

Not without my sister: imagining a moral America in “Kandahar”

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Shortly after 11 September 2001, George Bush urged US citizens to watch Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film, Kandahar, set in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Why? Cynthia Weber investigates the president's and the filmmaker's visions of Afghanistan and Afghan women.

Less than two months after 11 September 2001, and a few weeks after the beginning of the US bombing campaign in Afghanistan, President George W Bush made an urgent plea to see Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar*. He encouraged US citizens to watch it as well. *Kandahar* tells the story of Afghan refugee Nafas' journey from Canada back through Afghanistan to find her maimed sister before her sister commits suicide at the last solar eclipse of the millennium. Originally entitled *The Sun Behind the Moon*, *Kandahar* is about unfinished journeys – Afghanistan's incomplete journey out of the legacies of war (landmines, famine, fundamentalism) and Nafas' incomplete journey to rescue her sister.

As a disturbing display of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, it may seem obvious that *Kandahar* supports the position of the Bush administration. But reconsidered through what I call a US moral grammar of war – made up of the tripartite axis of foreign policy, popular (often filmic) imaginaries, and narratives of the family – *Kandahar*'s story of separated sisters in need of reunion and apparent rescue also comports well with the stereotypical way the feminine functions in US national narratives at times of war, as a figure in need of physical and moral security. This theme, in fact, informed official second-wave justifications of the war

on terror in both the US and the UK. Let us take a closer look.

Makhmalbaf's Kandahar

The screen is black, except for a circle of jagged light surrounding a large, dark object. This interplay of light and its obstruction is a total solar eclipse. It is the sun behind the moon. Various views of the eclipse appear and disappear as film credits roll and a mournful soundtrack begins. Cut to a burqa-clad woman. She lifts her garment to reveal her face. Holding her veil overhead, the burqa's mesh casts a grill-like shadow over her eyes. The camera intently holds its focus on this image as dialogue ensues. A voice asks in an Afghan language, 'What's your name?' The woman answers, 'Nafas'. The voice asks, 'Who are you?' Nafas answers, 'I'm the bride's cousin'. Nafas' English voiceover joins the mournful music as the camera lingers on her shadowed face. 'I'd always escaped from jails that imprisoned Afghan women. But now I'm a captive in every one of those prisons. Only for you, my sister'.

This is the film's opening sequence. Set in Afghanistan just before the end of the last millennium, *Kandahar* is a compilation of stories performed by Afghan residents and refugees about a country devastated by decades of

war, poverty, and famine. What ties these stories together is the journey of Nafas, played by Nelofer Pazira, herself an Afghan refugee who escaped to Canada some ten years earlier. *Kandahar* tells of Nafas' return to Afghanistan to find the sister her family left behind when she lost both legs to a landmine on their journey out of the country. Alone in the Taliban-held city of Kandahar since the death of the father who stayed behind to care for her, the sister writes to Nafas of her plans to commit suicide at the next solar eclipse. Nafas rushes to the Iranian/Afghan border, determined to infuse her sister with hope, with life, with herself as the breath of life (Nafas literally meaning 'to breathe').

Arriving just three days before the eclipse, Nafas spends one day organising her passage into Afghanistan (where women cannot travel alone) and two days travelling. The film is an unflinching record of Nafas' haunted and haunting journey to Kandahar and of the Afghanis and the Afghanists she encounters along the way.

We first see Nafas in motion in a Red Cross helicopter taking her to a refugee camp at the Iranian/Afghan border. Speaking into her tape recorder – which she explains to the pilot is her blackbox, 'in case I crash and don't return' – she tells her sister and the viewers that this moment of movement was preceded by nearly a month of waiting in Pakistan. The helicopter passes over Afghan mountains until it reaches a clinic for landmine victims. In a surreal long shot, we watch as a pair of legs parachutes toward the ground. The following sequence shows young girls at the refugee camp being prepared for the restricted mobility they will face upon their return to Afghanistan. Do not pick up dolls, the girls are told, for dolls are wired with bombs. The girls practice walking amongst clean, new dolls, building up their immunities to temptation. We later learn that it was when Nafas' sister picked up such a doll that she lost her legs, beginning her long pause in Afghanistan that now threatens to become a full stop.

