

THE RED BICYCLE

دوچرخه سرخ

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ABSTRACT

The Red Bicycle is a 12-minute short fiction film about Mahal (20), a young Afghan woman who is arrested on the charge of a “love crime”, losing her virginity in a romantic relationship before marriage. After she befriends a prisoner in a women’s detention centre, she plots out a daring escape to meet with her boyfriend before he departs for war. The film is shot in an Italian Neorealist style inside Pole Charkhi prison, one of the largest prisons in Afghanistan where about 95 percent of girls and women in detention have been arrested on “moral crime” charges, a term used for bad character, premarital sex, adultery, running away from forced marriages, prostitution, involuntary pregnancy. In some cases women and girls who have been raped are imprisoned alongside their rapists.

This support paper addresses my fieldwork research on the topic of “moral crimes” through foregrounding a difficult female protagonist who serves as an inspirational model in a post-war and post-Taliban Afghan climate. It goes on to describe how studying Italian Neorealist films influenced my fiction work, merging the relationship between documentary and narrative cinema, and providing a counter-argument that pre-war and post-war Afghan cinema has a history that exhibits distinctive influences from Italian Neorealism Cinema. The paper ends by analyzing an Afghan film, and encouraging Afghan filmmakers to adapt a filmmaking style based on motifs of neorealism in order to build our own distinctive Afghan National Cinema.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF IMAGES.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
Research and Development of the Screenplay.....	3
Plot	7
Approach and Ethics	11
FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS	19
Formal Influences	19
Afghan Cinema	20
PROCESS OF CREATION.....	26
Production.....	26
Post-Production.....	28
World Premiere.....	30
CONCLUSION.....	34
WORKS CITED	35
FILMOGRAPHY	36

LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1. Film still from <i>The Red Bicycle</i>	5
Image 2. Film still from <i>The Red Bicycle</i>	11
Image 3. Film still from <i>The Red Bicycle</i>	15
Image 4. Film still from <i>The Red Bicycle</i>	18
Image 5. Screenshot from <i>Like an Eagle</i> (1967), dir: Faiz Muhammad Kheirzada.	21
Image 6. Screenshot, <i>Osama</i> (2003), dir: Siddiq Barmak.	24
Image 7. Behind the Scenes of <i>The Red Bicycle</i> , Parwan, Afghanistan, 2017.	28
Image 8. Cinema Park, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2019.	32
Image 9. Screening of <i>The Red Bicycle</i> at Institute of France, Kabul, 2019.	33
Image 10. Screening of <i>The Red Bicycle</i> at Institute of France, Kabul, 2019.	33

INTRODUCTION

My family is from Afghanistan. We fled from the country in 1996, when Afghanistan was under the harsh Taliban rule. Under their rule, my school was shut down; like a million Afghan women, my mother was forced to wear the burqa and women were forbidden to work outside their homes, and their singing and filmmaking and even watching movies were banned. After living as a refugee in Tajikistan, my family immigrated to Canada in 2005, and I was fortunate to grow up and fully experience at home the Afghan culture that has always been part of my daily life and community. During my BFA program at NSCAD University, I reflected upon my experiences and culture through making films. Being of Afghan descent has also kept me keenly interested in current stories and events in the country and the evolving situation for women and girls in post-Taliban Afghanistan. I'm proud to have travelled to Afghanistan since 2010, and made films such as *Unknown Artist*, *The Red Bicycle*, and most recently my debut feature documentary film *Songs She Sings in Shadows* through Telefilm's Talent to Watch program. Through each film I explore an urgent range of social issues such as women's rights, Afghan traditions, and ordinary life that presents a contemporary view of Afghanistan for national and international audiences.

It's always inspiring to see that since the fall of the Taliban there's a sense of hope for artistic expression. Women now constitute approximately 30 percent of media workers. Some women have taken jobs at radio stations across the country, and some radio stations focus almost exclusively women's concerns. Women are encouraged to become visible again in public and to take jobs in politics and businesses in the capital and larger urban provinces, which the Taliban's gender policies forbade them to do in the 90s, and in rural areas to the present day. Gradually,

this post-Taliban situation has made me more curious to understand the Afghan culture and learn about the legal and judicial system that strictly follows Sharia law.

I began reading about cases of human rights violations, and was shaken when I came across the story of Gulnaz on national television, about a young Afghan woman who was raped by her cousin's husband and after virginity testing realized she was pregnant. After reporting to the police, instead of getting help, she was arrested and imprisoned for adultery and losing her virginity before marriage. After spending two years in jail, a statement was released by President Hamid Karzai which stated that Gulnaz would be released after she agreed to become the second wife of her rapist. Gulnaz was then pressured by her family to marry her rapist and save the family honour. The story shocked the international community and Gulnaz became another symbol of Afghan women's suffering. According to Human Rights Watch reports, the "virginity testing" of girls which has been condemned as unscientific, degrading and discriminatory by the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO), was officially banned in Afghanistan in 2016. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has been advocating for the criminalization of forced virginity testing for several years, and they worked towards amending the penal code to criminalize all virginity testing. Gradually in 2017, under increasing pressure from human rights campaigners, Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president, promised that forensic virginity testing would be banned as an official procedure. Unfortunately no policy has stopped clinics and hospitals from performing examinations, nor it has stopped traditional parents from taking their daughters to the clinics that lead to the imprisonment of women.

