



# Osama

Study Guide **Alicia McGivern**

## Osama

### Osama

dir. Siddiq Barmak/  
Afghanistan-Netherlands-Japan-Ireland-  
Iran/83mins/2003

### Cast

**Marina Golbahari** Osama  
**Arif Herati** Espandi  
**Zubaida Sahar** Mother

### Other cast

Mohamad NadUer Khadjeh  
Mohamad Haref Harati  
Gol Rahman Ghorbandi  
Khwaja Nader  
Hamida Refah

### Production

**Production Designer** Akbar Meshkini

**Sound** Faroukh Fadace,  
Behroz Shahamat

### Original Music

Mohammad Reza Darvishi

**Editor** Siddiq Barmak

**Cinematography** Ebrahim Ghafori

**Screenplay** Siddiq Barmak

**Producer** Siddiq Barmak

Julia Fraser  
Julie LeBrocqy  
Makoto Ueda

### Executive producer

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

**Director** Siddiq Barmak

**Production Companies** Barmak Film,  
Hubert Balls Fund of the  
Rotterdam Film Festival  
LeBrocqy Fraser Productions

## Introduction

*Osama* is a film about life for a young girl under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the home of director and writer, Siddiq Barmak. Said to be the first film produced in the country since this extreme religious regime was ousted in 2002, it premiered at Cannes in 2003 and went on to win a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film in 2004. The film opens with a quote from Nelson Mandela - 'I cannot forget, but I will forgive', which serves to entice the viewer to speculate on the story as well as suggest an indictment of the system on which the story is based.

The film tells the story of a young girl who has to reinvent herself in order to survive. Living under a regime that prohibits her from going to school and her widowed mother from working, she dresses as a boy and gets a job in a local shop in order to provide for the family. When forced to attend scripture school, other boys torment her and we observe her conflict as she struggles to hide her identity as well as come to terms with the enforced passage of her childhood.

While the film does tackle the plight of women under the Taliban, it is memorable mostly for its striking imagery. This imagery contributes to the sparse narrative, which relies less on dialogue than on visual storytelling for its impact. Images of a sodden blue burka being forced along the street by a powerhose, a single lock of hair being planted in a pot and being fed by an IV drip, or the imprisoned child Osama looking out at herself skipping in the yard all contribute to this harrowing portrait of life under an extreme regime.

Director Barmak has long been involved in Afghan filmmaking. It is his hope that *Osama* will inspire a new generation to reflect their stories in films that the world will want to see and that will contribute to the cultural rebuilding of his country.

## Questions

*Mulan* is another film where the central character must change her identity in order to survive. Do you know this film? Describe the story and compare with *Osama*. Can you think of any other films in which the central character has to change their identity? What do you know about Afghanistan? Brainstorm with your class.

## Director

Siddiq Barmak's filmmaking career can be seen as a reflection of recent Afghan history. His early interest in cinema began in the Park Cinema in Kabul. Some 30 years later he observed the Taliban burning film reels in front of the same place. The Park is one of the few cinemas in Afghanistan where his own film *Osama* has been shown. Barmak is a central figure in the rebuilding of Afghan cinema. *Osama* is his own first full-length feature and the first Afghan feature to be made since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. It marks him as a distinct talent who uses film as a means of engaging with the political and social realities of his country.

Born in Kabul, Barmak was making films by the age of 10, using bits of commercial reels salvaged from cinemas. At the age of 16, he got a job as a sound recordist with the state body, Afghan Film. He then became second assistant director and made his first 8mm short about a young billiard player. Despite his hatred of the Russians' invasion of his country, he took the chance to study film in Moscow and he lived and worked there till 1987. Barmak's conflict with the censors began with his graduation film, which was banned for being too anti-Soviet as was his next film in Kabul where he was conscripted to make propaganda. He was then sent to the front line but



deserted to join one of the Mojahedin<sup>1</sup> groups. Barmak travelled for months to try and get film finance and returned to Kabul in 1992 with the victorious Mojahedin. Unfortunately, fighting between groups continued till the Taliban moved in in 1996. Barmak fled with his wife and son to the north before fleeing to exile in Pakistan.