At the refugee camp, Nafas dons a burqa and arranges to accompany an Afghan family on their way to Kandahar by posing as the fourth wife. With only a UN flag as protection, the family board a three-wheel truck, draped with a colourful embroidered canopy. Husband and driver are in the cab; wives and children in the back. When the party stops for lunch, the wives and girls defiantly paint their fingernails, put on brightly-coloured bracelets, and (later) apply lipstick

by slipping makeup and mirror beneath the burqa. As much as Nafas enjoys these activities and what they seem to mean, she is anxious to continue her journey. But once back on the road, the family is robbed. All their money and possessions, including the truck, are carried off by bandits. The family decide they are at too much risk in Afghanistan and return to Iran, leaving Nafas stranded in a small village.

Here Nafas encounters Khak, a young boy recently expelled from a madaris – an Islamic school – for his failure to memorise the Qu'ran. Khak is trying to earn money by offering to say prayers for women mourning in a cemetery. For \$50, Nafas persuades Khak to be her guide, on foot across the white sand dunes toward Kandahar. When Nafas falls ill, Khak takes her to a village doctor who examines her piece by piece – mouth, ear, eye – through a small hole in a curtain hung between them while Khak negotiates their conversation, as direct conversation between unrelated men and women is forbidden. When the doctor mumbles in English, Nafas replies to him directly in English, confusing Khak. For reasons of safety, the doctor advises Nafas to release Khak as her guide, which she does.

The doctor turns out to be an African American who long ago came to Afghanistan in search of God, first by fighting the Soviets, then by fighting various tribal factions, and finally by offering his unschooled medical assistance to any needy Afghan. The doctor becomes Nafas' third guide, driving her in his horse-drawn cart to a Red Cross clinic for amputees where he hopes to find someone to take her to Kandahar. Here, the scene of legs parachuting from the sky is repeated. But this time we see not only the action in the sky but the action on the ground as, in dramatic slow motion, bare-footed one-legged men race on crutches desperate to secure the limbs they are missing, albeit in another form.

Balancing the poignancy of this sequence is our introduction to Nafas' fourth and final guide – a one-handed shyster who regularly returns to the clinic telling tall tales in an attempt to secure legs he can sell. Nafas' money and the doctor's chiding convince him to take Nafas to Kandahar. He goes away to make arrangements for their journey and returns in a bright orange burqa, explaining that he and Nafas can travel to Kandahar as members of an all-female wedding party. And so they join a procession of brightly-coloured burqaed women walking through the white sand behind the white-burqaed bride-to-be poised upon a donkey. All goes well until they reach the

outskirts of Kandahar. There the group is stopped at a Taliban checkpoint. Each member of the group is searched by two women wearing black burqas. One woman with a book and another with a musical instrument are detained, as is Nafas' guide, his mustachioed face revealed when he is required to lift his garment.

Like every other member of the wedding party, Nafas is also required to show her face and answer questions. The camera focuses on her face as the burqa casts a grill-like shadow over her eyes.

Taliban: 'What is your name?'

Nafas: 'Nafas.'

Taliban: 'Who are you?'

Nafas: 'I'm the bride's cousin'.

Nafas lowers her burqa. The camera swaps positions – from looking *at* Nafas to looking *as* Nafas. It sees, and we see, what she sees – the sun obscured through the heavy mesh of the burqa. With all of us – Nafas, camera, audience – fixed on this second eclipse of the sun, Nafas' English voiceover begins. 'I'd always escaped from jails that imprisoned Afghan women. But now I'm a captive in every one of those prisons. Only for you, my sister'.

The final credits roll as the solar eclipse replaces the burqa eclipse.

