self-serving *formulaic* accent as she used these multiple aspects of her identity to authenticate and self/exoticize her filmic characters. Given the aforementioned factors, the topicality of the intense global media attention on the plight of women during the Afghan conflict paved the way for Pazira to avail the timely opportunity to launch and support her nascent acting and filmmaking career .

Interestingly, it was also in 2001 that the filmic portrayal of Afghanistan began to evolve as renowned Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf's biographical film *Kandahar* (2001), made daringly during the Taliban rule, sought to present an authentic image of the country through its neo-realist treatment. Based on the journey of an Afghan-Canadian woman, Nafas (played by Nelofer Pazira), the film follows her taking a risky, and somewhat incredulous, journey across the Iran-Afghanistan border to reach Kandahar in Afghanistan, the stronghold of the Taliban at the time, to locate a childhood female friend, Dyana, from whom she had received a letter in 1998 saying that she plans to commit suicide on the day of the last solar eclipse of the year.[12]

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Makhmalbaf's filmic dramatization, employing a cast of local non-actors, offered a real-life portrayal of the tremendously harsh and precarious living conditions in Afghanistan, its population beset by a host of dangerous and hazardous factors as a consequence of years of conflict and war on its soil: landmines, destruction, poverty, corruption, want, death, disease, and lawlessness.[13] The film ends with Nafas unable to reach Kandahar to locate her friend.

Premiering at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, *Kandahar*, carrying a name that was already well-known by then (as the birthplace of the Taliban movement) to global media audiences through war-coverage of Afghanistan, won the Prize of the Ecunemical Jury from the World Council of Churches in 2001, and went on to collect many others including the Federico Fellini Medal from UNESCO in Paris the same year. The timing of the film's release in 2001 and the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks in the US coincided to bring unexpected global recognition to the topicality of Makhmalbaf's film.

The depictions in Makhmalbafs' film, and the international recognition and success it garnered, set a filmic trend for exploring the devastation and deterioration of civilian life in Afghanistan, particularly the condition of women under the Taliban rule and in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran.[14]

Capitalizing on the success of her role in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* that, amongst other honours, was also chosen as 'one of the top 100 best movies in the history of cinema by "Time" magazine' (Wiacek, 2020: 61), Nelofer Pazira followed with an attempt to emulate his film's positive reception with her debut documentary ingeniously titled *Return to Kandahar* (2003)---a timely and shrewd move no doubt as the title resonated with film festivals and audiences already familiar with Makhmalbaf's acclaimed film.

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Pazira, now an Afghan-Canadian journalist, returned to her country of origin to begin her filmmaking career on the pretext of resuming her search for Dyana. As a seeming sequel of sorts to the protagonist's intent in Makhmalbaf's feature film *Kandahar*, viewers are led to anticipate Pazira's success in her goal this time in her documentary film, *Return to Kandahar*. While the name of her debut venture also invokes publicity by an indirect mention of her association to the international success of Makhmalbaf's film, any similarities between the two filmmakers end with 'Kandahar' in the title. What begins to emerge is a *formulaic* accent and emphases that speaks specifically to Western audiences.

Return to Kandahar (2003)

According to the film's intertitles, Nelofer Pazira's journey to Afghanistan in *Return to Kandahar* takes place seven months after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Her mission is yet again to trace her friend, Dyana, this time in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, with whom she had stayed in contact through letters over the years.

We see Pazira travel the breadth of Afghanistan, filling in the background to her friendship with Dyana in voiceover while testimonial 'whisperings to the Western audience' (Usamah, 2008: 63) about the various aspects of her reflections, objectives, and experiences during her travel route are significantly prompted intermittently by her Canadian co-director Paul Jay who accompanies her.[15] As a strategy, Pazira places a continuous emphasis on the *burqa*, the most recognizable visual symbol of Afghan women's oppression relayed by the Western media at the time, while leaving herself free of a full head-covering to demarcate and establish her own 'modernity' and liberated

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position for her intended audiences. Hence from the very outset, the filmmaker consciously establishes her 'accented' position (Naficy 2001: 10).

Beginning her homecoming journey in the capital city of Kabul, Pazira visits her childhood home, school, and neighbourhoods all of which have now transformed into sights of desolation and poverty and stand testimony to decades of war and neglect. As the film progresses, we see that not much has changed for the general population. Images of *burqa*-clad women, crippled men on crutches, crowds of bearded men in the streets, impoverished children, and general despondence and neglect remain a constant feature from Makhmalbaf's earlier film, *Kandahar*. However, he had presented such scenes with a depth of feeling and purpose to draw attention to the ravaging aftermath of the armed conflict heaped on one of the poorest nations in the world that began with hostilities between two superpowers during the Mujahideen era.

In *Return to Kandahar*, what is new is Pazira's slow-paced and superficial attempt at making a 'participatory' and 'expository' (Nichols, 2010: 31) documentary film that is loosely based on occasional references to personal experiences that appear insignificant compared to the widescale destruction Afghanistan is reeling under. Pazira recounts a sketchy history of conflict in Afghanistan in her heavily accented English, thereby immediately situating her 'border-crossing' position (Naficy 2001: 277) as a native outsider-returnee. She moves from Kabul, to Kandahar, to Mazar-e-Sharif and back to Kabul with the somewhat surprising ease and amusement of a tourist taking in the sights and history and narrating them to the viewers rather than a native returning home (in this case also with a mission) in a land that is still struggling to count the number of remaining landmines and related casualties.

Herself the daughter of a well-to-do doctor, Pazira tells us her family fled from Afghanistan to Pakistan in 1989 during the US-backed anti-Soviet Mujahideen era. To draw attention to aspects

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of her ‘exilic, diasporic and ethnic location’ (Naficy 2001: 11) and highlight the changes since the filmmaker's departure, the film is interspersed with clips and stills of life in a pre-Taliban Afghanistan that depict a liberal past when young women and men, dressed in Western clothes, mixed freely without fear. Pazira comments: 'When Dyana and I walked these roads, tradition and modernity lived more in harmony.' Her intent here seems to be to identify with ‘modernity’ as a Western, and thereby superior, mode of living, while 'tradition' is equated with conservatism and backwardness.

As Pazira rolls out a paltry background to the political transformations that led to grave changes and decades of conflict in Afghanistan, one wonders at her over-simplification of historical perspectives, particularly coming from a journalist. Speaking of the 'fanaticism' of the Mujahideen era, Pazira tells her audience quite plainly: 'I began to question why the Americans were supporting such extreme forces. I came to realize that the West that we thought wanted our freedom, was only interested in the victory in the Cold War. And then the world abandoned Afghanistan.' We see the juxtaposition of random archival images and stills of a relatively free Afghan society, with Pazira and her family as testimony of a liberal past against clips of bearded fighters emblematic of the Taliban. These oppositional and poorly assembled depictions set the tone for Pazira’s *formulaic* accent and representations for a Western audience within the first ten minutes of her filmic journey, just as her patronizing compassion towards the Afghans is tilted towards Western expectations, demonstrating a self-serving, *formulaic* activism.

Her head barely covered as would be expected of an Afghan woman in a public place at the time, Pazira reminisces about the now missing billboards of 'Madonna and Michael Jackson' that she and Dyana had cherished as symbols of the 'West' in a busy street junction. If there remained any

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doubts regarding her recourse to 'opportunistic identity politics' (Naficy 2001: 269), Pazira's *formulaic* accent and emphases are clear now: She is ultra-conscious about differentiating and maintaining her identity as aligned with Western freedoms and culture, while using her Afghan heritage as a backdrop to support her timely film production that is carefully shaped as a poignant, exoticized, and somewhat thrilling storyline for shock value (searching for a childhood friend and saving her from committing suicide in a hostile environment) and appeal for distant audiences and inclusion at film festivals.