Returning to Kabul after the Taliban, Barmak along with other film-makers, worked for a revival of Afghan cinema, to make films for Afghan people. Key to the making of *Osama* was support from Iranian director and producer Mohsen Makhmalbaf who has dedicated himself to the regeneration of Afghanistan and its cinema. Critics of *Osama* have said that it is in fact too Iranian influenced. Whatever about this, there is no doubt that Barmak's

cinematic style has much in common with Makhmalbaf's own films, such as *Kandahar*, and that of his daughter, Samira Makhmalbaf, whose film *At Five in the Afternoon* is about women in post-Taliban Kabul. All three films were shot by cameraman Ebrahim Ghafari.

Since *Osama* premiered in Cannes, Barmak has announced several new film projects. He has taken over as head of ACEM – Afghan Children Education Movement – which Makhmalbaf had set up to address the lack of education for Afghan refugees in Iran. ACEM has funded several short films and encouraged young Afghan filmmakers, as well as direct funding towards *Osama*. The film was an Afghan, Dutch, Irish, Japanese and Iranian production.

Barmak is currently working on two scripts, set alternately in the past

and the future. He wants them to be comedies, as he says 'I really want to see our people laughing'.

### Questions

*From reading about Barmak's life, what kind of films would you expect him to make?*

*Do you know of any Irish film-maker who tries to make films that reflect the country's history?*

<sup>1</sup> See *Brief History of Afghanistan*

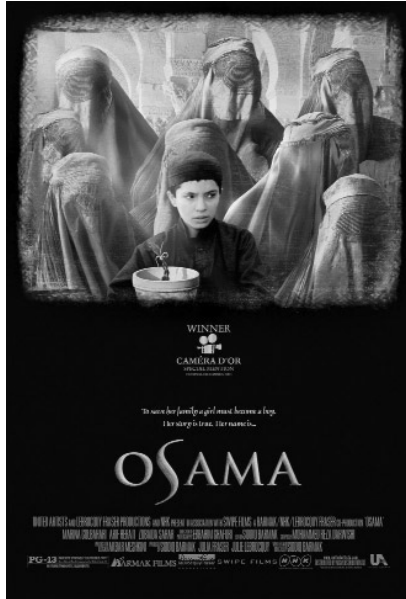
### First Look

A certain amount of a film's budget will be spent on publicity and marketing. This will include trailers, posters, advertisements. The film will be publicised in order to raise its profile and attract an audience.

The poster for *Osama* contains a figure who faces the camera,

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flanked by several other people wearing blue *burkas* which appear to cover them from head to toe. The central figure is wearing dark clothing which contrasts with the other blue garments. The background is yellow.



### Questions

Look at the poster for the film, **Osama**. What is your first impression of this film? Describe the different elements of the poster. What do you think the film could be about? Which elements of the poster suggest this to you? What period is it set in, do you think? Why? What does the title of this film suggest to you? Does anything/ anyone else come to mind? If so, does this connection give you any more information about the subject matter of the film? If so, what? Look closely at the figure in the poster: What can you say about this person e.g. Gender? Nationality? Age? Costume? Attitude? Explain your answers. What is this person doing? What do you think this could be about? What can you say about the other

figures in the poster? What kind of audience do you think would be attracted to this film? Explain your answer. After you have watched the film, do you think the poster was effective? Why/not? What kind of poster would you choose for this film?

### Synopsis

The film opens with a quote in Arabic translated as 'I can forgive but I cannot forget – Nelson Mandela'. We hear a squeaking sound from a can. A point of view shot of a dilapidated street shows a boy waving this incense burner and offering spells for money. He speaks directly to the camera and the filmmaker. Two women in burkas rush by, a cart loaded with melons is pushed hurriedly along the street. A crowd of women are revealed, walking towards the camera in demonstration, demanding the right to work. There are shouts that the Taliban are coming, and then they appear, driving through the streets, turning hoses on the crowd. Panic and confusion ensues, a woman, girl and the boy rush into a house. Outside women are arrested and thrown into a cage while the creaking can echoes again.

