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## Blind Faith: Women at War in *Khuda kay Liye* and *Escape from Taliban*

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The US administration declared the War on Terror in retaliation against the al-Qaeda attacks on the Wall Street Twin Towers, an event which sent shockwaves comparable to Pearl Harbor. The invasion of Afghanistan was justified on the grounds that the Taliban had provided sanctuary to the al-Qaeda terrorist network.<sup>1</sup> The additional agenda was to topple the Taliban regime, which imposed a medieval form of justice based on Sharia law and replace it with a pro-American government. Under the influence of Cold War expert Zbigniew Brzezinski and the neoconservative think tank, *Project for the New American Century*,<sup>2</sup> President Bush recycled Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations," as "the Axis of Evil" or the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Thus Operation Enduring Freedom transformed a geopolitical design into a crusade for human rights. In the White House weekly radio address to the Nation, First Lady Laura Bush made the link between those two issues explicit as she mobilized support for the US-led campaign in Afghanistan:

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. Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women. (Laura Bush, 2001)

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1. *Taliban* or *Taleban* is the plural of *talib* or student or more generally someone who seeks knowledge.
  2. One of *PNAC*'s founding members was Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad who was appointed as special policy adviser to several US Presidents and served as US Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003-2005, where he oversaw the drafting of the Afghan constitution. His behind-the-scenes manoeuvres earned him the nickname of Viceroy of Kabul.

Ten years into the war most experts and human rights activists agree that Afghan women have little cause for “rejoicing” this quote by Laura Bush and that her appeal which did not extend to Saudi women amounted to political expediency, propaganda or national therapy (Dreyfuss, 2005; Rashid, 2008; Kolhatkar, 2006; Joya, 2009; Mokhtareizadeh, 2011).

Another blowback from this Manichean cold war rhetoric is the media vilification of Islam or more precisely the conflation of Islam – as though it was a monolithic religion – with terrorism. For Hollywood and Bollywood, the Islamic terrorist became the archetypal villain and a new subgenre of thrillers emerged featuring terrorist cells with films such as *Shoot on Sight: Is It a Crime to Be a Muslim?* (Mundhra, 2007), *New York* (Khan, 2009) or *My Name is Khan* (Johar, 2010), to name but a few releases. For all its stretching of the viewer’s imagination, the latter film illustrates the demonization of Muslims in the West. The eponymous hero played by Sharukh Khan, Bollywood’s icon, embarks on a Forrest Gump-like mission, which takes him coast to coast across America, particularly to the Deep South, to vindicate his religion, courtesy of gospel-singing African-Americans, and reclaim his rightful place in America’s suburbia. The present paper discusses the issues of women’s rights, particularly forced marriage, and the growing influence of fundamentalism in the Pakistani box office success, *Khuda kay Liye* (Mansoor, 2007) and in the Bollywood film, *Escape from Taliban* (Chatterjee, 2003).

As the echoes to Allah reverberate at the beginning and at the end of the film, *Khuda kay Liye* explores the place of Islam in the context of 9/11 in contemporary societies in Pakistan, Britain and the USA. Shoaib Mansoor’s film resonates with the demonization of Muslims in the West. *Khuda kay Liye*, however, has a wider scope as it examines complex issues such as religion, secularism, fundamentalism versus religious toleration, modernity and tradition from different perspectives in Chicago, London, Lahore, Pakistan’s tribal areas or Afghanistan.

While it aims to avoid standard clichés mediated against Muslims, *Khuda kay Liye* remains a product of its time and presents a Manichean worldview. The film is constructed on binaries reflected by sets of characters: the two brothers, the second generation westernized Pakistani young woman and her intransigent chaperon of a father and the two Pakistani clerics, the two rival muezzins calling for azan and the clashes in court between the NGOs’ female supporters and the cohort of bearded fundamentalists.