The Red Bicycle features an outspoken female protagonist. Through her story we see Afghanistan's complex cultural landscape, while intimately portraying the lives of these victims

and accused women as they struggle to find justice. Moreover, I want to open a conversation on the topic of moral crimes which is often a taboo discussion. Through this film I challenge the relationship between reality and fiction, working with non-actors and prisoners inside the actual prison and on the streets of Kabul, to create an Afghan neorealist film. In this paper, I intend to address the ethical boundaries I worked within during the production of this film. What were some key artistic choices I made during the filming process? I will examine and address these topics in my approach to and making of *The Red Bicycle*.

Research and Development of the Screenplay

The screenplay for *The Red Bicycle* was developed in my MFA Screenwriting class with Professor Maureen Dorey. Before starting pre-production in Kabul, I already had the screenplay in Dari/English versions, but once I met with the prisoners, many dialogues and roles were improvised based on their knowledge of the prison and the law but the story remained true to the script. It was during the pre-production of *The Red Bicycle*, that I first visited Pole Charkhi prison, which is located on the eastern outskirts of Kabul. My producer, Salar Pashtooniyar and I were greeted by the Director of the Prison, Mrs. Aziza, who plays herself in the film. She let us take our time and visit the prison camps which consist of three abandoned compounds turned into a jail facility and cells for women and men.

The director of the prison further explained that previously women's prisons were located in Badam Bagh Prison in Kabul. But due to less space and a lack of better facilities, the prison was moved from Badam Bagh to Pul-e-Charkhi and has been renovated in recent years with the help of the United States Army Corps of Engineers. In 2007, the U.S. began transferring some of

its detainees from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan to the Pole Charkhi prison, also known as the Afghan National Detention Facility, located in the east of Kabul. She then pointed out one of the camps which was burnt out and completely abandoned. When I asked whether the prison was attacked by Taliban suicide bombers, she laughed and shook her head, and explained that angry women prisoners set the camp on fire, to protest the shift from Badam-Bagh women's prison. Badam Bagh prison was located inside the city of Kabul, the capital, and the prisoners preferred the Kabul prison since their families and visitors are rarely able to visit them in Pole Charkhi.

I wanted to capture the jail in *verité* and neorealist style. I cast an aspiring Afghan actress as my protagonist and worked with non-actors - women detainees - as supporting actresses and background actors. In the film, we see that three women share one dormitory-style cell. Each cell consists of two double bunk beds, and only the compound as a whole was locked up, with huge steel gates on the outside, surrounded by four coils of barbed wire atop two rows of surrounding double walls.



Image 1. Film still from *The Red Bicycle*.

After conducting interviews and hearing stories of a number of women who went through the process of virginity testing, I learned that before accused women and girls are arrested, they undergo medical tests and are forced to go to forensic clinics by the police, their parents, or courts to determine whether the victim or accused person has had sexual relations with someone. The accused person or the victim would be punished according to the proof given by the forensic clinics without her consent and her human rights are thus further violated. These virginity tests of girls often only happen in urban cities where people have access to clinics and police. However, in rural areas, due to lack of police, prisons, and the official justice system, the case goes through the *Jirga*, an Afghan tribal tribunal where the elders of the village determine honor killings. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) released a report noting 92 cases of honor killings from 2014 to 2015, and almost 50 percent of honor killings were committed because of suspected *zina* (extramarital sexual relations). [03] The honor killing and stoning to

death custom dates back to the 6th century B.C. (600 CE) when Abrahamic religions were founded, and currently all major religions including Sikhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity have moral codes that disapprove of premarital sexual relations as immoral acts equal to adultery.

The [unmarried] woman or [unmarried] man found guilty of sexual intercourse – lash each one of them with a hundred lashes, and do not be taken by pity for them in the religion of Allah, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of the believers witness their punishment.

The Holy Quran, Verse 24:2-3

If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Deuteronomy 22:23-24, The Fifth Book of the Christian Old Testament and of the Jewish Torah

Based on tradition and the Islamic culture of Afghanistan, Afghan people are family oriented where the majority of men are the dominant household owners and women are the caretakers and housewives. Shortly after a girl reaches puberty, she must marry a man while she's still a virgin. On the wedding night, in most areas, new couples are expected to show a blood-stained handkerchief to the family to prove the woman is a virgin. In the Afghan traditions of marriage, an intact hymen demonstrates the virtue and chastity of a bride. Shortly after the wedding night, if the couple cannot show a blood-stained cloth, it means that the bride has had sexual relations before marriage. This issue can cause serious violence towards the new bride. Such women are usually sent back to the father's household; this can even cause severe conflicts between the two families or end up with the killing of the new bride. Unfortunately, in most parts

of Afghanistan, Afghan women still represent men's honour and are often known only as mothers, sisters and daughters of men as opposed to being recognized as humans, equals who have valuable insights and knowledge who should be included in decision making processes in their families, the wider society and the government.

Under the Taliban rule, (1996–2001), the punishment for committing adultery and other moral crimes was public execution and stoning to death of both men and women. It is worth mentioning that after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, honor killings have been against the law of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In 2016, the government officially banned virginity testing of girls and women, when the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) presented recommendations for the criminalization of forced virginity testing until President Ashraf Ghani ultimately signed a decree banning forced virginity testing. They proposed that forced gynecological tests without consent are a violation of the right to privacy and no one or source has the right to violate the right to privacy; since virginity testing is physically and mentally harmful, it can be considered torture and, in some cases, sexual assault. Unfortunately, the detainees accused of moral crimes inside Pole Charkhi have undergone these tests without their consent, and the law hasn't stopped parents from submitting their daughters to the police, nor has it stopped honor killings in rural areas where the Taliban are still in power.