Outside a hospital, people are leaving and we learn that it is to be closed down. A woman doctor comes in with her daughter and changes into uniform. She attends to the male patients in very primitive conditions. We hear a French woman being taken away. Later a man escorts the woman and daughter home by bicycle. They are stopped by a Taliban who orders the woman to cover her exposed feet. At home she weeps for the loss of her husband and brother in wars and wishes for a son instead of a daughter. Her daughter looks on while her grandmother soothes her with a

fairytale about a boy passing under a rainbow and changing into a girl to avoid work. The girl's hair is cut off and when she awakens the next day, she dresses as a boy, now named Osama, and plants a lock of her hair in a flower-pot.

The Taliban are on patrol as the woman and her daughter walk to the hospital where people mourn the death of a patient. Osama removes the drip and carries it home. Next morning the boy with the incense burner recognises her and threatens to tell on her. They go to a shop where the mother asks the owner for a job for her daughter whose identity she reveals. When a Taliban arrives at the shop, the two females have to hide in the back. Next day, while at work, Osama goes to prayer with the owner and learns how to perform ablutions. A Taliban watches her closely from behind. On her way home with a melon and other food she is convinced she is being followed. She runs down the street which is empty, her footsteps echoing loudly. At the house, her mother looks out and there is no-one there. She accuses her daughter of attracting attention and proceeds to hide family memorabilia for fear of a raid. Again, the grandmother tells a story to soothe Osama.

Next day, a Taliban arrives at the shop and demands that as a boy she must attend scripture classes. A crowd of boys attend the class and are given turbans to wrap around their heads. They sit together chanting from the Qur'an, and then play, running around while Osama stays removed from them, for fear she reveal her true self. Espandi climbs a tree and asks her to come up and join him. Another lesson in ablutions takes place in the bathhouse. She stays hidden until ordered to join the group whereupon she submerges herself completely in the water. Outside, the boys chase her and the mullahs watch.

Back home, her mother tells her to dress as a girl so they can attend a wedding party. We learn that the groom is in Iran. There is dancing and singing until a shout goes up that the Taliban are coming and the women immediately start wailing as though at a wake. Back at the school, suspicions of Osama's identity remain and Espandi tells them she will climb a tree to prove that she is a boy. She gets to the top of the tree, but the mullah punish her by suspending her in a well. When she is eventually pulled out, crying for her mother, the teachers can see that she has begun to menstruate. With her gender now clear, Espandi runs off weeping, while removing his own turban, having lost his only ally. They call for her arrest and the children hunt her down before a mullah arrives, forces her into a burka and throws her in jail. Here she weeps and looks on at an image of herself skipping. The French woman from earlier is also in jail. Both she and Osama are led away to a public court. The journalist from the opening sequence is sentenced to death while the woman is to be stoned. A mullah arrives and agrees to forgive Osama but she is offered in wedlock to an ancient mullah. She begs for mercy and for her mother, before rushing to a hole in the ground to escape. Then she is led away on horseback and at the mullah's house she is prepared by the other wives who talk of the misery of their lives. The mullah arrives and offers her a choice of chastity belt. She hides from him but is found and led up to his chamber.

## **Second Look:** Impressions after viewing of the film

Watching Osama for the first time, I am struck by the impression it conveys of the country, Afghanistan, so often associated in the media over the past couple of decades with war, tragedy, terrorism and extreme fundamentalist rule. Undoubtedly it is

a powerful film, full of striking imagery that resonates long after. One's first response may be in reaction to the horror of Osama's life under the Taliban regime. We can react in a knee-jerk fashion to the lot of women as portrayed in the film, which leaves us with an impression of life under the Taliban. Although they have since been removed from power, the question still needs to be asked, what has happened since? How are women treated now in the new Afghanistan where President Karzai has been democratically elected? And does this film truly reflect Afghanistan of this period?

Both this film and Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* portray Afghanistan as an extremely undeveloped country with people living in very primitive conditions. Although Osama's mother has been educated and trained as a doctor, because she is a woman, there is no differentiation between her status and that of any other female. Because none of the women in the film, including Osama, are really given a voice with which to articulate their objections, we are only aware of their mass protest at the start and then more of a resignation to their lot, as epitomised by the mullah's wives or Osama's grandmother who relies on myth and legend to explain life.

Barmak wanted to make a film that focussed on the life of women under this regime, but by giving them no real voice he emphasises their powerlessness in the face of the Taliban. Although Osama is a child who is a victim of this system, the other children are also victims, with males forced into the role of oppressors. The film certainly does not leave us with any sense of hope and it is only because we watch the film knowing that the Taliban have

been ousted that we can contemplate a future for these children.