A rift estranges two brothers Mansoor (Shaan) and Sarmad (Fawad Afzal Khan) who have become very popular singers on the Lahori scene attracting rave reviews and television coverage. Under the sway of an Islamist cleric, Maulana

Tahiri (Rasheed Naz) who rants against the pernicious influence of Western culture and considers the likes of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan as deviants,<sup>3</sup> Sarmad becomes inward-looking and critical of westernized mores. Thus, he begins to pursue a radical interpretation of Islam, grows a beard and discards his jeans and guitar, also pressuring his free-spirited family to comply. Much to his chagrin, Mansoor does not accept that pop is degenerate art and leaves Pakistan to attend music school in Chicago. There he is at liberty to improvise and is encouraged to make forays into world music: The course is taught by an African American academic and students who come from different cultural and musical backgrounds experiment with crossovers. He then falls in love with an American cellist whom he eventually marries, despite deep cultural reservations over their radically different cultural identities.

In England, second generation Pakistani Mariam/Mary (Iman Ali) is in love with Dave, a white British fellow student and the pair intend to marry. Her father, a lapsed Muslim, who is living with a British woman to whom he is not married, is opposed to the very idea as it would make him the “laughing stock” of the expatriate Pakistani community. Although he smokes and drinks alcohol, he sees the world in Manichean terms divided between Pakistanis and Westerners or “goras” / “goris.” To protect his daughter from foreign, permissive values, he contrives a hasty trip to Pakistan, the locus of orthodoxy, promising that the marriage will go ahead once they return to England. However, while touring the tribal areas or FATA he has Mariam/Mary forcibly marry Sarmad, who is also her radicalised cousin. Mary is then abandoned in the remote village of Zakakhair on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and cut off from all links to her culture, friends and relatives.

The situation deteriorates markedly after 9/11. US raids have replaced Soviet reprisals. As Pakistan is gradually sucked into the Afghan war, its North-Western frontier, the FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces are destabilized like Afghanistan and Pakistani tribals grow the ranks of the Haqqani Taliban. Sarmad and Sher Shah (Hameed Sheikh) are almost killed not under American bombs or drones, but as a result of mujahideen internecine rivalries (maybe a note here explaining this terminology). In her compound Mariam/Mary cannot adapt to a life of obscurantism, segregation and submission to male power. After her efforts to teach young girls rudiments of literacy are frustrated by the village elder, she tries to escape wearing a burqa. The scene in which she comes within reach of her freedom in a “garroti,” a primitive open wooden cable car – as illustrated below – epitomizes her struggle.

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3. The mullah only tolerates vocal music in the *azaan*, the muezzin’s call to prayer.



Realizing that she is about to be dragged back and recaptured, as the lifeline is turned into a rope, she rearranges her black burqa as a kind of shroud and collapses in the casket-like car.

Once back in her compound, Mariam/Mary pays the price for her dreams of emancipation: she is kept under a tighter rein and Sarmad, who is instructed by his mullah to consummate the marriage by force, eventually rapes her.

In *Chicago*, marital bliss is short-lived. Indeed, the cross-cultural nuptials are hardly over when in the aftermath of 9/11 and with the all-pervasive paranoia over security, FBI officers arrest Mansoor on hearsay rumours – the rantings of a turban-wearing drunk man accusing him of being a terrorist. Subsequently, he is detained in solitary confinement and tortured for a year because of his affluence as well as his Islamic background, until he confesses his involvement with the al-Qaeda network. Although, the name Guantanamo is not mentioned, there are clear hints and parallels with the detention camp: Mansoor's torture in the infamous three-piece suit resonates with the 20-hour long interrogations, humiliations, random brutality, food as well as sensory deprivation inflicted on the likes of Asif Iqbal, Ruhai Ahmed and Shafiq Rasul (aka the Tipton Three) at the hands of the Extreme Reaction Force (Rose, 2004; 2006). Against all hope, Mansoor refuses to surrender and turn into what his gaolers would like him to, i.e. an anti-American.

On the walls of his prison, he scribbles his love for the USA. Yet, at the end of his ordeal, after repeated assaults and humiliations, he suffers from permanent brain damage and is institutionalized.

*Khuda kay Liye* explores the tensions and challenges facing Islam in multicultural and multiconfessional Western societies post 9/11.