Plot

The main character of *The Red Bicycle* is Mahal Wak (20s), an educated young woman from a working-class family in Kabul. The film begins with a medium shot of the protagonist inside a police pick-up truck where we see her wrists handcuffed together, looking worried. The

sound from the radio sets up the world and socio-politics of the region - a post-war Islamic country attempting to improve women's rights. The next sequence is a quick montage of the iron gate of Pole Charkhi prison, which is guarded by an armed policeman and where the barking of a guard dog can be heard. An adolescent and stubborn Mahal sits in a well-furnished office room, across from the director of the prison, a woman in her 50s, who evaluates Mahal's statement and her case. The prison director reminds her of the consequences of losing her virginity before marriage, which is unacceptable and sinful according to religion and the law. "What sin?" Mahal argues, "We're only in love." Mahal can't accept the charges made against her. The prison director asks her to sit down, and immediately stamps a folder of Mahal's case and orders her police staff to take her to Zone #2. Trapped in a cramped cell with two jail bullies she cannot bear and unable to contact or meet her boyfriend, Mahal feels isolated and alone as she observes her cell-mates in silence, women whose own misfortunes have brought them to this depressing cell: Zahara, imprisoned for heroin addiction, and Zarifa, a cold-blooded killer, jailed for the murder of her husband due to domestic violence and her forced marriage. The women whisper among themselves: Was her virginity test positive? Did her father find her having sex with a neighbor boy? Is her boyfriend going to come to rescue her? Mahal remains silent, and later she observes the prisoners' daily routine in the yard. Women gossip, and do laundry as their children play. Her cell-mates keep bullying her as they play volleyball. Hot-tempered Mahal gets fed up when Zarifa predicts Mahal's future.

"Once a girl's modesty veil gets dirty with a mark, it won't go away even if you wash it with a \$500 bar of soap."

Zarifa and Zahra laugh, when Mahal rushes towards Zarifa and gets into a physical fight with her. The next day, during a laundry scene, she befriends Nadia (40s), a kind-hearted detainee who is sentenced up to 8 years due to *zina*, committing adultery after her marriage. Mahal meets with her and her young daughter who lives with her inside the jail. This conversation between Mahal and an experienced detainee helps Mahal in predicting her own future, similar to Nadia's fate - to serve more than eight years in prison, give birth to her child, and find the prison the safest haven for dishonourable women to live. She's advised by Nadia not to write letters to her boyfriend since they won't reach him, and the police may find out where her boyfriend is and he will end up in the jail next door. Nadia represents the majority of Afghan women who have no choice but to keep silent about their desires, oppression and love interests so as not to bring more dishonor on her family.

In the next scene Mahal finds herself in a hospital room for a pregnancy test outside the prison. Shortly after, the doctor takes her blood sample to the lab and asks her for a urine sample; Mahal finds a way to jump out of the washroom window. She lands hard on the ground and exits the hospital gate. Terrified of getting caught in a narrow alleyway, she stumbles on a red bicycle. She stops and tries to make a decision as quickly as possible; she hops on the bike and cycles away from the city, through villages in the outskirts of Kabul. As the lines between her dreams and reality collide, Mahal and her boyfriend, Nawid (25) come face to face with each other in a deserted and heavily secured Afghan Army Camp set against a mountainous landscape. Mahal reveals her feeling of vulnerability about her transfer to the women's prison and tells him the only way out of the prison is if they get married to each other. But through dialogue subtexts, Mahal realizes that Nawid regrets making love to Mahal, and he bleakly suggests she go back to

prison until he returns from war. Mahal feels heartbroken and betrayed by this uncertain promise. The film ends with a hopeless and lonely Mahal cycling past an abandoned mosque where a mysterious woman, in a traditional green dress, who seems to be a runaway bride from her village, stops her. “Stop! Stop, I said.” She strides toward Mahal. “That bicycle is mine.” When she comes closer to Mahal they are both stunned, realizing that there are more women just like them running away from moral crimes in the country.

I structured the story around the plights of two Afghan women; an urban young woman and a woman from the rural area of Afghanistan. In the post-production process, I kept the rural woman as a twist to appear at the end of the film. I wanted to portray the common humanity and struggle of the characters while preserving their distinct personalities through fiction. I connected their journeys through a device of a found or stolen red bicycle that is a tool for their brief attempt at freedom. Although my two characters lead independent narrative lines in the story, I see their fates as fragments of a larger story interconnected through the lens of moral crimes.

As the film title suggests, *The Red Bicycle* is a metaphor which could be a ‘MacGuffin’, a term coined by Alfred Hitchcock, a plot device in the form of a desired object, or a motivator that the protagonist pursues, with little or no narrative explanation or importance. For me, it represents hymen, blood, power and passion. It also supports the most recent hashtag #MyRedLine on social media - a campaign led by Afghan journalists and women’s rights activists and supported by UN Women Afghanistan - through which Afghan women speak of their concerns and fears about what sacrifices may be made in order to make peace with the Taliban after a decade of American and NATO’s role in Afghanistan. What will happen to the

status of women prisoners inside the 30 prisons across Afghanistan? Will the prisoners face extreme release dates or will the Taliban execute women prisoners according to the Sharia law of *zina* regarding adultery and other moral crimes? These are questions that Afghan women are currently confronting before the peace process with the Taliban comes to reality.