## **Questions**

*What do you think of Barmak's portrait of Afghanistan? Describe the country as suggested by the film. Two other films **Kandahar** and **At Five in the Afternoon** (See section on Director) have a similar style to **Osama**. Find out about these films. How would you describe this style of filmmaking? Do you like it? Why/not? Mainstream films about growing up are often called 'coming-of-age' stories. Can you think of any examples? How do they compare with this film?*

## **Discussion** Characterisation of Osama

From the first moment that we see the girl Osama walking with her mother, she is set apart from other females on the street, with uncovered face and patterned clothing. She and her mother huddle together at a remove from the large group of protesting women in blue burkas, before they are caught up in the crowd running from the oncoming Taliban. The camera then picks her out, as she wails under a torrent of water being sprayed to disperse the crowd. Even when they rush into a building she goes to the door again to look out and listen to the screaming women running for their lives. She looks upon an image of herself skipping, as though observing her childhood self while this society thrusts adult reality upon her.

At this early stage in the film, Osama is depicted as an individual, both in a childlike and adult way. We watch her lead her veiled mother around, or warn her of the Taliban's arrival. She is frequently shown in close-up, observing a situation or looking

## Afghanistan a brief history

Afghanistan, (which literally means Land of the Afghan) is a mountainous land-locked country located in Central Asia, with Iran to the west and Pakistan to the right. It has a long history and culture going back over 5000 years. The exact population of Afghanistan is unknown, however it is estimated to be somewhere around 21 to 26 million.

The four major ethnic groups in Afghanistan are Pashtoons, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. While the majority of Afghans (99%) belong to the Islamic faith, there are also small areas of Sikhs, Hindus and even some Jews. The official languages of the country are Pashto and Dari (Afghan Persian)<sup>3</sup>. The capital of Afghanistan is Kabul, a city which has suffered much destruction during the many years of war.

In 1979 Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, but were made withdraw 10 years later by anti-Communist mujahideen<sup>4</sup> forces. Following the collapse of the Communist regime, fighting ensued among the various mujahideen warlords leading to civil war. The Taliban<sup>5</sup> emerged as a force able to bring order in the country, seizing Kabul in 1996 and imposing a set of norms on what had become a chaotic society.

One major mujahideen organiser was Osama bin Laden, backed by US, Pakistan and Saudi governments. However, in 1998, US President Bill Clinton ordered the bombing of four sites in Afghanistan which they claimed were terrorist training camps. This included one run by Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organisation, which was said to have forged strong connections with the Taliban.

In March 2001, the Taliban ordered the destruction of two ancient

statues of Buddha carved into cliffsides in Bamiyan, an act which was internationally condemned. Following the 11th of September 2001 attacks on the US, military action led by US, Allied and Northern Alliance toppled the Taliban for sheltering Osama Bin Laden, suspected of being behind the attacks. A process for political reconstruction was established later that year and presidential elections were held in 2004. On October the 9th, 2004, Hamid Karzai became the first democratically elected President of Afghanistan. National Assembly elections are to be held soon.

### Life under the Taliban

The Taliban belong to a Sunni Islam movement, which emphasises piety and austerity and the family obligations of men. When in power, they instituted Islamic law, administered by religious police. Punishments included the amputation of one or both hands for theft and stoning for adultery. In *Osama*, we see a stoning being authorised by a Taliban 'court'.

Under this regime, women were not allowed to work and their education was limited. They were denied hospital treatment to avoid being exposed to male staff. Many women were widows following years of war and a ruined economy and could no longer provide food for their families. As we see in *Osama*, women were banned from going out in public unless wearing face and body covering burqas and accompanied by a male relative.

Under the Taliban all forms of TV, imagery and music, the wearing of white shoes (the colour of the Taliban flag) or a too short beard were forbidden. Although opium poppy cultivation was reportedly banned in

1997 and again in 2000, production increased with the fall of the Taliban. Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium, with 80-90% of the world's heroin consumed in Europe coming from Afghan opium.

