

Cultural Daily

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Engi Wassef: Killer Culture

Engi Wassef · Friday, November 12th, 2010

When we read about Afghan women who burn themselves, as the [New York Times](#) reported this week, many hearts were moved. I think anyone, woman or man, Middle Eastern or not, is deeply disturbed by those women's stories. That initial reaction is just the human me. Then there's the reaction of the Middle Eastern, woman me, who thinks how close I was to being born one of those women. In terms of geography, genetics and time the incidences of our births are very closely related. Horrifyingly close. Why, then, am I watching their story on my laptop from the shelter of my lovely home, rather than suffering as one of them? Many would argue it's economics, as Dr. Arif Jalali, the senior surgeon in the Herat burn hospital, said in the Times article.

My answer would be different.

My answer is culture.

Having made a documentary, *Marina of the Zabbaleen*, in the Muqattam garbage village in Egypt, where people face the same extreme level of economic hardship as the Afghan women, and having seen how differently women are treated in the Zabbaleen village (better), I can say it's not money, it's culture. The level of terrifying oppression that women face in Afghanistan, which has been a part of their culture for decades, is no longer tied to who is in power politically. The Taliban have fallen, but the oppression stands.

So what does it mean when a year after the fall of the Taliban, an Afghani filmmaker named Siddiq Barmak makes a brilliant film called *Osama*, about the oppression of women and the cultural practice of underage marriage?

It means that culture can only be reformed by culture. Only through an engine as strong as the one that created the problem, can the problem be solved. We've witnessed this with female circumcision in the Middle East. Despite being outlawed in some countries, it continues to be performed because it is ingrained in the culture. It won't be until a neighbor or a friend says, "Hey, you can't do that, it's wrong," that people will stop.

That's where artists come in. Artists are in the unique position of being able to bypass politics, economics, and religion with a direct avenue to people's hearts and minds. Their work shapes society in a way that may not be fast, and may not be direct, but it is strong and deep. The less people are exposed to new cultural and artistic voices from their region and the rest of the world, the less they will change. So while I do believe it's very important for Afghanistan to receive economic aid for basics like food and medicine, I believe these tools for survival can only bring

about real change if they are accompanied by a cultural revival. Most of the women interviewed in the New York Times piece admitted it was some form of “shame” which led to their suicide attempts—shame arising from some trespass against cultural norms.

It was not hunger or a weapon of war that ended their lives. It was culture.

Guest columnist Engi Wassef was born in Cairo, Egypt and moved to New York City when she was seven years old. She wrote and directed Marina of the Zabbaleen, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2008. Her current script, The Beautiful Game, was developed at the Sundance/Rawi Lab in Jordan, and tells a Middle Eastern story set in London.

Photo by Tom Toro

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