Image 2. Film still from *The Red Bicycle*.

Approach and Ethics

I believe that through cinema I can fight for those who can't fight for themselves, and that such post-war social issue films can open a conversation and a path for people to speak about women's rights in Afghanistan and in many other countries where such stories are relatable to their culture and societal norms.

I spent a lot of time casting my lead actress, Mahal (20s), since every actor in Afghanistan is very careful with the roles they choose to play. They often reject playing taboo-breaking roles because this may trigger conservatives and traditional people against them. In August, 2017, I finally met with my two lead actresses, Mahal Wak and Farzana Nawabi, who are both talented and live and work in Afghanistan. They are both known for their popular television series, *Kahte Sewom* (2017), and an award-winning Afghan feature film *A Letter to the President* (2017) by Roya Sadat. For the role of Nawid, Mahal's boyfriend in the film, I cast my production manager, Sadam Wahidi, who is also an emerging local filmmaker. Once they read the script they were very impressed by the journey of the two girls in short film form, and how the social message was important for them as actresses. They wanted to play different roles to protest against the Western mainstream media that often misrepresents Afghanistan in a black-and-white, good-versus-evil dichotomy, still in a war-torn country where women are often shown under burqas with almost no voice. One of my actresses, whose entire family comes from a theatre and acting background, asked her parents to play roles in the film as well. Nadia and one of the police guards in the film are Farzana's parents.

In order to make a neorealist film, I chose to work strictly in docu-fiction and neorealist filmmaking approaches, using scripted and improvised dialogues, actors and non-actors on real locations and not using staged lighting, props and wardrobes. When I conducted interviews with women prisoners and understood the roots of their cases, I asked them about their values and thoughts on the topic of moral crimes in order to find deeper answers. I shared the script and story and introduced my film crew; surprisingly out of 50 girls and women, two young women and a little girl showed immense interest in taking part in the film. They read the script in Dari in

which I highlighted the scenes and dialogues for them to rehearse with Mahal Wak. They invited us to their cell, and we rehearsed with them for a few hours before rolling the camera. Here are some notes I wrote during our conversation with the detainees:

Pole Charkhi Prison, Kabul, August, 2017

- *Prisoner A: Sentenced to up to eight years in prison for having sex with her cousin before her marriage in Kabul.*
- *Prisoner B: Sentenced to life in jail for throwing a grenade at her family, killing her husband and in-laws. She says she was fed up with physical abuses from her husband.*
- *Prisoner C: Sentenced to up to six years in jail for selling drugs and exporting opium to Dubai.*
- *Prisoner D: Sentenced to up to ten years in jail for drinking at a house party and having sex with a man. When she was arrested, she didn't inform her family. She doesn't know what to tell them when she returns home in five years.*
- *Prisoner E: Sentenced to up to twenty years for committing adultery during her married life. She gave birth in the prison, and her daughter is now 8 years old, living alongside her mother in jail.*
- *Prisoner F: She is in love with a boy in her high school, and her virginity test result was negative. She is waiting to appear in court and may get dismissed if she's still a virgin after a second hymen test.*

Hearing these stories from all these detainees, most of whom are accused of moral crimes, made me more aware of the difficult relationships that can exist in families before their daughter is found guilty and after the fact when she returns home. For instance, one of detainees didn't tell her family that she had been in jail for five years, charged with having sex with a man at a party because she doesn't want to dishonor her family. Such a story reveals that there are women who don't know their basic human rights and respect Afghan values and religion, while blaming themselves for their crimes. Women prisoners often feel isolation, loneliness, and fear

of going back to their homes when they get released. Their lives outside the prison become harder since their families won't let them come back home or, in the worst case, the father or male siblings may kill them to save the family honour.

I was transparent about my project. Muslim women's values are often misrepresented in the media and films and I felt that I could learn from their cases to shape my film. I asked them how they felt about playing non-actor prisoner roles, as opposed to an actor or using real life subjects. I didn't want to expose their stories and instead, through fiction, I exchanged their stories and asked them to play someone else's role; suddenly they were enthusiastic about playing their cell-mates' roles on screen.

Scene #2 of *The Red Bicycle* is completely improvised. The prison director changed her own dialogue in the script according to her knowledge of the law. She told us they don't punish and torture detainees due to the laws reformed by the Afghanistan International Human Rights Commission, so I adjusted the script accordingly. A similar process took place in Scene #3, in which Mahal meets with her cellmates. I cast the two detainees who were interested in acting, as Zahra and Zarifa. In order to maintain a neo-realist style, I didn't change my actual script that already contained their roles. Zahra is in jail for her crime of heroin addiction, and Zarifa is a murderer who killed her husband due to repetitive physical violence at his hand.

Furthermore, in Scene #6, in which Mahal befriends Nadia (40s), I cast the mother of Farzana, an aspiring actress who has played small roles in many Afghan feature films. However, the little girl who plays the role of Nadia's daughter was a non-actor child from the prison whose

mother had the same story as my character Nadia; her mother let her play in the scene since she wanted to have the volleyball ball for herself after the scene wrapped. Aside from Mahal and Nadia, the rest of girls, women and children who appear in the background, as doctor, as army personnel and police officers are all non-actors from the film locations.



Image 3. Film still from *The Red Bicycle*.