Visiting her old school, Pazira finds it in poor condition with classrooms without chairs and tables, and a library devoid of books. Finding schoolgirls clad in *burqas*, Pazira comments that at the time when she was a student there it was seen as an 'insult to education itself' to wear a *burqa* to school, and doing so would have been considered 'the joke of the century'. As we are to see, Pazira's focus on the *burqa* as an imprisoning and shackling garment is to remain a symbolic equation with women's oppression and portrayal of savage conditions set in motion by the Taliban. The recurring references to the *burqa* and her own distancing from, and disapproval of, the garment are in tandem with the post-9/11 media discourse and aimed at the expectations of Western audiences. It is quite another matter that, factually speaking, wearing the *burqa*, not only in Afghanistan but also other countries in South Asia (e.g. Pakistan, India, Bangladesh), has been a common conventional and voluntary practice among conservative Muslim women regardless of class and political conditions. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) elaborates:

First, it should be recalled that the Taliban did not invent the burqa. It was the local form of covering that Pashtun women in one region wore when they went out. The Pashtun are one of several ethnic groups in Afghanistan and the burqa was one of many forms of covering in the subcontinent and Southwest Asia that had developed as a convention for symbolizing women's

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modesty or respectability. The burqa, like some other forms of cover has, in many settings, marked the symbolic separation of men's and women's domains, part of the general association of women with family and home rather than public spaces where strangers mingle. (35)

Repeating the Taliban's rigid gender-discriminatory policies from one of Dyana's old letters, written in 1996 after the Taliban had captured Kabul, Pazira puts on a show of dismay, telling the viewers that she needs to go to the Islamic movement's birthplace, Kandahar, to 'better understand the Taliban', and their fundamentalist ideology and treatment of women.[16] However, after her arrival in Kandahar, facilitated by a secure landing in a military plane at the US Air Force Airbase, she displays an attitude more akin to a touristic stance that focuses on the cultural history of the city, seen as a place that once symbolized spirituality, music, and poetry, rather than any serious and informed attempt to delve into the historical and geo-political aspects and fundamentalist forces impacting and vying for control of Afghanistan. The singular image of the fluttering US flag at the air base compels one to ponder the impact of the American occupation, its vested interests, and the physical devastation of a country now suddenly at the heart of Western media interest. Pazira's self-serving *formulaic* accent continues to be on target as she depicts herself as being on the right side of the law, human rights, women's liberation and freedom, and as a feminist, arguably for the benefit of her Western funders and audiences and the international film exhibition circuit.

By now, the initial interest in the search for Dyana seems to have faded, as the events of 9/11 gain importance in the film. Pazira goes as far as contrasting the dusty and non-descript Kandahar landscape with the more pleasant greenery in her Canadian home city of Ottawa. Her comments shed light on her own divided identity and 'interstitial' (Naficy 2001: 10) positioning not only in

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the film, but also as an Afghan-Canadian subject whose trite understanding of the historical, regional, and religio-political factors impacting and shaping the future of Afghanistan are coloured largely by the post-9/11 Western media depictions and discourses legitimizing the 'War on Terror' at the time. One is reminded of Vietnamese-American film scholar and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh Ha's critique of the falsified and glorifying American media coverage of the Vietnam War in the 1970s, otherwise hailed by historians as a humiliating defeat for the superpower (Minh-ha, 1991:100-101). A US defeat that is ironically likened by world media to its embarrassingly hurried withdrawal from Afghanistan after waging and losing its longest war that stretched for 20 years, dubbed by President Joe Biden as the 'Forever War' (Sanger, 2021).

On her way to the city of Mazar-e-Sharif**,** Pazira admits to having no address or clue where to find Dyana. Instead, her focus turns to memories of the Mazar-e-Sharif region as a place for 'picnics', 'going to the movies', and 'having lots of fun'. Although a visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headed by a war-lord, General Dostum, yields Pazira no help in tracing her friend, what is striking during this encounter is Pazira's own appearance, with her head uncovered and her hair flowing in the breeze, that draws attention to her Western visitor/outsider position despite her fluent conversation in the local language, Dari. A meeting between a notorious warlord in a Western suit and an attractive diasporic Afghan woman from Canada who appears free from the constraints of conventional apparel/*burqa* presents a classic mix of exoticism and orientalism, made all the more palpable in the intensely volatile setting of Dostum's highly fortified palatial bastion. Here, Pazira's physical appearance in a potentially dangerous setting underpins the overt accent placed on her own femininity and vulnerability, arguably for her target audiences in the West who would perceive the meeting as a mark of her defiant courage and earnestness to find her childhood friend and avert her suicide, regardless of how improbable such a task may be in a lawless and war-ravaged country, without even an address to guide the filmmaker's search.

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Looking at *burqa*-clad women on the streets of Mazar-e-Sharif, wondering which ones may be refugees from Kabul, Pazira comments: 'Should I just go and ask her or should I just pull her burqa off? Any one of these women could be Dyana.' However, the only veil she successfully manages to pull off is from her own superficial understanding of her environment and its socio-political and gender-specific cultural parameters. Usamah Ansari (2008) elaborates:

And with imperialism now framed within the rubric of a 'war on terror,' Nelofer Pazira also becomes the native informant: the classic anthropological sidekick who tells her faithful audience all about the novel idiosyncrasies of her 'traditional' society while inviting various interventionist discourses. She has a 'right' to pull off a woman's burqa because she is the native viceroy; she knows what is best for them because she is one of them, and since she is also embedded in the West and is intelligible to the Western audience, her statement effectively confirms common notions about Islam as patriarchal in ways not shared in Western traditions. (49)

With a partially covered head as a token of association with her native status in one of the most conservative societies in the world, Pazira sits herself down on the street to chat with a group of *burqa*-clad female vendors who apprise her about the impact of the war on their condition of life and the consequences of internal displacement. Here, Pazira's own appearance as a non-*burqa*-clad young woman, who is otherwise identifiable as one of the local women through her medium of communication (Dari), draws up a sharp contrast signifying her consciously staged self-positioning as an outsider and distanced 'native informant' speaking to a Western audience. This contrast further points to the *burqa*-clad local women's actual physical view, as well as to their world-view, both of which are framed by the limited space afforded by the mesh in their head-to-

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toe coverings. Yet again, Pazira makes it a point to draw the line between herself and the worldview afforded by her new hyphenated diasporic identity, and the Afghan natives she otherwise claims the agency to identify with. This time, it is the stark differences displayed through physical appearances on both sides that highlight and communicate Pazira's 'accented' (Naficy 2001) and Westernized position, one that also guarantees her a safe return to the West: hers is now a privileged diasporic and hyphenated position that allows for an unrestricted vision that is free from the forcibly regulated and limited view of the local Afghan women who can only peer from behind their *burqa*-mesh.

Pazira's supposedly earnest visit to the Tasadi Eight refugee camp, populated by internally displaced Afghans living in dismal conditions in mud huts, among whom, we are told, are highly educated individuals ('PhD's and MAs') reduced to manual labour and beggary for survival, is nothing short of absurd: she goes from door-to-door in the camp to locate her friend with a Canadian film crew in tow. Her next stop is at the Balkh University to see if Dyana may have been registered there. Her interaction with female students include questions about their views on the political environment, educational facilities and, invariably, on wearing the *burqa* to university. As the filming continues, we see Pazira get into a heated argument with male students who question her agency to film Afghan girls for 'foreign TV', terming it contrary to Afghan 'culture' and 'honour.' Perhaps for the first time Pazira displays any level of passion and genuine expression as she argues back in favour of the girls and their right to make an independent choice to be interviewed, while declaring her own identity: 'I am a Muslim and an Afghan.' Her accent here changes to one of solidarity, and identification with the Afghan female students, while the passionate arguments conducted in Dari highlight her own fragmented position and divided Afghan-Canadian identity caught between two highly polarized cultures and viewpoints. Not to mention her personal differences in class (urban; middle-class), a Western upbringing and

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education, and the privilege to return to her safe Canadian abode and a budding career after her trip. As she herself points out following the altercation: 'I get to go back to Canada, but these women have to live with this mentality.' Similarly, Pazira compares herself with Dyana: 'I got my chance to live an independent life, but did Dyana?' While this brief comment reflects their two lives and destinies asundered by the complexities of a shared past but individual circumstances and opportunities, it is also highly superficial, given Afghanistan's turbulent history and the very reason that the film is supposedly being made to trace and save a friend compelled by her extreme hopelessness to consider suicide.[17] Not to mention why Pazira's own family chose to leave Afghanistan. Whereas Pazira could have delved more deeply into these issues to present a strong 'authorial and autobiographical' (Naficy 2001: 34) imprint, her hasty treatment leaves a disappointing and weak stamp.