It does not shirk from investigating similar crises in the context of Pakistan's mutating urbanized society. It also posits that US discourse inspired by Huntington's theory of "the Clash of Civilizations" has much to answer for in disseminating "Westoxification" (Maulana Tahiri's pro-Taliban sermons) and alienating mainstream Muslims. The ideological underpinnings of the film are consonant with Hamid Mohsin's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*, Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* or the more recent *Ours Are the Streets* by Sunjeev Sahota. *Khuda kay Liye* is less about the confrontation between liberal and radical Islam than about misguided beliefs. In that respect, contrary to the teenage rebellion of *Kamosh Pani*'s Salim Khan and its exploitation by fundamentalist clerics from Lahore (Sumar, 2003), the film leaves the spectator in the dark as to the reasons for Sarmad's sudden

radicalization and equally sudden detalibanization. The spectator may critique the way Shoaib Mansoor consigns the debate between secularism and religion, between Deobandi fundamentalism / Wahhabism and moderate Islam to a large extent to the end of his film. The violent tensions between Shi'a / Sufi and Sunni Islam in Pakistani society are also conveniently overlooked. So is the collusion between radical Islamic parties and sections of Pakistani civil society and military circles following General Zia ul-Haq's Nizam e-Mustafa policy of Islamization illustrated by the injunction "chadar aur chaardhiwaaree" (the sheet and four walls). For example, the fundamentalist vandals who ransack the concert stage are not brought to justice.

At least two reasons can be invoked. On the one hand, film may not be the most suitable medium to articulate complex religious issues in a short time frame. Hence the debate between radical Maulana Tahiri (Rasheed Naz) and liberal Maulana Wali (Naseeruddin Shah) appears didactic and somewhat artificial like the tirades between Police Commander Tariq Ali (Naseeruddin Shah) and Imam Junaid (Om Puri) in *Shoot on Sight : Is It a Crime to Be a Muslim ?* (Mundra, 2007), unlike similar controversies that mobilize and divide the characters of Hanif Kureishi's *Black Album*, Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, or Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God*. The reception of the film, on the other hand, amply justifies Shoaib Mansoor's caution. Although *Khuda kay Liye* was no art-house work, the film had to be released privately and incurred several fatwas to have it banned. Furthermore its success provoked several riots.

Those two reasons help explain the director's treading a fine line between condemning fundamentalism, especially the deployment of religious discourse to incite hatred and countenance jihad on the one hand, and humbling the articulate Islamist hardliner, Maulana Tahiri, on the other.<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, there is one character that is excoriated for his humbug religion – Mariam/Mary's father has no qualms sacrificing his daughter's happiness as he becomes a born again Muslim.

The showdown between the two clerics is a significant set-piece. On the surface, it promotes contestation and establishes that the Quran and Hadith are subject to interpretation, hence the debatable edict of fatwas banning music and pictures. Maulana Wali, played by Indian actor Naseeruddin Shah, often typecast as Bollywood's voice of moderation, tells the court to beware of the literal meaning: "deen me dadhi hai, dadhi me deen nahi" (the beard is the beginning of love, not its zenith) . In his riposte to his radical counterpart who promotes the prohibition of art, Maulana Wali quotes the syncretism of Hazrat Dawūd (Prophet

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4. The radical cleric may be based on Maulanas Abdul Aziz Ghazi or Abdul Rashid Ghazi of Islamabad's Lal Masjid.

David) who was inspired by ragas and was gifted with the most beautiful vocal chords and a talent for playing instruments.

From a theological perspective, the liberal cleric argues that Mary's nikah (marital contract) is invalid under Islamic law, since she was given a Christian name and was brought up as a Christian. Furthermore, although "wilayat al-ijbar" (guardianship right) empowers the young woman's father the right to marry his daughter without her consent, the provision is not absolute but contingent on the absence of hostility, compatibility between the spouses and the suitor's ability to pay the mahr (gift to the bride). On the basis of Hadith ("Bukhari, volume 3.94; Nasai, volume 2.403"), Maulana Wali invokes lack of consent to annul the marital contract.

On a political level, it must be noted that the debate is taking place before the Lahore High Court. Thus it would seem fair to assume that what is at stake is not so much the expression of diverse religious faiths – Sufism is hardly mentioned. Rather, the Pakistani State seems to recuperate the message of toleration.<sup>5</sup> Such interpretation tallies with the erosion of support for the religious parties which countenanced General Zia's and General Musharraf's military regime.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite his much reduced influence and funding in the aftermath of the Jihad against the Soviets, the firebrand mullah wields much support whether in Lahore or over the tribal areas.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, he does not hesitate to challenge the authority of the High Court, and, through it, that of the government, which he considers as illegitimate and "unIslamic."