Since the fall of the Taliban, concerns continue to be raised within the international community about the ongoing situation of women in the country, particularly in relation to the justice system. With the Taliban's oppression of women widely acknowledged, there are fears that the international community would now regard the situation for women to be much improved whereas outside of the cities this would not appear to be the case. Afghan people's concerns about their own security within the country is evident from the very large number of refugees who continue to live in Iran and Pakistan. However, there are positive developments: in a country where languages came to be seen as evidence of a particular allegiance, with Dari regarded as leaning to the west and Iran and Pashto to the south and the Taliban, the decision has been made that both languages would be official under the new constitution.

### Questions

1. *What impression do you get of Afghanistan from reading the brief history above?*
2. *How effectively do you think filmmaker Barmak has represented life under the Taliban in **Osama**?*

<sup>3</sup> *Osama is in Dari language*

<sup>4</sup> *plural of **mujahid** meaning 'struggler' but often translated as holy warrior.*

<sup>5</sup> *'student of Islam' from the Arabic word **talib**, meaning seeker or student.*

ahead on the bicycle, taking in the world around her. Back at home, she behaves as a child with her grandmother who plaits her hair and talks of legends, while the mother weeps for her dead husband and brother. However, Osama is forced to put childhood behind her and from being a weeping child she awakens as an androgynous looking figure, obliged to go to work. Filmed in close-up observing her new state in the small mirror, she then goes to plant a lock of her hair in a flowerpot. Plaintive singing reinforces the impact of the scene as she walks her mother through the streets, peopled with the sick, soldiers, men at work. Yet now it is her powerless mother who is huddled while she stares straight ahead, pulling her in from passing traffic, or carrying off the IV drip. It is as though with male status, even a fraudulent one, comes male confidence. But childhood is not completely over as later she calls for her mother in a nightmare or draws a stick figure in the steam of the shop window or watches herself skipping in the rain. Terrified she looks over her shoulder as she runs from the shop, carrying melon and meat, the child's bogeyman now appearing as Taliban figure. When her mother scolds her, she is dressed as a girl again and is comforted by her grandmother.

Barmak has chosen to give Osama little voice. When she does speak, she is pleading for mercy from first her grandmother, then the boy Estiban, the Taliban and finally the mullah. Instead of articulating a response to what is happening, Barmak casts her as an observer of her own life, as though in watching it unfold, she is also observing the role of women in general. With the use of striking imagery, he has created a character whose tragic circumstances give the viewers an insight into life in this troubled country.

### Questions

*From your viewing of the film and the discussion above, what is your opinion of the character of **Osama**? Is she sympathetic, do you think? Which of the film's images is the most striking? Why? What do they tell us about this character?*

### Conclusion

*Osama* is undoubtedly a powerful film that offers a memorable portrait of recent history. Apart from its setting however, it's story of a girl who reinvents herself in order to survive is not completely unusual. We can consider *Mulan*, or *Yentl* or even *Europa, Europa* in which a young Jewish boy joins the Hitler Youth in order to conceal his identity. What makes *Osama* stand out is the fact that it is the first film from Afghanistan to give us a cinematic glimpse of what life was like during the Taliban period. Although the story of Osama is sparsely told, Barmak achieves considerable tension through the quality of his visual storytelling. Osama's terrified race along the street from the imagined Taliban is as heart-stopping as any chase scene from a mainstream thriller.

Among European films there have been several highly successful titles which have offered a child's view of life, often as a means of recounting recent history. Examples include *Cinema Paradiso* (Italy), *Kolya* (Czech Republic), *Butterfly Tongue* (Spain). However, the 'cute' children of these films have very little in common with the observant, increasingly terrified Osama who, unlike them, speaks little. In reality the frightened Osama is brutally forced into adulthood and there is little sense of hope for her at the end of the film.

Seen alone, *Osama* offers a single, humane but ultimately tragic view of Afghanistan. If seen alongside the other two titles *Kandahar* and *At Five in the Afternoon*<sup>2</sup>, we get a richer understanding and even a sense of optimism with the latter title. These three films do share a distinctive style, they are popular in Europe yet are not often seen in Afghanistan itself. It will be interesting to see what kind of films are made and what stories Afghan filmmakers will want to tell in their new democracy.

<sup>2</sup> See *Director Section*