Of this world

Despite the surreal cinematography, *Kandahar* is insistently of this world. As the director explained, 'The reality of Afghanistan is surreal in itself ... When you watch people who've lost their legs in explosions take a shovel and use it as a leg, it seems surreal, but it's reality'. Nelofer Pazira, whose real-life search for a friend was indeed fictionalised into this film, also remarked, 'It is a true story ... I play myself in the film, a woman searching for her sister in the prisons of this world. All the women suffering in my country are my sisters'. Nafas, both through her vocation and her journey, embodies the quasi-documentary aspect of the film, which has little time for heroism, mystery or adventure. We are told at the outset that she is a journalist in Canada, a professional identity she enacts by reporting all her encounters into a tape recorder for her sister. Her journey represents less an heroic rescue mission than it does a series of necessary encounters with Afghans and Afghanists, with an earthly city in darkness as its destination.

The Afghan landscape is presented as a glittering wound that demands attention in itself and for itself. Anchored in contrasting cinematic and storytelling styles, *Kandahar* fashions a grammatical structure

based upon three primary sets of tensions – place and placelessness, progress and non-progress, lightness and darkness – that it explores in turn – spatially, temporally, and morally.

Place

The place and placelessness of Afghanistan, for example, become the symbolic spatial terrain the film's characters negotiate: crisscrossing *Kandahar's* landscapes, none of them has a stable place. Indeed, all the characters we meet are not only in motion, they are out of place: the Afghan refugees in Iran; Khak in his religious boarding school; the American doctor in Afghanistan; the one-handed man in a burqa; and Nafas herself, who wanders from place to place within and beyond Afghanistan.

It is the one character we never meet, and yet who dominates the narrative, who *is* firmly in place. This is Nafas' sister, legless and alone in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar. Crippled in body and spirit, she cannot wander, and ultimately she cannot hope. An absent presence who drives the film's action, Nafas' sister symbolises many things. She is Afghan women's containment within social, cultural, and religious institutions. She is the absent identity of Afghan women, denied a public image of their own through the burqa. 'Perhaps this is why they are called blackheads', Nafas speculates about these women whose individual identities are reduced to a collective category, and denied an image of their own making.

Kandahar's symbolic and narrative concentration on the obscured identity of Afghan women's individuality and image is also a metaphor for Afghanistan as a whole. Makhmalbaf has described Afghanistan as 'a country without an image'. Again, '...Afghanistan is a nation without a picture. Afghan women are faceless: 10 million out of the 20 million population don't get a chance to be seen'. And, to the outside world, Afghanistan appears to be 'a land without a face'. Getting one's bearings in and about this half-faceless place is not only difficult – it may be dangerous. By contrasting what appear to be open, faceless landscapes with the daily restrictions on and resistances of the distinct individuals who inhabit them, the film depicts how political, cultural, and religious conventions have eroded the individuality and image of Afghanistan, transforming everything – even its people – into minefields. As the doctor tells Nafas, 'In Afghanistan, everyone is either a threat or an opportunity'.

Time

There is a similar challenge in the film's exploration of opposed temporalities – progressive and non-

progressive. The outside world is forever writing Afghanistan into progressive narratives, be they earthly narratives of capitalism, socialism, or empire, or theological narratives of progress toward a purer form of Islam. The film is a comment on the non-progressive effects of these temporal impositions, western and eastern alike. Nafas has three days by the end of which she must find her sister or risk her suicide – yet *Kandahar* screens scene after scene which underscores the futility of imposing a progressive temporality onto this pre-millennial Afghanistan. The film makes this point in three ways – by emphasising a cyclical temporality over a linear, progressive one, by recording all journeys in Afghanistan as interrupted or incomplete, and by remarking on the effects of the selective incorporation of ‘progress’ into Afghanistan.

Temporally, the film is a narrative loop, beginning and ending at the very same place. The first and last images of the film – the repetition of a solar eclipse, itself a cyclical event, marking as it does the recurrence of specific orbital alignments – are an announcement of cyclical time, as are the film's first and final narrative sequences. Not only do we see the same encounter between Nafas and the Taliban on the outskirts of Kandahar, but we see them through the same shots and hear them through the same dialogue, the repetition underscoring the many ways in which cyclical time – the time of the eclipse – is cheating progressive time, for we never see Nafas progress to her destination.