During the making of the film, I made ethics a priority and determined that without receiving consent I wouldn't film. It was through an improvisational acting workshop that I realized the power of storytelling which can bring people together even in the darkest places. As a filmmaker, I think in order to have a critical view toward the future of Afghan women's individual rights there is a need to create a platform that allows them to question their personal experiences of femininity in relation to their place and voices in their family, religion, society and politics.

I see my protagonist as opening a path for Afghan women to realize their unique individual voices and distinctive personalities and to see that their struggles are remarkably similar and rooted in gender inequality in a society that constantly faces conflict and instability. I often ask myself why Afghanistan is the world's forgotten tragedy and why is their condition and human right has worsened in recent years? To find the answers, I believe it is necessary for me to bring such stories forward, to meet with people from all provinces of Afghanistan in order to understand the history and roots of inequality in the context of women's rights. I came to an understanding that to bring reform, Afghan women must move beyond the politics of their gender, representing men's honor and family pride. Without the active participation of women at work in politics, the law, the arts and the broader culture - women who make up more than 50 percent of the population - peace and progress in Afghanistan will fail. That is what is at the core of this film. My main character questions against traditional customs when she meets the Director of the Prison. Since she's an educated woman, she doesn't believe that falling in love is a sin. The important thing, she's educated and demands her right to live as a free person. She knows that she has the same desires, emotions, the right to fall in love as women everywhere and she is a powerful force for change. She's doing best she can to find answers from Nadia, The Prison Director, and finally when she unites with her lover. According to the law, in some cases, if families agree to the marriage of the couples, who had romantic relationship before marriage, the accused couples will be released from the prison. Mahal tells Nawid that the only way for her freedom is if they get married. Unfortunately, since they both dishonored their families, their proposal may lead to honor killings. Nawid knows the consequences of their moral crime, and therefore he decides to leave for war.

For the purpose of studying *The Red Bicycle* as an example of Neorealist short film, I share the definition of Georges Sadoul, one of the first cinema writers and critics to call neorealism a "school", who offered five key characteristics: geographically bound locations; temporal boundaries (post-war); the existence of master filmmakers (for example, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica); the existence of disciples (for example Luigi Zampa, Pietro Germi, Giuseppe De Santis); and the formation of a set of rules (location shooting, long takes, use of true-to-life subjects, open-ended plots, working-class protagonists, nonprofessional casts, vernacular dialogue, and social criticism).

Following the same traditions of the Neorealist school, the main subject in *The Red Bicycle* involves a young woman from a working-class Afghan family, and realism is maintained through and performances mainly constructed from scenes of prisoners performing fairly mundane day-to-day activities and tasks, such as doing laundry, gossiping in their bleak cells, playing volleyball and sewing, etc. while being completely aware that they are being filmed; 80% of the film is shot on locations, with a hand-held camera on a shoulder mount and monopod using available interior and natural lighting, the rest of the film is shot on a tripod in order to follow the film's subjects intimately in their spaces while they speak with each other. For the costumes and set design, I intentionally didn't impose props. The clinic, jail cells and the streets appear exactly as they are. After blocking the scenes, I wanted my actors to convey collective experiences along with the prisoners, to feel comfortable and to act in their own spaces and clothing. Moreover, my subjects played roles that were true to the stories of detainees who undergo family pressure, dishonor, humiliation, lose self-confidence and feel ashamed and hopeless. Together they become the voices of women who have historically been silenced, vices that are a key to social transformation.



Image 4. Film still from *The Red Bicycle*.

FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS

Formal Influences

“Neorealism involves a greater interest in individuals...through the investigation of reality, in order to reach an understanding of things, and to give them their true value.”

(Roberto Rossellini in M. Leihm 137)

As an Afghan director and a cinephile, it was intentional to make a neorealist short film inspired by contemporary films that are produced in a post-war situation. I studied stylistic tactics used in neorealist films due to limitation of crew, budget, safety, and professional actors in Afghanistan. I also studied female protagonists in *La Strada* (1954) by Federico Fellini, *Osama* (2001) by Siddiq Barmak, and Iranian New Wave and French New Wave films which all have influences from the Italian post-war films and are social issue films that informed my filmmaking motifs.

In this part of my thesis paper, I attempt to present a counter-argument to the view of the Iranian-New Wave movement which sprang organically from the cultural and political censorship of the post-revolution period. My intention is to identify the long and distinctive history of Italian Neorealism on Iranian New Wave Cinema, as well as in the films made in pre-war Afghanistan. First, I locate Italian Neorealist filmmaking influences on Afghan directors from the 1970s to the present as a means of highlighting the transformative nature of the artistic movement due to the major political shifts which happened in the country during that time. Second, I compare *La Strada* to Afghan films *Like an Eagle* and *Osama* (2001). I then compare these to the emphasis and use of realism in Afghan and Iranian New Wave cinema in order to

outline the cinematic elements these three films share through a socio-political lens. Lastly, I relate the points above to encourage Afghan filmmakers, including myself, to adapt neorealist approaches in their films in order to invent their own style and movement that will be stylistically unique and key to creating an Afghan national cinema.