By now, Pazira's journey seems absurd in its intent: Coming all the way from Canada with a film crew, with no address to guide her, moving from one Afghan city to the next, randomly asking people she meets in market-places and refugee camps for the whereabouts of her friend, searching door-to-door, seeking help from various government officials, including General Dostum, a notorious warlord accused of countless war crimes, including a case of suffocating thousands of Taliban fighters in shipping containers being probed by the UN (Barry, 2002). If the unsuspecting viewers were given the impression that Pazira had been braving great danger and was finally getting closer to tracing her friend, the film itself shatters that expectation and goal.

Finally, news of a family that may be Dyana's surfaces, but Pazira is told that she can only visit them alone without the film crew. Pazira's answer, 'It is ok, finding her is more important than the film', fails to ring true, and one wonders, if that was indeed the case, why the exercise could have

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not been carried out in an independent capacity without the need for extensive funding, a film crew, and an audience. At this point, it seems even Pazira is not sure which accent to put forth, and how. Surrounded by mystery and darkness, for what is no doubt meant to be the film's climax, Pazira is finally all set to visit Dyana's house. However, springing a surprise on viewers who have been waiting for the much-anticipated reunion for close to an hour, Pazira is informed of news from Dyana's uncle that his niece committed suicide some time back. This anti-climax may have been plausible and poignant in a fiction film, but reflects on weak filmmaking in a documentary, compounding one's suspicion that the supposed search for Dyana was timed to capitalize on the post-9/11 media hype around Afghanistan to launch a film career.[18]

Back in Kabul, Pazira visits a shrine she and her friend had frequented together as young girls, and lights candles. The purpose of this sequence, in which the focus is primarily on Pazira herself, seems to be the addition of an exotic-plus-spiritual flavour to her filmed journey. Pazira's slender frame, dramatically profiled in the candle-lit interior of the shrine, serves indeed as a stereotypically exoticized ending, aimed at conjuring a poignant vision of feminine vulnerability in a rough and dangerous terrain – one that appears more reflective of her narcissism and deftly orchestrated *formulaic* accent than a tragic conclusion to an earnest longing to trace and save the life of a childhood friend. Pazira's choreographed journey as an Afghan-diasporic/exilic/migrant filmmaker, reflecting aspects of her 'fluid' state (Naficy 2001: 17) and clearly made to reach out to Western audiences, concludes with her return to her secure environment, along with her Canadian crew, with nothing achieved, least of all the purpose declared in the films' title. The film ends with intertitles that present unsubstantiated information about the horrific conditions at the time in Afghanistan in a quest to jog viewer attention and alarm, and elicit compassion and concern among uninitiated audiences at the other end of the globe: one of the highest infant and child-bearing mortality and illiteracy rates in the world; war-lordism and private armies, financing for

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which comes 'from drugs, smuggling, taxes, and direct support from the US government'. Closing images of a generation of Afghan children whose innocent smiling faces signify their ignorance of the uncertain future that awaits them in a devastated homeland stress their newsworthiness in the service of foreign invasions, conflict, and documentaries such as Pazira's. By the end of the documentary, film critic Martin Kramer's (2002) words ring remarkably true:

> When the history of the Afghan campaign is written, it should be (foot)noted that films played a significant role in rallying public opinion behind the idea of changing the regime in Kabul—not to eradicate terror but to liberate women from the *burqa*. (69)

Whereas Makhmalbaf's dramatization in *Kandahar* stands out as a pioneering topical depiction from a 'neighbour' (Iranian) filmmaker of distinction who understood the pulse of the region, religion, culture, languages, the socio-political contradictions of his subjects, as well as the complexities of effectively portraying the diasporic identity and predicament of his Afghan female protagonist, Pazira's attempt to achieve similar depth in *Return to Kandahar* remains questionable as her 'opportunistic identity politics' (Naficy 2001: 269) continues to hold her back. For example, her constant display of amazement at the changed scene in Afghanistan since her childhood (the *burqa*-clad schoolgirls, empty library shelves, classes held on floormats) only signify her lack of preparation, as a journalist and a filmmaker, regarding the conditions of the long war in Afghanistan, and her profound disconnect with the place she calls 'home.' Similarly, Pazira's attempts at conjuring or conveying autobiographical/first-person details come across as dull and devoid of true sentiment, as she focusses her *formulaic* lens to address her pre-determined target audience. Likewise, any attempt to show a realist picture of the adversities faced by Afghan women lacks depth and fails to convey their predicament, much as feminist film theorist E. Ann Kaplan (1983) points out: 'The realist error lies in assuming that showing oppression is sufficient argument

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in itself' (137). Similarly, while largely unseen on screen, Paul Jay's prompting presence in the film serves as a production prop to steer and shape the narrative, and validate Pazira's journey and *formulaic* accent and observations for Western audiences. While this prompting strategy ensures that Pazira is looking and speaking from the right side of the fence (liberal/progressive/Western), it also plays a redeeming and refining role for her accented emphases throughout the film.

Return to Kandahar, produced in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), is a classic example of media opportunism at play that taps the identity and novelty of a Muslim woman as a filmmaker and a topical subject representing a distant and dangerous war-torn country to produce a mediocre film that rests on sensationalism, exoticism, and flimsy background research. Despite the large-scale funding spent to transport a sizeable film crew, the film does not serve any credible purpose or clear focus as a documentary film (e.g. witnessing, investigating, documenting, or conveying an activist, feminist, or political intent); nor provokes a serious discussion on its socio-political aspects (gender issues; impact of religious fundamentalism on women; historical background of the geo-political war and conflict in Afghanistan), or features of documentary filmmaking (participatory; expository; investigative; first-person/auto-biographical storytelling; women's/feminist filmmaking), hence rendering the impact and Pazira's accent/emphases significantly lacking in cinematic or scholarly substance.

What contributes most to the lack of depth in *Return to Kandahar* is the absence of a contextual background and insight into the historical factors that led to the turbulent conditions in Afghanistan. Despite her audio-visual medium, active participation, and expository intent, Pazira fails to foreground her topic effectively and convey what Kapur (2002) concisely sums up in her incisive article as the intertwined factors that led to the struggle for power in Afghanistan:

The Taliban swept across Afghanistan in 1996 not simply as a religious force determined to set up an Islamic state. It was a force born in the crucible of the Cold War, schooled in the Madrasas and whose members were raised in refugee camps. It was a force whose very way of life was war and which imposed its way of life on an entire country through brute force and violence. To view the Taliban as a force that is exclusively the outcome of religion does not create space for the fact that the current conflict is neither ancient nor archaic. It did not emerge from the passages of ancient religious texts. It is a contemporary movement that emerged from equally contemporary conditions, relations and conflicts. (220)

In the absence of the underlying contextual background that Kapur points to, depictions in *Return to Kandahar* remain superficial and no more than the viewpoint of a highly distanced native more in tune with the comforts and privileges of an adopted life elsewhere, in this case the contrast between Canada and Afghanistan. Equally, the film reflects the Western tendency to fund and award sub-standard work for reproducing its stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women, particularly in the case of a filmmaker who can also add exoticism and novelty (Muslim/woman). A tendency made obvious by the numerous awards that *Return to Kandahar* won, including the Gemini Award for the Best Social Issue Documentary, and Best International Documentary in 2003 in Canada (Tokawa, 2013: 161).

