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## Kandahar

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## Kandahar

### Abstract

This is a review of *Kandahar* (2001).

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In recent times, no human garment has reached worldwide attention and notoriety than the burqa, the traditional garb that literally blankets women of certain fundamentalist Muslim sects from head to foot. For indeed, the events of September 11, 2001 not only caused universal uproar over the innocent lives lost at the WTC, it equally spotlighted the unseen, silent, long-suffering victims of Taliban terrorism- the women of Afghanistan.

Serendipitously, Mosen Makhmalbaf, an Iranian filmmaker, essays the shrouded world of Afghan women under Taliban rule in Kandahar. A riveting film that blurs documentary and fiction boundaries, *Kandahar* (originally *Safar e Ghandehar* /Iran, 2001) was inspired by the true story of Afghan-born journalist and central star Niloufar Pazira who set out on a quest for a long lost friend in Kandahar.

*Kandahar's* storyline revolves around its main character Nafas, a native Afghan woman working as a journalist in Canada. Free and flourishing in a prosperous country, Nafas is distraught over news that her sister in Kandahar has threatened to commit suicide at the next solar eclipse as she could no longer bear the unspeakable anguish of her persecuted existence compounded by her disability caused by a landmine. In the opening scene, we see Nafas taking the first leg of her mission to Afghanistan in a chopper. She dictates diary entries to a portable cassette

recorder which she refers to as her "black box." This is where we get the back story of her quest.

*Kandahar* then develops into a road film where Nafas, after donning a burqa, attempts to cross the Pakistan/Tajikistan border. Along the journey, she encounters Iranians who fear entering Kandahar and impoverished people scrounging for material gain at every opportunity, before finally meeting an urchin who is willing to help her through the journey. She also meets a doctor who turns out to be an American Black Muslim activist who ventured into Afghanistan to immerse in civil rights struggles only to end up helping remedy the most basic problems of malnutrition and poverty-related diseases. As the journey progresses, we get glimpses of the now-defunct Taliban regime's extreme fundamentalist practices which include the indoctrination and combat training of young boys. *Kandahar* proceeds with a pervading feverish tension given the harsh, nearly uncivilized environment. In one hauntingly surreal scene, a mob of landmine amputees race for prostheses being parachuted from helicopters to a Red Cross outpost.

But the heart of the film is the fact that in three days, an Afghan woman at the end of her rope will avail of the only option that allows her free agency and liberation from suffering- death. But the film avoids the easy way out; it is open-ended and we never see Nafas reach her sister in Kandahar.

Of late, the grim scenario in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has become an all too familiar fixture in global news coverages. But *Kandahar* reiterates the fact that historically, women have often been the first victims of social, political, and religious strife. Feminist scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that "Androcentric religious culture makes the woman 'the other,' woman's silence and absence are normative." As such, male dominance is central in the definition of humanness, the female is relegated to a derivative existence. In the androcentric universe of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, women are simply defined as 'not man.'

The film depicts Nafas' sister as emblematic for the suffering Afghan woman, yet, we never get so much as a hint of her. She is a mere echo that we hear only through the voice of her sister, a woman whose contrasting circumstances provide her soul and story. In solidarity with the plight of Nafas' sister and the countless subjugated women of Afghanistan, the film *Kandahar* shrouds itself with a burqa.