Afghan Cinema

It is impossible to divorce Italian Neorealism from Afghan cinema during the 1960s and 1980s, produced by Afghan Film, a state-funded organization that was established in 1968 during a period when Afghans led a liberal and westernized lifestyle, while trying to maintain a respect for more conservative factions under King Mohammad Zahir Shah. During this decade *Like an Eagle* (1967) by Fayz Mohammad Kheirzada was the first feature film produced by the Afghan Film organization that tells the story of a young Afghan girl from a small village who is different from the ordinary village girls. She's adventurous and often dreams of being like an eagle, to fly away and see parks and celebratory fireworks in the city. She tells her secret of going to the Kabul celebrations to her doll; she writes to her parents before leaving her modest village and taking a long bus towards the city of Kabul.



Image 5. Screenshot from *Like an Eagle* (1967), dir: Faiz Muhammad Kheirzada.

Through her journey, we see rural and urban landscapes of Afghanistan when it had a brief, relatively peaceful era, when modern buildings with neon lights were constructed in Kabul alongside older traditional mud structures, musicians played on cultural celebration nights, and the country appeared to be on a path toward a more open, prosperous society. The film features key elements of Italian Neorealism Cinema. Filmed over the course of two days, it casts a child non-actor as the protagonist of the film, capturing her mundane and daily routines in her room, such as playing and talking with her doll, observing life in her small village, and following her adventurous road trip and discovery of life from Paghman to Kabul.

After the communist coup in 1978, and following the Soviet invasion of the country, many filmmakers joined the Mujahideen resistance and stopped producing films. However,

Engineer Ahmad Latif remained the president of Afghan Film and had no choice but to make pro-Soviet propaganda films, that still somehow managed to tell stories from ordinary Afghan life such as *Akhtar The Joker (1981)* and *Farar (1987)*. These films, made from auteurist visions which told Afghan stories with social issues on screen, filled cinemas in Kabul and larger cities. However these films weren't submitted to international film festivals due to Soviet censorship and the Soviet presence in the government which controlled and censored the films. Yet these films still managed to show Afghan history and paint a picture of Afghan culture before the Cold War period.

In contrast, *Osama* (2001) by Siddiq Barmak, was the first movie to be shot in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in November 2001, and brought much success and attention to the Afghan Cinema after winning a Golden Globe in 2002 and earning a special mention at the Cannes film Festival. The film tells the story of a girl in war-torn Kabul, who tries to survive and pass herself off as a boy, Osama, in order to work under the oppressive regime of the Taliban. Similar to the Oscar-winning neorealist film *La Strada* (1954) by Federico Fellini, the mother of the protagonist in *Osama*, a poor widow, is forced to dress her daughter as a boy in order to make her the breadwinner of the family. In *La Strada*, the sweet and innocent looking protagonist named Gelsomina is sold by her mother into servitude to the brutal travelling sideshow strongman Zampano who teaches her to play the drum and trumpet during his street shows. Like Fellini's realist filming style, Barmak's opening scene is a documentary within the film that captures the violent suppression of a women's-rights demonstration in the war-blasted streets of Kabul. A frightened preteen girl (Marina Golbahari, a non-actor) watches from a doorway as Taliban armed men, using water hoses and AK-47s from pick-up trucks, scatter a

crowd of women who wear blue burkhas. The film recruits non-actors from the streets of Afghanistan, and shares the gifted Iranian cinematographer Ebrahim Ghafari, who worked on many of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's films. The film was made with the help of the Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf himself, who travelled to Afghanistan and loaned his film equipment to Barmak to make this post-war film. It was during this time, that Makhmalbaf's family produced many post-war films in Afghanistan, such as *Kandahar* (2001) and *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003). Each scene with Osama is painted with a mix of realism and poetry that's haunting. The film has such a strong auteurist vision that one can completely forget the difficult and low-budget process of its production.

"When your pain is becoming more deep and deep, you can only tell it by poetry, because there are no words to explain that, no color, no images. Just poetry." Siddiq Barmak

Like many Iranian New Wave films, Barmak uses a poetic visual sense in the darkest time of history: after the main character's decision is made to turn herself into a boy, her mother plants one of the girl's severed braids into a flowerpot and waters it with an intravenous drip which she rescued from the shut-down hospital. Similar to this dark yet poetic scene, in the film's end sequence there is a long take of the protagonist behind the bars of the women's prison as she awaits her trial by the Taliban. Barmak's film explores dimensions of the human condition related to strictly social and political chaos under the Taliban rule; in particular, he shows the harsh realities of Afghan widows under the Taliban. Under the Taliban rule, women were forbidden to work outside the home. Through this film, Barmak tells story of a woman who is a widow, she has no male family members to support and feed the family, nor is she able to work as a nurse in the hospital where she used to work.



Image 6. Screenshot, *Osama* (2003), dir: Siddiq Barmak.

Therefore Osama, her preteen daughter, is dressed as a boy in order to become the breadwinner of the family. It is interesting to examine realism shown through the point of view of a female protagonist in *Osama* – a strong individual and subject – something Fellini also achieves with *La Strada*. Although the world of the story is much bigger and more complex than that of the female protagonists, it is key who the survivors are and the ones who move the story forward. Although both films share a similar neorealist recipe – non-professional actors; real locations; a large number of poor people down on their luck – both films explore more than poverty and social injustice. They both try to show the human condition, dreams and surreal wishes of their protagonists with the lyricism of poetry as if telling a fairy tale.