It is disappointing that Pazira's own presence and attempts to share her personal childhood experiences in the film, her knowledge of the local language, Dari (which she uses frequently and fluently), as well as appearance (variations of local dress and head covering), and a largely monovocal dominance collectively reflect a superficial 'self-inscription' (Naficy 2001: 277), failing to convey a substantial depth of connection with the lives and identity of the people and

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land she has travelled across continents to document. In Trinh Minh-ha's words (1991), Pazira is reminiscent of 'the Inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming "I am like you" while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding "I am different" while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at' (74).

If anyone has benefited from the making of *Return to Kandahar*, it seems it is Pazira herself who seizes the opportunity for funded self-indulgence to establish herself as a 'filmmaker' by exploiting Western fascination with a remote and dangerous land (Afghanistan); an exotic filmmaker with a heavy English accent (Afghan, young, Muslim woman); a largely unknown culture (Pashtun/Afghan); the added mysteriousness couched in a foreign language (Dari); and the extra-diegetic addition of soulful traditional music and Dari songs in the background to create a distinctly foreign and spiritually ignited atmosphere. Against all these factors that seem to dominate the production, any mention and pursuit of Dyana appears coincidental and a mere excuse to launch a film career.

No doubt, much like Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar*, the role of the 'historical moment' in which *Return to Kandahar* was 'produced, distributed, and exhibited, and the audience it reached' (Kleinhans, 1984: 320) cannot be underestimated in the international recognition and audiences Pazira's film attracted despite the marked difference between the depth and quality of representations depicted by each filmmaker. By the end of the film, one strongly wishes Pazira had *not* returned to Kandahar. At least not with this *accent*.

Act of Dishonour (2009)

Spurred by the success of *Return to Kandahar*, Nelofer Pazira returned to Afghanistan to film her directorial debut feature *Act of Dishonour* (2009) which, she claimed in an interview, is based on a true story.[19] In this 'accented' film (Naficy 2001) we see Pazira playing the role of an Afghan-

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Canadian interpreter, Mejgan, who accompanies an all-male Canadian film crew. The audience, however, is not immediately told about the nature or significance of the venture that the film unit has travelled all the way to Afghanistan to shoot.

This time, Pazira strengthens her *formulaic* accent with a thematic combination of the *burqa and* honour-killing. From the very outset her 'opportunistic identity politics' (Naficy 2001: 269) is clear as she appears dressed in jeans, a long coat, and a loose scarf partially covering her head to maintain her foreign/Western identity and visual separation from the impoverished and backward Afghan environment she is in (one she terms 'primitive' in the film). With her strangely expressionless acting and bored demeanour she comes across as the very embodiment of the distanced native who returns only for vested interests, camouflaged as cultural curiosity and 'finding oneself.'

Filmed in an Afghan village near the Tajikistan border, Pazira pitches her story around a fifteen-year-old girl, Mena, played by Afghan actress Marina Golbahari, a beggar girl who was discovered by Iranian filmmaker Sedik Barmak on the streets of Kabul, and who portrayed the title role in his award-winning film *Osama* (2003) (Gall, 2004). We see Mena, displaying all the youthful attractiveness of a beautiful, vulnerable girl dreaming of her approaching wedding to a young bus driver, Rehmat (played by Masood Serwary). In an otherwise sparse environment that holds little promise, Mena is lured into playing a small role in the Canadian film by Mejgan in return for a *burqa* that she needs to complete her trousseau. Pazira's *formulaic* accent again hinges on the *burqa* as a visual symbol of Afghan women's backwardness and oppression while she covers her own head with a loosely worn scarf to distinguish her liberated onscreen identity.

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Reluctant, but enticed by the film crew's colourful cart of costume *burqas*, we see Mena fearfully step out of the house with Mejgan to participate in the shoot despite cultural taboos and without her father's knowledge. As a result of her digression, Mena is dealt the harsh verdict of 'honour-killing' by the village elders who see her interaction with foreign male crew-members as 'adultery' and an unforgiveable affront to the honour of the entire village and their religio-cultural principles: an honour-crime they voice is punishable by 'stoning to death', and 'honour-killing.' Even though the honour-related verdict is supposedly the turning point of the film, Pazira does not provide a context for her audience on the notion of honour-killing as a cultural practice as opposed to a religious one. Nor is the significance of the custom identified as a 'moralistic' stance that usually results in the murder of women whose bodies are seen as the repositories of so-called family and community 'honour' in tribal and ultra-conservative patriarchal societies (Hayat, 2002: 88).[20]

As tribal traditions and customs overrule relationships, under pressure from the village elders we see Mena's father make an attempt to kill her with a knife as she sleeps, but, overcome by emotions, refrains from doing so. Instead, he passes on the task to end Mena's life to her fiancé who, gun in hand, arrives to lead her out of her house as neighbours watch.

Once their job in the village is done, we see the crew packing up and leaving in their jeep, oblivious of the tragic outcome of Mena's interaction with them and the consequences of this supposed 'act of dishonour' on a young and innocent life that was just beginning to blossom. In the following scene we see Rehmat, convinced by the villagers, Mena's father, and his own mother that his male honour, and by association that of the entire community, are at stake, escort Mena to her fate in the desert. We hear him firing a shot and then calmly walking back with his gun and Mena's green *chador* in hand. As the film ends, we see Mena (now without her *chador*) standing alone and sobbing in the desert as the sun sets behind her. This final open-ended scene that could have sealed

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a powerful comment in the hands of a more able and sensitive director is rendered flat and mediocre. Pazira's unimaginative and dull treatment and distinctively poor direction are unmistakeably reflected in Rehmat and Mena's acting in what is supposed to be an emotionally charged climax scene of the film. Instead, the most Pazira manages is a set of banal lines delivered by Mena in her defence as she addressed her fiancé on the way to the desert: 'I haven't committed a sin. I had a wedding dress. I didn't have a *burqa*. It was all for you.'

It is ironic that Mena, brazenly exploited by Mejgan, was eventually denied the promised 'purple' *burqa* by the crew as she could not complete her stint in the film shoot (instead, we see Mejgan offer her cash payment)---a *burqa* Mena may pay for with her life (honour-killing) and would not need for a wedding that is not to be.

Similarly, Mejgan's exchanges with Ali, a returnee of Hazara ethnicity, who helps the Canadian unit to set up a makeshift cinema for the village children, reflect Pazira's superficiality and disconnect with her subject and strange ignorance (even as a journalist) of the centuries of socio-cultural contexts embedded in the patriarchal mindsets of the very culture she has come to depict, and claims as her Afghan origins. For example, her claim to help Afghan women results in the very opposite. Asked by Ali for the reason behind her visit to the place she has called 'primitive', she states gallantly: 'I wanted to come and help, especially the women. I don't like the men's attitude here.' One wonders if causing the potential danger of honour-killing had even crossed her mind as she set out to 'help' a young woman given the consequences of doing so that we see in her film. Especially given that the Afghan tribal society tends to rely on their own parallel legal system of law-enforcement known as *pakhtunwali* that comprises an all-male tribal council known as the *loya jirga* and *panchayat* (jury) headed by tribal chiefs whose decisions are non-contestable, and

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neither are women allowed to testify or speak in their defence (Yousafzai and Gohar, 2005: 23).[21] Such voids and stark lapses in conveying a contextual understanding of the culture she is portraying show Pazira's indifference and disregard for a meaningful understanding of her subject and its depiction for unversed audiences. Surprisingly, any deep understanding or consideration of the cultural aspects and importance of tribal 'honour' are ignored under Pazira's directorial (or journalistic) abilities nor given due significance to add depth to the storyline or to the character of her protagonist.