Indeed, not one of the many journeys recounted in the film is completed. There is no arrival, whether of individual characters, the one-legged men racing toward prosthetic legs parachuting to the ground, or the droves of presumably soon-to-be refugees Nafas passes along the road travelling in the opposite direction. Repeated non-arrival speaks to the history and historical possibility of Afghanistan. Historically, Afghanistan has experienced ‘progress’ selectively. As the doctor tells Nafas, ‘Weapons are the only modern things in Afghanistan’. *Kandahar* is unreservedly critical of this particular form of progress. But it does not thereby eschew progress itself, whatever that may be. It simply refuses to name it, to decide what it may be for the Afghanistan it portrays. It does this by deliberately holding open a space for progress, by keeping every storyline open – and by its translation of movement, whether progressive or non-progressive,

into hope. This translation is performed primarily through Nafas. While she may or may not ever arrive in Kandahar, her journey seems to be as much about collecting encounters that will inspire her sister, her sisters, and herself with hope, as it is about ultimately arriving at her destination. *Kandahar* is about the journey, not about the journey's end.

Morality

This is not to say that *Kandahar* does not articulate a basis for progress. It does so very clearly. The basis for progress, it suggests, is the very same as the basis for hope that Nafas finds on her journey. It is the humanity and humanitarianism of the Afghans she meets.

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Morally, *Kandahar* codes humanity according to a simple dualism of light vs. dark. What is light is good; what is dark is evil. What is light and good is humanity; what is dark and evil are social, cultural, political, and religious forces within and beyond Afghanistan like the Taliban, civil wars, and proxy wars. As with its handling of space and time, the film constructs a tension

in its employment of this moral dichotomy. On the one hand, the film is an allegory about the threat of light descending into darkness. On the other hand, the film chronicles how the light of humanity repeatedly shines through this darkness. Without exception, the characters of this film stand for the goodness of humanity and their struggles against darkness.

This is most obviously the case with Nafas, but we find goodness and its struggle against evil scripted into the core of every other character as well. The young girls in the refugee camp exhibit an innocence/lightness which is about to be risked upon their return to Afghanistan. So, too, does Khak – a young boy we first encounter in the madaris – struggle against darkness as he naively negotiates the religious and economic minefields of Afghanistan. Expelled from school and desperate for money to support his fatherless family, he still makes a gift to Nafas' sister of the ring he scavenged from a skeleton, a ring that Nafas refuses to buy.

Goodness is not merely associated with the innocence of youth or with its protection. Characters who long ago lost their innocence are also portrayed as innately good. The refugee family – Nafas' first guide – is a metaphor for the wider Afghan community and the possibility of peace among warring Afghan factions,

composed as it is of a husband and wives of different ethnic backgrounds. The shyster is sympathetically drawn even as he talks the Red Cross out of a pair of legs he intends to sell. He is not a bad man, the film suggests, but just a man in economic need trying to survive like everyone else. Although his agreement to take Nafas to Kandahar is rooted in their economic bargain, on the journey he does this selflessly, all the while putting himself at great risk. An even better example is the American doctor. Having come to Afghanistan in search of God, the doctor begins this search in all the wrong places – in war and violence. Enlightened by the poverty and neglect of the people he encounters, he lays down his weapons to become a doctor, a conversion that represents the possibility for the transformation of the human spirit.

While everyone who offers to guide Nafas to Kandahar disappoints her, no one betrays her, even though betrayal is always possible. The refugee family could have taken Nafas' money when they themselves were robbed. Khak could have reported Nafas to the authorities for speaking directly to the doctor. The doctor could have used his gun against Nafas, robbed her, and turned her in. And the shyster could have traded Nafas and her concealed tape recorder to the Taliban for his own freedom when he himself was captured. None of these things happens.

But just as the film depicts images, journeys, bodies, and histories as incomplete, so it stresses the incompleteness of an individually-based humanist moral grammar. For while part of the point of *Kandahar* is to show how humanity's struggle for goodness and hope often prevails even under the threat of total darkness, the film's subject is as much 'negligent humanity' as it is individual Afghan triumphs. Yes, the human spirit conquers many obstacles. But it shouldn't have to. War and its legacies like landmines, poverty, famine, and oppression persist in wounding Afghanistan and Afghans. While there are complex domestic and international origins to these problems, both the west and the east bear responsibility not only for their adventures in Afghanistan but for their neglect of the Afghan people.