Since Siddiq Barmak filmed over the course of a year with assistance provided mostly by Makhmalbaf, critics can see the impact of the Iranian New Wave on Barmak's film. However,

Barmak, who received an M.A. degree in cinema direction from the Moscow Film Institute in 1987, has a very unique way of sharing Afghan folk tales as a metaphor for the transformation of Osama. When Osama's mother prepares male clothing for Osama, her grandmother tells her a folk tale:

"Remember the old tale I told you. Once upon a time, there was a good-looking boy whose father has died. He went to work and came home exhausted. He wished he could be a girl so he wouldn't have to work. One day a wise man told him that if he passed under a rainbow, he would become a girl. "What's a rainbow?" he asked. It's a souvenir left to us by Rustam, the great hero to free us from pain and misery. Boys turn into girls and girls turn into boys."

As an Afghan filmmaker who watches closely the films made by Afghan directors such as Atiq Rahimi and Siddiq Barmak, I notice that their neorealist filmmaking tradition is more focused on the poetry and use of Afghan folk tales and myths that are unique in Dari/Farsi literature. This makes the Afghan post-war films unique, with an auteurist control that has the potential to encourage young filmmakers to adapt these aesthetics and to try to improve, establish and build an Afghan national cinema which is distinctively our own.

PROCESS OF CREATION

Production

As mentioned earlier, getting location permits to film inside an actual prison caused the most amount of stress. We had been in touch with several Afghan politicians who worked at the Ministry of the Interior and with a close friend who worked at the Ministry of Culture and Information who was a close friend of the prison director. After securing filming permits at the Afghan Film organization and the Ministry of Culture and Information through my registered Afghan production company, Kabuli Camera Productions, we were able to show our permit letters to the men's prison director. He signed our permits and advised us to not film the detainees, but after explaining we were film students and making a research-based fiction film, he was convinced that we had our own actors and would not film anyone without their consent. We followed a police officer as he led us in the direction of the women's prison compounds where we met with the director of the prison for women detainees in her office. After reading the synopsis, and seeing the permit signature from the men's prison director, she approved our filming but with one condition: that we shoot everything within two days due to security issues and the privacy of the detainees. My producer, Salar, and I thought it would be impossible to shoot a short film in a difficult location within two days, but we accepted this generosity and I insisted on meeting with the detainees for my research and improvisation of the film script.

There was no time to waste. She took us around the property, and informed us about security and taking risks; I needed everyone to be on board to film all major scenes which take place inside the prison. We filmed the first scene with the prison director in her office, and after

many retakes and improvisation with the dialogue, her acting became very natural and she had a great time learning how film shoots work. She generously offered her own police staff and guards to act as non-actors in the film and to play themselves.

I enthusiastically blocked the scenes with the cinematographer and conducted rehearsals with the actors and non-actors. As we were filming, a few female prisoners flirted with my cinematographer/producer and soundman and placed their phone numbers in the lens bag. Some shared their stories of moral crimes with my actresses and me. Children kept giggling and laughing in the background every time I called “Quiet on set, please,” and some kids fought over the volleyball ball which was the only prop we brought to prison for the film shoot. I enjoyed directing my actors in their improvised and scripted roles. It was total chaos as we were running out of time, and the police officers had to lock the prison gate, but they waited for an extra three hours until our film shoot was complete, minutes before the sun set.

In one of the scenes where the protagonist cycles in the rural area, we filmed in the Panjshir Valley where we were, unfortunately, surrounded by an angry group of boys who couldn’t tolerate seeing a woman on a bicycle. They wanted us to leave their village because this representation of a woman on a bicycle did not represent the women of their village who all wear the blue burqa. In order to stop provoking more people, we wrapped the scene and shot in another part of the valley road where people were very cheerful and helpful since many Afghan films had shot in that area. Our location permits also recommended that specific area for security as further from that village, there were no police stations to protect us. Since Afghanistan is a conflict zone, traveling to the country is not advised and it is all at one’s own risk. We had little

time and dangerous locations, but we had a great cinematographer, actual and authentic locations, a local professional sound man, a talented cast, kind and enthusiastic non-actors and a production manager and fixer who helped the film shoot go smoothly. It was one of the most memorable film shoots I have had in Afghanistan, and I will not say no to going back to work with those women to make a feature length version of the film in the future.



Image 7. Behind the Scenes of *The Red Bicycle*, Parwan, Afghanistan, 2017.

Post-Production

I wanted to start editing the film right away, but my producer suggested I take a month's break from it, to view the footage and contemplate on the structure of the film. After a month, I immediately returned to the editing. Since I didn't have any budget for the film, nor had I won a SSHRC fellowship to produce the film, I had no choice but to start the post-production process

myself, and I applied for a few post-production grants in Toronto. It took three months before I arrived at a first cut. After showing it to my committee, Barbara Evans and Marie Rickard and to the Graduate Program Director, John Greyson, I had a critical feedback on the imbalanced treatment of the two female leads in the film. It turned out that I had filmed more scenes with Mahal (the detainee character) than with Farzana, the runaway Afghan bride whose journey was very observational in the initial screenplay, and in the editing process, Farzana's scenes turned out that it doesn't match the pacing and drama compare to Mahal's scenes. I decided to cut down the story of the Afghan runaway bride. It was a creative challenge for me to cut her role from the film, but I decided to still keep her character as a surprise and a twist. Her appearance in the final scene shows that my protagonist, Mahal, is not alone in her struggle with the issue of moral crime in Afghanistan.