In a bid to fuel life into her film, Pazira adds several incidents and parallel stories: Rehmat's childhood experience of shooting his father's murderer in the opening scene as he is supported in his revenge-killing by the village elders serves as a reference to the film's topic of 'honour-killing' (the enactment of a child committing a validated murder very obviously meant to hold audience attention); the Canadian crew introducing cinema and cartoons to the village children by setting up a small makeshift film theatre, only to be shut down by the conservative locals who display extreme hostility for the 'foreigners'; a displaced Hazara family returning to the village to reclaim their house after the war but failing to do so (Tanner, 2002: 284).[22] However, the film fails to achieve any depth of meaning or poignancy that a topic of this nature (honour-killing), supported by a strong production team, international institutional funding and assistance, and exhibition venues associated with 'accented' cinemas (Naficy 2001: 292), could have produced in the hands of a sensitive and artistically competent filmmaker versed in the history and socio-cultural traditions and norms of the subject matter at hand. The many loose ends (for example, Mena's father buying rat-poison at a stall in the desert that he hands over to Rehmat to kill her, but we never see it being used), and lax editing and unnecessary scenes that fail to add significant meaning to the narrative, drag the film to ninety minutes. Unfortunately, the film ends without making a

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marked impact in the absence of a grounded socio-cultural representation of the subject or traditions prevalent in the region. support

The film's only saving grace and striking element is Paul Sarossy's cinematography that independently captures pleasing visuals and contrasting scenes of sun-baked desert land, mountain streams, and magnificent painting-like images of trees in bloom to imaginatively reflect the many shades of developments and emotions in the film that otherwise lack creative substance and depth.

Authenticity undoubtedly not being a major concern in the film, Pazira's *formulaic* depiction of Mena comes across more as an alluring Bollywood village damsel than an Afghan girl raised in an ultra-conservative environment where religion and cultural traditions reign supreme, and intense war and internal strife have destroyed all semblance of a normal life. Whereas Mena may not have had any exposure to the outside world (her only view even in the village is from a gap-like window in the wall of her mud-house), nor even possess the essential *burqa*, Pazira's emphasis on exoticism ensures that her heroine is well-versed in portraying a glamourous image as she admires herself in front of a half-length mirror in her home, swirling around and playing with her flowing locks.

Pazira's *formulaic* accent and reliance on exoticism and romanticizing Mena's looks and appeal for a Western audience runs throughout the film, as she depicts Mena with her glossy blow-dried long tresses flowing out of a maroon *chador* that barely covers her head, and even so keeps slipping provocatively, and for the main part dressed in a flowing maroon dress to match. Mena tells us she collects rain-water to wash her hair (that too in the desert!). And, in an attempt to add pathos to her story, to do so she uses bottles that once contained medication to cure her mother from tuberculosis. Her appearance contrasts sharply with the subdued and staid depiction of the other

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women shown in traditional attires, with their heads covered even inside their homes. It is also not clear why Mena, despite being a young woman of marriageable age by Afghan standards, still does not own a *burqa* of her own – a garment that even the poorest of Afghan women would possess. And why her father, who can afford her wedding, would not provide the staple *burqa* for his daughter? The result is a weak, scarcely credible portrayal and storyline.

The filmmaker's accent and emphasis is clearly on promoting novelty, not substance. Even though a story centered on the very same topics (*burqa*, honour-killing, gender, war) could have been represented most effectively, particularly given the creative license afforded by a feature film. Hannah McGregor (2012) reflects on Pazira's work:

The independent woman filmmaker occupies a difficult position. She must deal with the standard difficulties of independent filmmakers (funding, distribution, and artistic compromise), while negotiating an identity at once marginalized and exoticized. Her subject position makes her films more vulnerable to critique from other post-colonial and feminist thinkers and, particularly since she's an Afghan-Canadian woman producing documentaries in the wake of September 11, more exposed to certain kinds of social and political coding. Because Pazira's Afghan background lends her documentaries an aura of cultural authenticity, they are both more prone to being read as the 'truth' about Afghanistan and to being critiqued for complicity with this reading. (110)

Regardless of the complexities outlined by McGregor, watching and evaluating *Act of Dishonour* as a final product with its sketchy storyline, superficial characterization, flat dialogues delivered with equally scant feeling (including the hackneyed '*burqa* is a prison' discourse by a Canadian crew member on the 'oppressive' nature of veiling for women thrown in for good measure), one can't make excuses for its weaknesses regardless of the filmmaker's 'accented' position, 'interstitial' location, and 'opportunistic identity politics' (Naficy 2001).

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It becomes increasingly obvious that *Act of Dishonour* has been made as a hurried product with an unversed foreign audience in mind, rather than an accent/emphasis on authenticity of portrayals, depth of representations and characterization, and sound historical and cultural background research, factors that mark quality filmmaking and memorable cultural portrayals. One is pressed to ask: how many more such '*poor them*' formulaic film productions will bank on selling the ravages of war in Afghanistan; the ever-horrific custom of 'honour-killing'; patriarchal control and Muslim women's oppression; and related socio-cultural issues abroad if devoid of intelligent content and meaningful cinematic depictions? One also cannot but wonder about Pazira's motivations, whether she is naïve, clever and opportunistic, simply a weak filmmaker, or herself the victim of a fragmented identity who is tempted by Western funding opportunities, willing to be exploited as a 'native informant' (Usamah, 2008: 49) for recognition and fame[23] by reproducing and endorsing stereotypical notions of the oppressed Muslim woman who needs to be 'saved' (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 27) and liberated.

Significantly, whereas in *Return to Kandahar* Pazira expressed the urge to 'pull off' the imprisoning *burqa*, in *Act of Dishonour* she sets out to lure her protagonist by promising to provide her the very same garment ('prison'?) to serve another facet of her *formulaic* accent.

Noticeably distanced from the socio-cultural codes of her Afghan origins, Pazira's shallow portrayal of Mena as a young beautiful, vulnerable girl facing dire consequences that are etched in tradition and tribal customs is yet again an example of accenting novelty over quality.

Written, and directed by Pazira, and produced by her film company Kandahar Films (which she founded in 2001), in association with Foundry Films, Nomad Films, and support from the National Film Board of Canada, *Act of Dishonour* boasts a substantial film production team and yet fails to

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deliver beyond a disappointingly flat tale of the ever horrific, and disturbing (particularly to Western audiences) topic of 'honour-killing.' By now, to viewers familiar with his flare to add surreal humour with sensitivity to instil meaning and life into the most bleak and ordinary of situations and scenes, it is quite obvious that having had a head-start with Mohsen Makhmalbaf is not a guarantee of becoming a filmmaker of his calibre. Something the viewer is reminded of particularly with Pazira's lack of depth in characterization, including her own (as Mejgan), and inability to portray a population and culture (one that she claims the agency to represent through her own origins) that is fraught with decades of war-weariness, religious fundamentalism, poverty, despair, and attendant complexities. Film critic Jennie Punter (2010) aptly seals Pazira's cinematic outcome in her review:

> Beautifully shot by cinematographer Paul Sarossy, *Act of Dishonour* has elements of what could have been a fascinating insight into a culture on the cusp of change, in a part of the world we know little about. If only that Canadian film crew didn't get in the way.[24]

Disappointingly, *Act of Dishonour*, as in the case of *Return to Kandahar*, signifies that although Pazira may belong to the Afghan diaspora, unfortunately her films add nothing to the otherwise rich, meaningful, informative, and entertaining 'Diaspora cinema' category that spans globally diverse contributions (Naficy 2001:13) and their 'exilic, diasporic, and ethnic' characteristics (11). Pazira's only achievement may be that her films attempted to vindicate the post-9/11 US stance to attack Afghanistan, and the vast amounts spent on its so-called 'War on Terror.'

Failing to weave the socio-cultural, historical, political, and traditional contexts in her *formulaic* and exoticized representations in *Act of Dishonour*, ironically Pazira's own words during a conversation with Mena are the only thing that ring true by the end of her directorial feature: 'I have lost my way.' As indeed did the US, we are reminded, as it freed Afghanistan from the Taliban in December 2001 only to hand it back to them twenty years later in August 2021.