The High Court of Lahore may be instrumental in quashing Mariam/Mary's forced marriage to Sarmad and indicting her own father. However, it is the Pakistani army that pressures the village elders to avoid a diplomatic crisis with the British authorities and sends a helicopter to rescue the young woman.

Thus the film reminds its viewers and critics that Pakistan is an Islamic republic, while at the same time championing the sovereignty of the State, through two of its still popular institutions – the judiciary and the armed forces. Despite the controversial fatwas decreed against it, the film's success was hailed

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5. In *Shoot on Sight : Is It a Crime to Be a Muslim ?* there is a similar hijacking of moderate islam by the British institutions.

6. The MMA or Muttahida Masjlis-e Amal is ironically referred to as the Mullah-Military Alliance (Racine 29).

7. The cleric's ubiquity may confound a western viewer. However, it is consonant with the spread of fundamentalism. Besides, it is consistent with Pashtun tradition in the Federally Administered Territories (FATA): "Pashtuns throughout history have maintained a pattern of moving between two residences, both for the purpose of seasonal migration and to have an escape route from tribal feuds." (Nawaz 30)

and recuperated by President Pervez Musharraraf as a national achievement. By championing Maulana Wali's tolerant Islam, the film reconciles Mohammad Iqbal's theocracy with Jinnah's secular ideal.

However, *Khuda kay Liye*'s consensual message takes liberties with politics and sociocultural practices. Forced marriages were prevalent in diasporic societies with a rural background and the British Foreign Office was involved to curb the practice. Mariam/Mary may have been unsuspecting of her father's ulterior motive. However given their liberal position, it is highly unlikely that Sarmad's parents would have cut off all relations with their son or would have countenanced his rushed marriage away from Lahori society. The section of the film devoted to the FBI's physical as well as psychological demolition of Mansoor makes for grim watching while the film overlooks the themes of honour killing, rape, mutilation as well as the stoning of recalcitrant women at the hands of the Taliban and their partisans (Aslam, 2008 ; Joya, 2009 ; Bieber, 2010). The reason for this imbalance may be domestic consumption and sensitivity: it may have been more politically correct to expose Western abuses against innocent Muslims, rather than denigrate the country for the violence and discrimination inflicted on women. Generally, female oppression is glossed over and Mariam/Mary's epiphanic moment at the end to renounce her existence as a free woman in London to return to the same village compound where she had been imprisoned for two years to educate illiterate girls in the tribal lands beggars belief given the role of madrassahs and the hold of feudalism. The use of violence against women is more convincingly portrayed with Sushmita Bannerjee / Sayed Kamal in Ujjal Chatterjee's *Escape from Taliban* (2003) or Khaled Hosseini's and Atiq Rahimi's fiction.

Militants easily blend in Lahore and re-emerge in Waziristan and vice-versa, but little geopolitical insight is provided on the AfPak war and the issues of Pashtun identity and Pashtunistan and Afghan refugees are not explored. It is worth pointing out that about 15 million Pashtuns / Pakhtuns inhabit Afghanistan,<sup>8</sup> while some 25 million live in Pakistan, mainly in FATA, because it contains tribes that straddle the Durand Line, the disputed border between British India and then Pakistan and Afghanistan (Nawaz 2). Furthermore, the army is represented as the nation's bulwark against terrorism. Its overbearing presence and ambiguous role are never articulated. Nor does the relationship between the militarization of the State and the escalation of violence nationwide come under any scrutiny. *Khuda kay Liye* operates double standards for domestic political reasons. It is almost foregrounded with US suppression of

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8. Both pronunciations are correct, *Pakhtun* being favored by northerners and *Pashtun* by southerners.



diversity and mental torture, a proleptic link with the Patriot Act, extraordinary rendition and Guantanamo. Yet, at the same time, Shoaib Mansoor seems to be oblivious of the Pakistani State's apparatus against human rights and of the collusion between the CIA and ISI to sustain the war industry.<sup>9</sup>

The country's promising duo with its crossover music has given way to an image of schizophrenia and self-destruction. Both Sarmad and Mansoor are shell-shocked either at the hands of the Taliban or the West's heavy-handed treatment of its Muslim Others.