Kandahar is not an invitation for west and east once again to write their desires onto what they too often regard as an empty landscape. Afghanistan has many images, the film points out, if one will only notice them. It is not up to either west or east to 'complete' Afghanistan through their visions of this space/time, which the film notes have only helped render the country a battleground. As a critique of how domestic and international fundamentalist visions of

Afghanistan have reduced its people to poverty, hunger, and violence, *Kandahar* both enacts and calls for a re-envisioning of Afghanistan by those who gaze upon it as if their vision were in no way impaired, as if they saw this space/time for what it 'is'. Subtly yet persistently *Kandahar* suggests it is not only those within Afghanistan who are suffering from impaired vision. The west and the east, so often seeking to see themselves in heroic adventures in foreign lands, fail to see this country for itself. Staring at Afghanistan without seeing it, like those who stare at an eclipse, west and east are too often blinded by their own projects and their own desires.

The film is targeted to an English-speaking audience, to whom it reports on how their legacies of heroic encounters with Afghanistan have lacerated its landscape and its people in the name of earthly or spiritual enlightenment. This is why the film chooses an outsider (an American doctor) as its symbolic embodiment of the possibility of human spiritual transformation and the humanitarianism such a transformation makes possible. *Kandahar* testifies to the urgency of this moral encounter, before the sun disappears fully behind the moon.

Bush's Kandahar

It is uncanny the extent to which the official US discourse on the war on terror reflects the grammatical structure of frustration that makes Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* meaningful. Both are characterised by a double temporal frame of necessary progress versus cyclicity. Just as Nafas urgently needs to find her sister before hope is eclipsed by darkness, so too in official US discourse does the US urgently need to capture Osama bin Laden before more dark terrorist acts are committed against “the west”.

Yet when major US military activities officially ended in Afghanistan with the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of an interim Afghan government, not enough was known about bin Laden's whereabouts to capture him. Like Nafas' attempt, US military activity begins and ends at the same place, with necessary progress frustrated. With the simultaneous bombing of four passenger trains in Madrid on 11 March 2004, and similar bombing of the London transportation system on 7 July 2005, America's 9/11 seems to have been repeated in an echo that also extended its links to the second Gulf war (2003).

By widening the frame from Afghanistan to Iraq, the non-progressive cyclicity of the official US narrative on the war on terror is merely replayed in another location. 'Gulf war II' – itself a redux of the war on

terror in Afghanistan (not to mention the first Gulf war and some would argue increasingly, Vietnam) – did result in the overthrow and capture of Saddam Hussein. But the official US aim of instituting a democratic order in Iraq and making Iraq safe for the Iraqi people is nowhere near being achieved. Arguably, far worse than even these failures to bring security to post-Saddam Iraq (repeating US failure to secure Afghanistan outside a small zone around Kabul) is the mirroring of US security tactics to those of Saddam’s in the Abu Ghraib prison (itself recalling US treatment of suspected terrorist ‘detainees’ in Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay).

Read onto the US war on terror, Makhmalbaf’s *Kandahar* is a damning critique of US post-9/11 foreign policy. Yet President Bush latched onto this film to help justify his bombing of Afghanistan. How was this possible?

One factor was its release date. Although it was screened in art houses and at film festivals before 9/11, most Americans first heard about and saw *Kandahar* in November 2001, a mere two months after 9/11. The timing could not have been better for the Bush administration. Traumatized by the events of 9/11, many US citizens were urgently asking the question ‘why do they hate us?’ One would be hard pressed to find another moment in US history when so many Americans so self-consciously went in search of a moral compass, asking not just ‘why do they hate us?’, but the follow-on question ‘and what should we do about that?’

The Bush administration responded by declaring war on terror, which the vast majority of US citizens supported at the time. When the Taliban refused to turn in Osama bin Laden, the administration declared war on Afghanistan and began its bombing campaign of terrorist training camps and Taliban positions. The US response to 9/11, therefore, was aggressive and vengeful but not necessarily moral. Posing convincingly as a nation of dogooders remained a problem. How could this extensive bombing campaign that disrupted and destroyed the lives of so many Afghans be seen as doing any good?