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Pazira's 'Accented' Position

A contextual reading of Pazira's two films reflects her 'interstitial location' (Naficy, 2001: 20). and self-positioning as one of conscious distancing from the culture, country, people and circumstances that she sets out to portray, and the viewer expects her to identify with, given her Afghan origins. Instead, we see an emphasis on what Hamid Naficy refers to as 'opportunistic identity politics' (269) that is made apparent through Pazira's conscious self-separation from her subjects to propagate and validate a Western point of view of the dismal and backward conditions in a conflict-weary Afghanistan.

If Pazira becomes a 'situated but universal' (10) figure it is not because of her accented and diasporic identity, but more so because of what I have argued is her *formulaic* accent, and the timing and appeal of her topics in both films for Western audiences and film festivals. It is particularly significant to note that, although the filmmaker's origins and early life are embedded in the turbulent history of Afghanistan, she underplays this autobiographical and experiential connection to instead facilitate her distancing, and shape and strengthen her *formulaic* accent.

Playing 'opportunistic identity politics,' (269) the most that Pazira manages (or allows) as evidence of her connection to Afghanistan is the periodic insertion of still photographs of holidaying and family picnics of her pre-migration time spent in Afghanistan (*Return to Kandahar*), which, ironically, given the post-9/11 circumstances and the conditions of the women she interacts with in the film (poverty-stricken street vendors, subjugated students, internally displaced refugees), sharply highlights her disconnect with the very people she wants to show an affinity with for the benefit of appealing to her audiences. Instead, her own privileged status, class, and socio-economic disconnect contrast sharply during her interactions with her subjects, hence ironically

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strengthening what I argue as her 'outsider returning temporarily to leave' position even further. Her ticket to success and recognition seems to lie solely on her own attractive and exoticized appearance in her films either as a circumstantially displaced Afghan woman, now claiming authenticity in her reporting back from her travels through documentary film (*Return to Kandahar*), or performative role as an Afghan woman returning to her country of origin though feature films (*Kandahar* and *Act of Dishonour*).

Pazira's filmic portrayals, comments, and observations come across as significantly indifferent, stereotyped, and essentialist because of their superficiality. This is particularly so because her focus in both films centers on outward symbols of women's oppression and subjugation (*burqa*) without a substantial historical, political, and socio-cultural background to foreground them. Although an 'accented' (4) subject herself, Pazira's 'self-inscription' and 'homecoming and border-crossings' (277) in both films are one of a carefully crafted and pre-determined *formulaic accent* that employs a marked separation from her Afghan women subjects and their predicaments (*Return to Kandahar*) and self-exoticization, and orientalism in her depictions of her protagonist as well as herself (*Act of Dishonour*). Significantly, although in *Return to Kandahar* Pazira presents her homecoming to Afghanistan as a journey with the distinctly personal motive to trace and save the life of a childhood friend, her 'authorial' (34) touch that may reflect a deep connection to her purpose remains sketchy. Her attempts at autobiographical reflections seem to be added purely as staged fillers to add poignancy to an otherwise insipid story and incredulous journey.

Pazira's *formulaic* approach, while targeting a Western audience, and validating their perceptions of Afghanistan, no doubt also satisfy her Western funders, but in the process compromise and weaken her 'exilic, diasporic, and ethnic' (11) filmic position, facets of all of which could have added strength to her portrayals and standing as a filmmaker of substance. Similarly, any attempts

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by Pazira at 'auto-ethnographic' representations (Nichols, 2001: 18) ring hollow, and appear significantly tailored to fill gaps in the film and give the impression of being presented in passing. For example, in *Return to Kandahar*, scenes of Pazira visiting her old school and speaking with students about wearing the *burqa*, or her conversation with women vendors on the sidewalk in Mazar-e-Sharif appear moulded to show a deep interest in women's issues and what may be perceived as their oppressive conditions in the clutches of a fundamentalist and patriarchal society, and gender-discriminatory traditions. Likewise, *Act of Dishonour* pitches the horrific and familiar topic of 'honour-killing' associated with conservative Muslim and tribal societies (although this custom has no connection to religion) to attract Western audiences and seek a slot at film festivals. However, the filmmaker's exoticization of her protagonist coupled with her narcissistic and orientalized self-projection at a shrine in *Act of Dishonour* damage her directorial input, robbing the film of meaningful substance despite its powerful subject of honour-killing.

For Western Eyes: Quality or Novelty?

It is important to question how Pazira's stories and self-projections in *Return to Kandahar* and *Act of Dishonour* resonate and connect across borders and cultures in the West, and what are the factors that contribute to their appeal at Western international film festivals in particular: is it her own (exotic) participation in her topical films as a 'Muslim' women, with all of the contradictions and constraints this entails for Muslim women's participation in the public sphere in conservative societies (in this case Afghanistan) that brings them added attention and recognition? Hence, is it the quality of these filmic portrayals, or the novelty of their filmmaker, subjects, and the timely execution of a *formulaic* accent that garnered them international acclaim, and Pazira a film career? Consequently, is quality inevitably compromised when novelty dominates to attract and secure

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foreign funding, screening opportunities, inclusion at film festivals, and popularity among remote and unversed audiences, all largely located in the West? Martin Kramer (2002) comments on timing being of the essence in opportunistic filmic projections of Afghanistan:

It was a mercifully short war, the campaign to drive the Taliban from their hold on power in Afghanistan—so short, in fact, that general knowledge of Afghanistan couldn't possibly keep pace with military operations. There was so much to digest: not just the Taliban regime, but Afghanistan's complex ethnic composition, its history of civil conflict, the loaded question of Islam, and the country's murky relations with Pakistan and the Arab world. It is at moments like this, when time is short and the subject is foreign, that documentary and foreign films attain an influence they never enjoy in peacetime.[25]

Given the timing of her cinematic introduction to the world in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* to her own foray into filmmaking, it is apparent that Pazira had the stage set to capture a film market and audiences engulfed by 24/7 images of a remote and raging conflict in Afghanistan in the wake of the US-led 'War on Terror'. Added to this was the much-touted freedom for Afghan women, particularly from what was perceived as the most obvious symbol of their oppression: the *burqa*. Usamah (2008) notes:

> That the oppression of women was sold as a central reason for needing to topple the Taliban (Kolhatkar & Ingalls, 2006) also reveals that Orientalist imaginations are gendered. Indeed, the type of developmentalist intervention that Orientalism furthers is often predicated on helping women.(52)

It is not mere chance then that both of Pazira's films discussed here also focus on women as the central characters and victims in her stories. Added to the aforementioned factors are elements of filming in a dangerous terrain; claiming authenticity and agency as a native and 'insider'; Pazira's own visual participation as an Afghan diaspora woman filmmaker; self-orientalization and

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exoticization of her own history of displacement and refugee status as a result of conflict; homecoming and nostalgia. All of these are aspects that Pazira strategically packages to attract foreign funding and sympathetic audiences, clearly placing her *formulaic* emphases on expressions of novelty, rather than quality.

Likewise, we see Pazira's complicity (conscious or unwitting) with Western media's legitimation of the 'War on Terror' and focus on images of *burqa*-clad Muslim women as oppressed beings in dire need of rescue by white/Western feminisms and military interventions. A legitimation we see mirrored in Pazira's anxious urge to 'pull off' the burqa from an Afghan woman, reminding one of feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty's reference (1991) to the 'debilitating generality' of Third World women's oppressed 'object status' (71) in her essay entitled 'Under Western Eyes' that critiques Western feminist approaches that essentialize non-white women as a homogeneous group. Conversely, we see Pazira validate this essentialist 'object status' in her films through a *formulaic* accent that is specifically shaped *for* Western eyes.