Like *Khuda kay Liye, Escape from Taliban* (2003) critiques the violence meted out to women in the context of Talibanization and radical Islam. However, Mansoor's dual narrative film broaches the theme from a different perspective – the tensions between radical and moderate Islam – as well as the wider geopolitical context of Pakistan versus the West and the demonization of Muslims in Western societies. In contrast, apart from a few liminal scenes based in Kolkata, India where the two main protagonists live and fall in love and one episode at the Indian and Afghan embassies in Islamabad, Chatterjee's bollywood film is mostly located in Afghanistan, a country ravaged by war and associated with bloodshed, firebombs and jihadis firing AK47s as underlined in the prologue.

Another key difference is that in *Khuda kay Liye*, Mary is coerced into marriage whereas Sushmita (Manisha Koirala) and Jaanbaz Khan (Nawab Khan) choose to get married despite her family's opposition since Jaanbaz is a Muslim and the Banerjees are Hindus and the two elope to Afghanistan, her husband's native country.

This significant difference explains why Western-educated Shusmita finds herself lost and alienated in a place her husband had misrepresented as heaven on earth, conveniently failing to mention Russian air raids and the mujahideen insurgency. Another significant omission, in common with *Khuda kay Liye*, is the condition of women, especially those who challenge purdah and male patriarchy. The heroine's sense of oppression in her new homeland is eloquently reflected by the film's sand colour scheme and barren mineral landscape, mostly shot in Ladakh and Rajahstan, unlike *Kabul Express* which was filmed in war-ravaged Afghanistan.

It is worth pointing out that, at least from a visual point of view, Sushmita's diary does not start chronologically in 1988 with her marriage plans in Kolkata or her perilous journey to her Afghan village, in the Gazni region, after an 18-hour ride from Kabul or even her mixed reception with her in-laws during

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9. The film is reported to have been bankrolled by the ISI.

which she is given a Muslim name, Sayed Kamal and she is segregated as a “kaffir” or infidel.

Rather, her narrative is triggered off by a punitive raid by the Taliban on 2 December 1994. Rebuking her for non-observance of roza during Ramadan, the Taliban repeatedly slap her, punch her and hit her with the butt of their kalashnikovs as she refuses to conform to their injunctions and they drag her to her bedroom where she is confronted by a broken portrait of her husband who has migrated to India to eke out a living. This chronological reordering could be justified by Sushmita’s confusion and trauma. Thus, the Russian invasion and the ensuing civil war between the Najibullah puppet regime and the US-funded mujahideen is displaced chronologically. She later records an earlier conversation with the village elder, Dranai Chacha (Prithvi Zutshi) informing her that “the war [with the Russians] has claimed this nation. It has ruined the future of our children. Everything is finished.”<sup>10</sup>

A more likely explanation is that the narrator foregrounds this scene with the Taliban because it crystallizes several dominant themes such as human rights abuses and the brutal suppression of dissent. This scene is a point of no return as she makes explicit, she has become “a prisoner of fanatics, the Taliban,” Sushmita’s prostrate position, her sombre scarred face are reflected in the way she writes her diary, a covert gesture of resistance by the fire or kerosene light.

By rearranging chronological order as in the marriage episodes, Sushmita contrasts her own situation as a victim and a non-Muslim outsider. The contrapuntal references to paradigmatic Bollywood nuptials, particularly the choreographed song “Aye jaane jaa” and the sabre and scarf dances at Kala’s wedding (Jahangir Khan) also illustrate the divide between communal Afghan cultural practices and Taliban sectarianism.

The marriage ceremonies are framed by brief shots of mullah-inspired, gun wielding rallies as well as scenes in which the Taliban round the villages in their ubiquitous Toyota pick ups propagating their fatwas against miscreants who do not pray five times a day (namaz), read books other than the holy Quran, defy burqa orders, leave women unescorted by a “mahram” or male relative, play music at weddings or shave off facial hair.<sup>11</sup> The episode is a graphic illustration of the Taliban edicts, most of which deal with the restriction of women’s rights (burqa provisions), segregation on public transport, social exclusion and invisibility (ban on education, employment and recreational activities).