A unique element of the film is the non-diegetic sound and music, drawing from Afghanistan's rich historic connections to its contemporary urban industrial landscape. Since the tone is emotionally moving, I intend the audio to create a range of emotions in the viewers. The music leads the viewer into the stories of the subjects and the spaces. Non-lyrical and non-diegetic music is edited throughout the scenes by Steve Singh, a Toronto-based musician, who mixed the sounds of Persian/Afghan folk melodies with mechanical instruments that come from bicycle parts, eg: a bicycle bell, tires, and the sounds of speed. The music without lyrics creates an overall emotional tone to convey the feeling of freedom and liberation felt when running away from societal repression. The music unites the parallel narrative strands of the film into a lyrical and poetic anthem of Afghan womanhood. Other non-diegetic sound includes the news we hear from the radio in the short scenes where Mahal is first taken to jail inside a police pick-

up vehicle and later halfway through the film when she is being taken to the hospital outside the prison for a pregnancy test. I tried to present news on human rights and suicide bombings during the war in Afghanistan from 2001 until the present, in which over 111,000 Afghans, including civilians, soldiers and militants, are estimated to have been killed.

After I received the post-production grant from the Lindalee Tracey Award, I was able to send the film to sound designer/mixer Mike Monson and Steve Singh to create theme music for the film, and to Benjamin Wong to color grade the film. I showed them film references and photos of Afghanistan from my iPhone albums, to indicate actual colors we see and sounds we hear in the city to match the look of the film. Above all, I love the idea that I filmed it in an Italian Neorealist Style, capturing the outdoor and indoor spaces through the point of view of the subjects. My hope for the film is that it presents a more nuanced view of Afghan women and culture to global audiences. Through the dramatic journeys of these women, I try to ask whether there is still room for women's rights in a society affected by war, fundamentalism, ethnic divisions and poverty.

World Premiere

It has always been my dream to premiere my films in Afghanistan, and to receive feedback about the film from the young generation. In the winter of 2019, my dream came true. When I was in production of my debut documentary feature film, *Songs She Sings in Shadows*, I had a great opportunity to plan, organize and programme the world premiere of *The Red Bicycle* at the Institute of France. I contacted my colleagues Hassan Karimi and Mohammad Mehdi Zafari who both work as the Artistic Directors and Cultural Programmers at the Institute of

France in Kabul, and together we managed to program the screening of *The Red Bicycle* at the International Women's Day event on March 8th.

The Institute is located in the French-run Esteqlal High School (Lyée Esteqlal), one of Kabul's oldest schools which is under contract to the French government. It provides funds to teachers, and conducts cultural activities (theatre and puppet shows and music concerts) and encourages Afghan youth to showcase their art, voices and films. The event was a complete success as more than three hundred audience members including poets, photographers, journalists and students participated in celebrating International Women's Day with artists whose works exhibit a range of social justice topics and themes. Although the event was not a film festival screening, I invited my main cast and crew members to watch the film, and I was moved by the number of bright-minded youth and intellectuals who engaged in the Q&A session shortly after the screening. They asked me interesting questions about the process of filming and what message I intended to convey through the story. We expressed our views on how upsetting it was to visit the prison and learn about moral crimes, and the injustices women go through in a male-dominated society where the customs, religion, and medieval traditions always come first against human rights and a reformed justice system.

Movies were banned under the Taliban rule from 1996. During their oppressive rule, all cinemas in Kabul were shut down. They burned film reels and most of the Afghan film archives, bombed The Buddhas of Bamiyan, and lashed shopkeepers if they played music in bazaars. After the screening of *The Red Bicycle* in a post-Taliban climate, I realized that, in order to locate the cinema in the hearts of Afghans, the target audience for any Afghan filmmaker should

be Afghan youth in schools and universities in rural and urban areas until cinema is accepted as visual culture and once again in the wider Afghan culture. During that time, I also visited Kabul's oldest cinemas, Cinema Park and Ariana Cinema, where all-male audiences watch Bollywood movies. Where once Cinema Park was a treasured luxury for the elite, Afghan cinemas now reflect a collapsed industry due to conflict, financial neglect and lack of care and attention from the Kabul City Government, Afghan Film and the Ministry of Culture and Information. Unfortunately, I couldn't hold the screening of my film in Cinema Park due to its lack of an adequate sound system, screen condition, and broken chairs. I was advised by my fixer to screen it at the Institute of France since they have better security and an audience including student and faculty members.



Image 8. Cinema Park, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2019.



Image 9. Screening of The Red Bicycle at Institute of France, Kabul, 2019.



Image 10. Screening of The Red Bicycle at Institute of France, Kabul, 2019.

CONCLUSION

As a relatively new director, through the making of *The Red Bicycle*, I found my distinctive voice, style, and approach to directing my films. Even though I have faced many challenges during the production of this short film (lack of security in Afghanistan and not enough rehearsal time in the prison) I was able to visualize and execute an Afghan neorealist style close to what I had imagined. I was shooting a film about a topic I am passionate about investigating – and hopefully even further in a feature film - in order to raise awareness and to fight for an official ban on moral crimes and virginity testing of girls and women. I hope that my short film helps open a conversation among people and religious leaders to stop the practice from being performed in every clinic and hospital. My producer and I managed to stay within the budget while achieving a high production value in many locations that were almost impossible to shoot in (such as Pole Charkhi prison, the Afghan Army Camp and rural areas where people were culturally strict and protective of women.)

Most importantly, I had fantastic support from my cast and crew and many friends who helped the shoot go smoothly. I look forward to making more films with compelling narratives, helping Afghan cinema grow, and presenting contemporary films to national and wider international audiences.

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