Conclusion

Differing from Naficy's formulation of the ''accented cinema' (2001), Pazira's carefully executed *formulaic* accent employs all the trappings of appealing to eager Western sources of funding and unversed audiences: the topical subject of the post-9/11 US-led War on Terrorism; Western media hype around Muslim women, war, *burqa*, religious fundamentalism, gender subjugation; the pathos of suicide by a young girl, and the ruthlessness of honour-killing and potential violent victimization of a young bride-to-be as a consequence of patriarchal dictates and customs. Ticking all the boxes, her *formulaic* approach is modelled for success and winning awards that Valck *et al* (2016) point to as the most tangible form of symbolic capital-catapulting a film and filmmaker to

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a position of fame and wide acceptance (20). Certainly, the undeniable role of international media outlets and festivals in advancing filmmaking careers, and acceptance at film festivals no doubt remains a crucial factor in the promotion of Third Word, diaspora, minority and marginal cinemas.

Instead of the native insider, each time Pazira seems to return to Afghanistan as the 'native outsider,' backed by generous funders and leaving with guaranteed Western audiences willing to overlook her shortcomings and emblematic over-simplification of socio-cultural, political, and historical issues in her representations as long as she reproduces essentialist stereotypes with an exotic flavour that can ensure exotic portrayals and easy marketing. The reviews for *Return to Kandahar* are self-explanatory.[26] Commenting on Pazira's acting abilities in *Kandahar*, *New York Times* film critic Elvis Mitchell (2001) had this to say when the film played at the Lincoln Plaza, New York:

> Mr. Makhmalbaf isn't much of a storyteller, and Ms. Pazira is more than his equal in her lack of acting ability. She looks slightly distracted when staring into the camera; she seems to be waiting for instructions to change expression to come over an ear piece, and the instructions never quite get there.[27]

Noting Pazira's reactions to the various absurd and unpredictable incidents she encounters in the film, Mitchell continued:

> By this point Ms. Pazira's vacant stare has become a part of the texture of "Kandahar": you almost can't imagine anybody else -- certainly not someone who might actually react to these unusual proceedings -- as the lead.[28]

Whereas Mohsen Makhmalbaf has certainly proved his abilities otherwise time and again, it seems Nelofer Pazira has maintained her shortcomings and vacant stare in both her slow-paced directorial ventures discussed here, minus her attractive self and fluency in Dari. Her *formulaic* 'accented' returns to Afghanistan leave much to be desired.

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Afterword

July 2021: As I commenced research on this paper, media reports began to pour in confirming the final exit of US forces from Bagram Air base in Afghanistan who 'switched off the lights' and left quietly in the dark of the night without even informing their hosts, citing 'security' reasons.[29] After 20 years of war that resulted in clear defeat for the US, the indescribable devastation of Afghanistan includes countless natives maimed, killed, raped, slaughtered, internally displaced, not to mention the refugees and exiles scattered around the world, mostly forced to live in miserable conditions in refugee camps. Once again the country stood at the threshold of lawlessness, political crisis, and war-lordism as the Taliban continued to make significant and swift progress to overpower the Afghan army and take control of district after district.[30] The only difference being that with the Western forces now gone, the media had no interest in covering the ground situation in Afghanistan. How many will now return, foreigners or members of the Afghan diaspora, to make a film remains to be seen. What funding outlets and channels would now be interested particularly in the plight of Afghan women and their conditions as the Taliban begin to enforce their rule and ideology with renewed vigour and greater power now as a political entity enjoying bargaining power on the international forum, also remains to be seen. One thing is certain: yet again women will be the first targets of religious identity and nationalism. And likely the country will once again be too far away and obscure to matter other than for conflictual purposes, relayed back by the media, if at all, as a signpost of backwardness, lawlessness, and strife to the very Western powers that had invaded to liberate, develop, and reconstruct it.

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A clear message regarding regressive policies has already been conveyed as the Taliban issued a decree for all unmarried girls, women, and widows under 40 to marry 'Taliban.' Lists of all such potential brides had already been ordered in provinces under their control as they advanced towards the capital city of Kabul.[31] No doubt the policy is aimed to use women of child-bearing age to extend their ideology through a controlled population growth. Likewise, as another extremist and absurd measure, even mannequins were ordered to be beheaded! Such is the nature of the Taliban's gender-specific control and dogma.

On August 15, 2021, the fall of Kabul heralded the end of any hope that Afghans may still have harboured as the Taliban comfortably ensconced themselves in the Presidential Palace while Afghan President Ashraf Ghani packed his bags with 'US dollars' and fled the country with his close aides, reportedly to Tajikistan.[32] On August 31, just before midnight, US commander Maj. Gen. Christopher T. Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, boarded a transport plane as the last American soldier to leave Afghanistan.[33] After 20 years, the Taliban, hunted as criminals by the US, had arrived as victors to form their government. Their first action was to rename the country as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), and their leader as a Caliph.[34] All this was taking place even as the Western states still scrambled to evacuate their citizens; the US embassy lowered its flag while personnel raced to destroy sensitive materials and documents; and Afghans nervously watched their country left destroyed and betrayed both by foreign powers that had vowed to 'save' it from the Taliban, and their own successive rulers who had claimed to steer it towards progress and a successful future. A new game plan was now in action, and the Taliban were calling the shots in the very presence of the US forces that had invaded the county two decades earlier. The world media was already beginning to compare the US defeat and

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unceremonious exit from Afghanistan with its defeat in Vietnam in the 1970s. The global political and media interest had now shifted to geo-political developments and the role regional powers such as Pakistan, India, Russia, and China would play in recognizing the new Taliban government, and how the scenario would play out for the Western world, particularly the US. Afghan women's freedoms, human rights, and re-building of Afghanistan were of little or no concern. Already.

One wonders would a Pazira return to Kandahar to capture developments and acts of dishonour now?

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ENDNOTES:

[1]These included Munizae Jehangir (*Search for Freedom* 2003); Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy (*Afghanistan Unveiled* 2007); Samar Minallah (*Dar Pa Dar: Afghan Refugee Women* 2008) (Pakistan); Samira Makhmalbaf (*At Five in the Afternoon* 2003); Yassamin Maleknasr (*Afghanistan, The Lost Truth* 2003) (Iran); Saira Shah (*Inside Afghanistan: Behind the Veil* 2001) (Afghan diaspora).

[2]For a listing of the various components of the 'Accented Style' of cinema as defined by Naficy, see Naficy, Hamid. (2001). “Appendix A.” *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. 289.

[3]*Fatwa*: Islamic religious edict.

[4]The *burqa* is a head-to-toe garment, covering the face and the entire body with a mesh screen for eyes, worn by very conservative Muslim women in the sub-continent. In Afghanistan, the Taliban officially enforced the *burqa* for all women as a symbol of their fundamentalist policies.

[5]For detailed data, see Jackson, A. (2009). "The Cost of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict: 1978-2009." *Afghan Civil Society Forum*, 2009. https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/afghanistan-the-cost-of-war_14.pdf. Accessed on 8 September 2021.

[6]For figures on Afghan civilian casualties, see "Afghanistan: Civilian casualties exceed 10,000 for sixth straight year." UN News. February 22, 2020. https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057921. Accessed on 5 August 2021; Badalic, Vasja. (2019). *The War Against Civilians: Victims of the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Pakistan.* Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Victims and Victimology, 2019. E-book.

[7]For figures on Afghan conflict-related casualties from 2001-2016, see Crawford, Neta C. 'Costs of War.' Watson Institute. Brown University, USA. 2016. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPDATE_FINAL.pdf. Accessed on 10 September 2021.

[8]Even the then British First lady, Cherie Blair called for 'giving back a voice to the Afghan women.' Similarly, the US First Lady at the time, Barbara Bush aired her propagandist support for Afghan women's rights through a radio broadcast from the White House. Ward, Lucy. "Cherie Blair Pleads for Afghan Women." *The Guardian*, November 20, 2001. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/nov/20/uk.september11. Accessed on 12 July 2021.

[9]The *chador* is a shawl worn loosely over the head and shoulders by Muslim women in the sub-continent, Afghanistan, and Iran.