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10. The elder’s story of scorched earth resonates with equally graphic accounts by Atiq Rahimi, Khaled Hosseini and Yasmina Khadra.

11. Similar scenes are depicted in the fiction of Khaled Hosseini and Atiq Rahimi as well as in Malalāi Joya’s autobiography.

Sushmita's resistance to male patriarchal order is best illustrated by her defiance of the Taliban who, in her words, treat women as shoes, chattels or slaves.<sup>12</sup> Yet her rebellion started with her disobeying her father's order not to marry a Muslim. Colonel Banerjee (Yusuf Hussain) slaps his daughter, a gesture that is repeated by her husband, her extended family and by the Taliban. Sushmita hits back Jaanbaz in public and calls him a liar for not informing her of the existence of his first wife, Gulghutti (Ferozeh) with whom she develops a female bond against male oppression.<sup>13</sup> To combat prejudices as illustrated by the faith healer who fails to save a young mother in labour or by the self-appointed doctor who prescribes medicines past their sell-by dates, the main protagonist enlists the support of Jaanbaz's aunt, Guljarina or Abu (Vineeta Mallik) to create a dispensary for women. The locum resents Shushmita's tirade as he is trying his best to provide relief to an impoverished population with a high rate of illiteracy and no medical facility. The film's implicit message is that the issue of liberating Afghan women cannot be resolved with military expenditure and at the expense of health and education improvements.

On a personal level, Sushmita adopts Tinni (Krupa Sindhwa) to relieve Sadagi (Benika) of the stigma of delivering a baby girl before marriage and to compensate for the loss of her own baby after being hit by her husband. In the course of her work at the dispensary, she encounters a burqa-clad young Indian woman who ironically entreats her to rescue her from physical and psychological abuse by her in-laws. Her husband in a similar fashion to Jaanbaz has left her to remarry in Pakistan because she could not give him children. Sushmita also provides succour to battered women like Gulghutti who is repeatedly beaten up by Jaanbaz's brothers or like the young women attending her English class.

Sushmita falls foul of the Taliban on several occasions whether for failing to wear the regulation burqa, to follow roza or for opposing the execution of Jalil (Shubhrajyoti). Violence escalates on the third time she crosses the path of the Taliban commander. On their previous showdown, after ransacking the wedding ceremony of a renegade family, Abdul Malik (Aly Khan) had vowed to have the kaffir woman hung up in public. This time he has come to deliver expeditious justice according to Sharia law. Sushmita stands accused of "teaching the language of Satan" and empowering women – a charge she denies vehemently : "I am teaching them the language of humanity and to stand up against your tyranny !" Given his cold-blooded precedents, the Taliban commander acts rather out-of-character hearing out a feminist lecture. Ransacking the dispensary, Abdul

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12. Her denunciation resonates with Malalā Joya's campaign against the brutalization of women who often choose immolation over forced marriage.

13. The issue of male violence and female solidarity in the context of a polygamous society is explored in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Hosseini, 2007).

Malik strikes her with the butt of his rifle before dumping her to the ground and asking two of his guerillas to drag her body away from the compound as illustrated below.



Sushmita's barbaric ordeal is graphically highlighted by her white shroud bisected by her dishevelled jet black hair as well as her Christic cross-like or prostrate position. One particular striking low-angle shot suggests that a grave is being freshly dug up. In the sequel during which Sushmita is nearly kicked unconscious by her four attackers, the camera zeroes in on a space clearly designated for summary executions. This interpretation is further substantiated by the four lines converging from the four automatic rifles to the young victim's fallen body. Furthermore, the unrealistic scene in which Abu rushes to rescue Sushmita protecting her body from bullets and calling her torturers "animals" who defile Islam reminds the viewer of a piet .