This is where the Bush administration turned to *Kandahar*. Never mind that *Kandahar* offers a damning critique of foreign adventures in Afghanistan. In November 2001, George W. Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair rejustified the war in humanitarian terms, and they paraded their wives Laura Bush and Cherie Blair before the press as ‘universal sisters/women’ to argue the case for Afghan women. That month, in the first full-length radio address ever given by a US First Lady, Laura Bush told Americans:

‘Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering: The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists ... The plight of women and children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate human cruelty, carried out by those who seek to intimidate and control. Civilised people throughout the world are speaking out in horror – not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us ... Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity – a commitment shared by people of good will on every continent’.

For the Bush administration, *Kandahar* – which makes an urgent plea for international humanitarian assistance for Afghans to the English speaking world – became a cinematic lifting of the veil on Afghan women and, more broadly, on Afghanistan itself. In both the US Department of State ‘Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women’ (2001), released immediately following Laura Bush’s radio address and the comments of the First Lady at the Republican National Convention three years later, Makhmalbaf’s chosen symbol of oppression, the burqa, has been neatly appropriated. As Laura Bush told delegates, ‘After years of being treated as virtual prisoners in their homes by the Taliban, the women of Afghanistan are going back to work ... And wasn’t it wonderful to watch the Olympics and see that beautiful Afghan sprinter race in long pants and a t-shirt, exercising her new freedom while respecting the traditions of her country’.

In the official US story, the US may have gone to Afghanistan for all the wrong reasons, but its joining of humanitarianism to the rescue of Afghan women enabled it to bring Makhmalbaf’s story to its version of a happy ending. It could do this, however, only by going a step beyond Makhmalbaf, reminding him and the world that it is sometimes necessary to use military force to realise humanitarian goals. By bombing Afghanistan, the Bush administration urged, the US was making a (moral) difference in Afghanistan.

Is the US really saving sisters, you may ask, or are these sisters rescuing for the US the faltering fiction of its own humanitarianism? From the perspective of the official US story, the answer to this question is – ‘who cares?’ America’s mission is too important to get sidetracked into ‘politically correct’ conversations about gender or imperialism.

But it is not so easy to quiet this conversation. One way or another, the feminised other eventually finds a way to

grab our attention. Like the pictures from the Abu Ghraib prison that circulated in the global media, US moral mistakes come back to haunt it. They will do so for active moral agent in its own right.

Cynthia Weber is a professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Lancaster, England. She has described her research as broadly conceived of as Critical World Order Studies, a term that conveys both engagement with core disciplinary International Relations (IR) themes like sovereignty, intervention, and global governance while marking the intra- and inter-disciplinary nature of the work. Her research addresses the following question: 'how do hegemonic discourses function, and how might they be resisted and/or reconstructed?' This question stems from a long-standing concern with US global hegemony, not only through US foreign policy but also through globalised expressions of hegemony found in popular culture, gender, and sexuality.

Cynthia Weber has previously written on the relationship between sovereignty and intervention, US foreign policy (especially in relation to the Caribbean), and various theoretical debates in IR theory (like gender, constructivism, and post-structuralism).

*Her latest book is entitled *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film* which takes up the question of US hegemony in the context of September 11. By weaving together IR theory, cultural studies, and gender and queer studies, the book focuses on America's emerging moralities in relation to the war on terror. It does so by tracing how popular films circulated in the US in the aftermath of September 11 both mark America's moral movement about post-September 11 foreign policy and participate in the reconstruction of American morality nationally and internationally. How American morality is conceived and reconceived – not only by foreign policy officials but by everyday Americans – is vital to the practice of US global hegemony, which is central to how we think about international security and global governance.*

Cynthia is currently, working on two projects. The first, an hour-long documentary on the topic of Post-9/11 US citizenship, the second an on-going project on 'the aesthetics of fear' as it is expressed politically through events like September 11, reactions to the 7/7 London bombings (especially through the [we're not afraid](#) website), and

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