[10]A Google keyword search on "Afghanistan war documentaries" or films regarding the "Taliban" era suffices to track dozens of titles on the subject, with many available also on Amazon and IMDb for purchase and renting. Amazon. https://www.amazon.co.uk/s?k=afghanistan+war+documentaries&i=instant-video&adgrpid=80035559256&gclid=CjwKCAiAnfjyBRBxEiwA-EECLATs0qJbEWUaj8qfvV5sXymNgRIctZ7d5m-XtDQLqbw3xyp_iArbARoC6BwQAvD_BwE&hvadid=389791249361&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=1007835&hvnetw=g&hvqmt=e&hvrand=8973022724965298195&hvtargid=kwd-434717170935&hydadcr=12316_1948794&tag=googiehydra-21&ref=pd_sl_2hgbzibnzf_e. Accessed on 24 September 2021.

IMDb. https://www.imdb.com/search/keyword/?keywords=taliban Accessed on 20 September 2021.

[11]Saira Shah's film *Beneath the Veil* (2001) had shocked the world with secretly filmed footage passed on to her by an Afghan women's organization of a *burqa*-clad Afghan woman being shot to death in the Kabul football stadium by the Taliban for allegedly committing adultery. The shooting

took place as male spectators looked on. For further discussion of the film, see Kramer, Martin. (2002). "The Camera and the Burqa." *Middle East Quarterly*. Spring 2002. pgs-69-76. http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/the-camera-and-the-burqa/ . Accessed on 24 September 2021.

[12]It is reported that 3000 people commit suicide in Afghanistan each year, 80 percent of whom are women. The reasons are largely gender-violence and oppressive socio-cultural norms such as under-age marriages. Saif, Shadi Khan. (2017). "Around 3000 Afghans Commit Suicide Every Year." *Anadolu Agency*, 17 September 2017.

https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/around-3-000-afghans-commit-suicide-every-year/912627. Accessed on 5 September 2021.

[13]For detailed discussion on Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Kandahar*, see Graham, Mark. (2010). "The Burqa Films: Land Without Images: *Kandahar*." *Afghanistan in the Cinema.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

[14]Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Kandahar* paved the way for other filmmakers to focus on Afghanistan, including what I argue elsewhere were to be 'neighbour' filmmakers from Pakistan and Iran looking in from their perspective. These filmmakers included Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy; Samar Minallah; Munizae Jehangir (Pakistan); Samira Makhmalbaf; Hanna Makhmalbaf, Yassamin Maleknasr (Iran).

[15]Usamah Ansari notes: The co-director of this film and member of the J Films production company, Paul Jay, mentions in his ''Director's Notes'' that he involved himself with the documentary after meeting Pazira in 2002 because Pazira's story "''had what great documentaries are made of---a compelling character, a dramatic individual story, set in an epic background. So, in the end, I couldn't resist'" (Jay, 2006). He also felt that "''Nelofer's search, and Dyana's story, were a natural and powerful metaphor for the fate of the country and of Afghan women. Dyana's letters are sad, desperate and poignant.'" The relationship between Pazira and Jay in terms of control over the production and narrative process is unclear, although it is apparent that only Pazira's cultural positioning (that is, her relationship with Afghanistan and personal investment in it) is laid bare for the audience. Indeed, the film requires a constant referencing to Pazira's personal story and status as Afghani, while Jay's own biography is entirely ignored."" Ansari, Usamah. (2008). ""Should I Go and Pull Her Burqa Off?": Feminist Compulsions, Insider Consent, and a Return to Kandahar." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Vol. 25, No. 1, 64. March 2008. Routledge.

[16]For details on the emergence of the Taliban movement see Rashid, Ahmed. (2008). 'Kandahar 1994: The Origins of the Taliban.' *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia.* New York: I. B. Tauris.

[17]For further details on prevalent suicide rates among Afghan women, see: Whimn, Jessica Rapana. "Why the Suicide Rate is Higher for Women in Afghanistan." *New York Post*, September 10, 2018. https://nypost.com/2018/09/10/why-the-suicide-rate-is-higher-for-women-in-afghanistan/. Accessed on 5 September 2021.

[18]In 2004 Nelofer Pazira set up the *Dyana Afghan Women's Fund* in Afghanistan. Since 2006 the Canadian-registered charity organization claims to have provided girls and women with education and skills training in the province of Bamiyan. For details of the organization visit: http://www.dawf.ca

[19]In the interview, Nelofer Pazira claimed: ""Act of Dishonour" is about honour killing. It is based on the true-life story of a woman who acted in a short film that one of my friends made in Kabul. Her husband was in Pakistan at the time of the filming, but he returned to Kabul as the crew celebrated the completion of filming. He shot his wife dead because she had left her home and had acted in a film." For Nelofer Pazira's interview, see "Honour Killing Film-Afghanistan-Grim Reality." Women's UN Report Network, September 20, 2010. https://wunrn.com/2010/09/honour-killing-film-afghanistan-grim-reality/ .Accessed on 13 September 2021.

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[20]For further discussion on the socio-cultural factors behind the victimization of women on the pretext of 'honour', and 'honour-killings', see A.A. Hayat. (2002). 'Honour Killings.' *Women: Victims of Social Evil.* Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Security Management. Press Corporation of Pakistan; Stewart, Frank Henderson. (1994). "Women." *Honor.* London: University of Chicago Press.

[21]For detailed discussion on the workings of the *jirga* system see Hassan M. Yousufzai and Ali Gohar. (2005). "The Context of Jirga." *Towards Understanding Pukhtoon Jirga.* Just Peace International Publishers, Peshawar, Pakistan; Ali Wardak. (2003). "Concept and Definition of Jirga." *Jirga – A Traditional Mechanism of Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan.* Wales: University of Glamorgan.

[22]The Hazaras are an ethnic Shiite Muslim sect that was part of the Northern Alliance, comprising all major Afghan ethnic groups such as the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Turkmen that formed a coalition of non-Pashtun parties in Afghanistan that resisted the Taliban regime, and succeeded in overthrowing their rule with American assistance in 2001. (The Northern Alliance coalition was also formally known as the United Front for the Liberation of Afghanistan). Tanner, Stephen. (2002). "The Rise of the Taliban." *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban.* New York: Da Capo Press.

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[23]*Act of Dishonour* has been screened at the Edinburgh International Film Festival; Toronto Film Festival; Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival (Winner Special Mention); Belgrade Film Festival. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1670620/releaseinfo. Accessed on 4 October 2021.

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[25]Kramer, Martin. (2002). *Camera and the Burqa*. https://martinkramer.org/reader/archives/the-camera-and-the-burqa/. Accessed on 11 October 2021.

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[29]Amiri, Ehsanullah and Lubold, Gordon. "After the US's Bagram Exit, Afghans Face the Taliban Alone." *The Wall Street Journal*. July 5, 2021.

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https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-u-s-s-bagram-exit-afghans-face-the-taliban-alone-11625517960. Accessed on 2 August 2021.

[30]The once dreaded warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum has also returned from exile in Turkey to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban and secure what he believes to be his stronghold areas. Daily *Dawn* (AFP), August 6, 2021. https://www.dawn.com/news/1639074/abdul-rashid-dostum-back-in-afghanistan-to-fight-for-besieged-home. Accessed on 6 August 2021.

[31]*The Times of India*. "Back to old ways: Taliban forcing women to marry terrorists, give up their jobs." August 23, 2021. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/back-to-old-ways-taliban-forcing-women-to-marry-terrorists-give-up-their-jobs/articleshow/85300503.cms. Accessed on 25 August 2021.

[32]The Daily *Dawn*. "Taliban Enter Kabul, Ghani Flees." https://www.dawn.com/news/1640905/taliban-enter-kabul-ashraf-ghani-flees. Accessed on 6 August 2021.

[33]Horton, Alex. (2021). "This U.S. soldier's boots were the last on the ground in Afghanistan." *The Washington Post*. August 31, 2021. Accessed at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/08/31/christopher-donahue-last-soldier-afghanistan-night-vision/. Accessed on 5 September 2021.

[34]Caliph is a title used for an Islamic religio-political leader who is entrusted with supreme control.