Incidentally, "Ruk jao," Abu's command to the Talib leader echoes Mary's plea as she tries to break from her shackles in *Khuda kay Liye*. The main protagonist cannot live with a permanent sword of Damocles above her head. She decides to

escape to Pakistan, taking advantage of Gulbibi's sudden illness (Kanisha) and Gulghutti's company. However, her first attempt is foiled after she tries to phone her family in Kolkata and the Indian and Afghan embassies decline to intervene. Sushmita and Tinni are kidnapped by Jaanbaz's brothers who beat her up. Her second endeavour is almost nipped in the bud by a Taliban patrol which is busy executing villagers. It, nevertheless, aborts as Jaanbaz's brothers stop her in her tracks and take away her daughter. Her third successive escape equally ends in failure. Despite Gulghutti's help and her own resourcefulness posing as a burqa-clad doctor and hijacking an opium-laden tractor, she is brought before a Sharia court in the neighbouring city. Her trial takes place in a dimly lit reception room sparsely decorated with handwoven carpets, cushions, copper pots and the ubiquitous kalashnikov. Sushmita, her back to a wall faces four sitting judges and her three standing Taliban accusers. Abdul Malik reminds the court of the stoning sentence for women who disobey or dishonour their husbands. The accused denies his charge that she is maligning Islam and "brainwashing" young girls and women against the teachings of the Quran. For her defence, Sushmita contends that she is empowering them against retrograde customs that have nothing to do with Islam :

Women have no right to education, they can't voice their opinion...they can't go without an escort. Confined inside all a woman got to do is produce children, cook and clean the house, as if she's a slave. If she disobeys you, you hit her till she faints. You kill women ! A woman means nothing to you but a slave!

Her plea falls on deaf ears pursuant to order 34 of the Taliban code stating that women have no legal recourse and that a woman's testimony is worth half a man's testimony. Accordingly, under Abdul Malik's direction that she should be given the death penalty, the mullah returns a guilty verdict, declaring that she should be converted to Islam, whipped twenty five times before being punished according to Sharia law.

By sheer coincidence and quite ironically, Sushmita is saved by the timely presence of the AK 47 on the wall as well as the deus ex-machina appearance of village mashar, Dranai Chacha at the eleventh hour in a UN car.

Even though the film evokes the devastation and dismantling of Afghanistan under Soviet direct or proxy rule as well as the feudal warfare out of which the Taliban emerged, it mainly focuses on the plight of a Western-educated woman who refuses to be brow-beaten by fanatics and almost pays with her life her militancy for women's rights. Given its focus and the fact that it purports to be "a true story," *Escape from Taliban* cannot provide a comprehensive insight into

the rival Taliban movements, let alone Afghanistan's complex factional and ethnic politics. In the Gazni district where the film is located the Tadjiks account for 50%, the Hazaras 25%, and the Pashtuns 25% (as opposed to 47% for the Tadjiks and Hazaras and 51% for the Pashtuns in the Gazni province). No insight is provided into this cultural diversity.

Besides, although Gazni has a high degree of Taliban insurgency, the militant nexus between the Pakistani and Afghan borders is vaguely alluded to, as is the opium and arms trade funding the militias or the war in Chechnya. Furthermore, there are several references to Afghan labourers in India. But, curiously no explanations are provided why Afghan migrants would look to India in preference to Pakistan, which seems culturally and ideologically closer. A film critic may dismiss some of the Bollywood interludes which may be meant to alleviate the overall sombre climate, yet seem to turn local folk dances into Mumbai theatrics, albeit in shalwar kameez. While praising the woman's perspective, columnist Perna Singh Bindra is critical of the film for lacking subtlety and for catering to the Indian audience which likes overdramatisation (Vasagar, 2003). The charge is relevant to a large extent, but it is partly due to the focus on the heroine's tentative struggle and the film's chromatic scheme. Admittedly, the Taliban commander lacks credibility as he keeps issuing empty death threats to Sushmita; he fits in with the mullah's "kalashnikov culture" (Nawaz 15) and is more trigger-happy when it comes to despatching those who dare criticize his rule abroad or who denounce his involvement in the opium trade. Yet, his character is consistent with the emergence of ruthless as well as charismatic young men who took on the Red Army, then fought the Nato coalition and "are not tribal leaders by lineage or election and whose power and legitimacy are based on their recently acquired wealth – either Arab money or the exorbitant compensations paid by the army – and their ability to fight and fill the power vacuum." (Nawaz 26) *Escape from Taliban* highlights how jihad has reshaped tribal society around the militants and the mullahs in both Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal belt. TTP's leader Baitullah Mehsud (Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan) is a case in point; although not a cleric himself, he nonetheless used religion to rise to prominence:

Traditionally, the mosque was not used for tribal political activity. The mullah, who has a low status in Pashtun society, was subordinated to the tribal elders, who had the monopoly on political activity conducted in the *hujra* (the guest house of the leaders), which acted as a counterweight to the mosque. The mullah acted as a mediator between parties in conflict but he did not handle the gun. When the threat came from a non-Muslim enemy, the mullah came to the front and preached jihad [...]. New opportunities have enabled the mullah to reject his traditional role and to move from the

mosque to the *hujra*. Mullahs participate in the new jirga as members of parliament [...] Jirgas, which were traditionally held in the open, have been held inside madrassas and addressed by mullahs. In the traditional system, mullahs could not sustain a network of political patronage, as they lacked financial means. But now they have access to money and have created a space for themselves in the society. (Nawaz 26)

On a thematic level, the violence unleashed against women is consonant with real-life daily tragedies denounced by NGOs, such as *Time*'s front cover of the mutilations of Aisha Bibi, the acid attacks on schoolgirls as well as the flogging, rape, torture and immolation of women (Joya, 2009). Sushmita's plea is reminiscent of the summary executions and stonings in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* and Atiq Rahimi's *Maudit soit Dostoïevski (Damn Dostoyevsky)*. It strikes a forceful contrast with *Kabul Express*, a Bollywood-ized documentary by two Indian rookie reporters who land in Afghanistan with no maps or contacts and meander their way through the ruins of Kabul.<sup>14</sup>

A more serious flaw is that Chatterjee's film conflates fanaticism with custom and tradition. Obviously, the Taliban propagate a literal view of the Quran and a rigid application of Sharia law to all. Indeed, the film does justice to their puritanical stance which appeals to uneducated young males and marginalizes women. This exposure tallies with documentaries produced by journalists like Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy. However, initially, the Taliban's popularity was due to their challenge of feudal practices and obligations and delivery of quick and free justice (Joya, 2009; Nawaz, 2009). This more efficient form of leadership was based on a challenge of the *kashars* (the young, the poor, and those belonging to minor lineages) against the *mashars* (the tribal elders) and the "mafia" of maliks and political agents who had an interest in maintaining the status quo (Nawaz, 27), a fact that the film chooses to ignore as Sushmita's feminism alienates both the Taliban and village elders. Thus the film overlooks the atrocities committed by the mujahideen and the warlords propped up by Western governments to single out the Taliban. Furthermore, although it alludes to the Taliban's complicity in the opium trade, it falls short of analyzing Pakistan's ambiguous role vis-à-vis Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura.

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14. The war is not seriously addressed other than in a few scenes involving an implausible hostage crisis with a Taliban doubling as a member of the Pakistani Frontier Corps, murderous AK-toting Hazaras or villagers stoning Taliban. Apart from the odd burqa, incidentally used by men as a camouflage, Afghan women are marginalized.

With all their geopolitical and cultural approximations as well as their technical blemishes, *Escape from Taliban* and *Khuda kay Liye* not only make for compelling viewing, they also help probe some of the misconceptions and brutal realities about Afghanistan and Pakistan. Radicalization cannot be reduced to a homegrown phenomenon; rather it is created by Western assumptions of the concepts of modernity as well as insensitivity to different cultural or religious practices and issues of territorial sovereignty. As Michael Barry emphasizes with his theory of Yagestan, exogenous forces have always failed to shape Afghanistan. *Khuda kay Liye* is equally dismissive of intolerance on both sides of the Atlantic.

Radicalization is partly fuelled by a credibility gap. While focusing on the Taliban and burqa issues, the US has deflected criticism for its role in the debacle (Joya 288-90). By instrumentalizing the mujahidden warlords in their jihad against the Soviet Union, the US has not only undermined a delicately poised state on the geopolitical map, it has further eroded confidence in the Pakistani State and institutions, sparking off major refugee crises both in Pakistani cities ill-equipped to deal with such influx or in camps with the barest of facilities which turn into hotbeds for mafias and militants. Both films show that all is not quiet on the Eastern front as violence against civilians, mostly women and children go unabated and food, health and education programs lag far behind military aid. At the peril of their lives, an increasing number of women find the courage to challenge bigotry and male patriarchy.



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