


Book Review: 'Television and the Afghan culture wars' by Wazhmah Osman

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Television and the Afghan culture wars: brought to you by foreigners, warlords, and activists was written by Wazhmah Osman, an Afghan-born filmmaker and professor of media and communications at Temple University.

With the recent withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Taliban, Western media audiences are left wondering what the invasion was for. Osman does not answer this but, instead, offers a much more important reminder for those who forget: Afghanistan was already a country full of people, culture, history and activity before the war, and will continue to be so after. She frames it as a discussion of telecommunications and visual culture in the region and, ultimately, a cultural history that considers the role of empires. What does media look like in a place where Nielsen ratings do not apply? How do we know what sells, what is popular, and who is watching what, when? Finally, who benefits from particularly popular stories and narratives, especially when every major global power has a stake in the outcome, for a variety of political and economic reasons?

Osman considers two approaches to cultural studies in the region taking into account the roles of colonialism and empire, and international development, particularly in media contexts. She shares the fascinating history and narratives of the many different television networks, popular television shows, and the experience of television as a source of information and entertainment for Afghans across this diverse and cosmopolitan landscape. Due to massive international investment in the medium, Afghanistan punches above its weight when it comes to stations and networks for a country of its size. Chapter Two, 'Imperialism, globalization, and development', places her work in its theoretical context. With an eye towards Herbert Schiller's work on American influence on international culture and John Tomlinson's ground-shaking *Cultural imperialism: a critical introduction*, Osman's work sits comfortably on the

shoulders of media researchers. She takes her research a step further than Tomlinson, however, using the work of Arjun Appadurai to show that cultural exchange goes in many directions, and that the top-down image of cultural imperialism fails to show the whole picture. Then, drawing on Achille Mbembe's work on the politics of death and killing, Osman explores the modern imperialism plaguing Afghanistan. She also takes a sceptical look at development as a positive alternative to imperialism, showing the ways that the top-down control of funds leads to extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth (both within Afghan communities and between Afghan and non-Afghan personnel), and perpetuates hierarchies of power in gender, ethnicity and nationality. Ultimately, Osman points out that the impact of cultural imperialism and international development are both problematic, but Afghans are themselves actors who can and do choose to use these investments in a way that works for them. The power dynamic might be problematic, as it perpetuates imperialism and hierarchies, Osman insists, but nonetheless some problematic things can still be useful.

The author relies on more than one hundred interviews and years of fieldwork at various stations around the country, and provides her own empirical experience as someone who grew up watching television at her grandparents' house in the area. Her perspective is clear and extremely important. Osman unmistakably positions herself in the text, explaining her research and recruitment process, which relied on her knowledge of the actors involved and the use of her prior connections, both family and family friends. She explains these connections both as context for non-Afghans, who need to understand the role of social obligations in the area, but also to illustrate how some of her personal links to a particular writer or tribal affiliation might matter in one situation, but that other links are better options in another. In introducing herself to interviewees as the niece of a well-known writer or the cousin of a particular scholar, she offers her relevant social links, so they might determine how they are connected to each other and how she can be trusted. In using these connections, Osman does what no non-Afghan researcher could, and offers a truly excellent overview of both the Afghan media landscape, and the map of ethnic, regional, family and tribal alliances that one must understand in order to navigate it. She also later shows how these alliances and connections can be understood as obligations among individuals, and how this is often used to explain rights and freedoms.

Over the course of seven chapters, Osman reminds us that Afghans are not a mere blank canvas onto whom outsiders from the British Empire, the Soviet Union, the United States, Iran, India and elsewhere can project their personal projects and interests. Consumers play a role here too. Osman's work, more than anything, emphasises the agency of the Afghan people in their choices of media consumption. By linking modern, cosmopolitan Afghanistan, with its many different options for soap operas and media sponsors, with the Afghanistan of cultural exchanges and melding that has been there for centuries, she shows that the modern era is not an aberration or an exception. Afghanistan is not now, and has never been, an isolated space. Whether it is the diaspora of undergraduate and graduate students in the 1970s, or the

large population of former refugees who spent years in Pakistan speaking Urdu and are now able to watch Indian soap operas without subtitles or dubbing, the connections Afghanistan and Afghans have with other lands is a running theme throughout the book. Rather than a cultural and social blank canvas onto which the desires of other states can be imposed, Afghan media consumption reflects the interests and abilities of an audience and the major economic actors in the region, who already have extensive knowledge of the outside world.

In addition to her thorough destruction of the “backwater” stereotype, Osman, using television as a framework, dives into other important issues. In Chapter Five, ‘Reaching vulnerable and dangerous populations’, this includes the dynamics between different ethnic and tribal groups and outside actors, as well as a very good history of women’s education and “namoos” killings (often mistranslated as honour). Through a combination of illustrations from call-in shows and on-air interviews, as well as references to additional literature, Osman carefully explores human rights as understood in various parts of Afghanistan: something owed by someone to someone, based on networks and relationships. Rather than simply suggesting that this is a way Afghans discuss the issue, she shows how these discussions play out in talk shows, for example, *Roshani*, a programme on Saba TV, as well as a variety of call-in and reality TV shows that explore the obligations of family members to each other, and the careful employment of public shaming for those who fail to live up to those obligations or who violate the trust placed in them.

Osman also sheds a nuanced light on the role of women in media in Afghanistan, both as characters and images, and as creators. Women’s stories in dramas and reality shows are often profitable for networks and stations seeking external funding, but the well-being of the women involved is generally ignored, especially after the show ends and money no longer flows in because of them. Chapter Six, ‘Reception and audiences: the demands and desires of Afghan people’, expands on the role of women and takes it further, showing the interests of all audiences. Foreign dramas offer a fascinating talking point in Afghanistan. Osman explicitly explores the space of Indian soap opera villains as liberatory icons for Afghan women, as well as the artistic creations of Afghan women in low-budget films and local women-only theatres. With the spotlight comes danger. While the deaths of women in the public eye are often glossed over, some producers and networks have managed to thread a careful needle. One popular talk show, *The Mask*, fully masks the women who come to speak on domestic matters – where the personal is political – providing them with anonymity and, thus, security, while allowing the spotlight to fall on the issues they raise. While they continue to be constrained by internal and external actors (e.g. men hired to work on “women’s issues”, who somehow end up being paid considerably more) or threats of violence, Osman positions Afghan women in the public eye just as other feminist cultural scholars have done, with the note that ‘the stakes are much higher there’ (Osman, 2020, p. 156). Remembering Leila Ahmed’s writing on colonial forms of feminism, Osman shows us the ways that women in Afghanistan are active agents with their own experiences and

opinions, finding ways to tell their own stories.

Osman uses television as a window into the human experience of daily life in Afghanistan for everyone, showing that entertainment without explicit educational or informational messaging is a valid, if not vital, thing. While foreign investors might want human rights discussions in slow-paced, Afghan-produced dramas, Indian and Turkish soap operas show alternate ways to live. They do not necessarily provide what development experts would like but they offer stories that entire communities want to follow. When one lives in a contested place and struggles for access to education and economic stability, entertainment can offer a window into another world.

Television and the Afghan culture wars is an excellent book for scholars interested in Afghanistan, the media and the role of entertainment in society, as well as gender in the media and the continuing relevance of discussions on imperialism, colonialism and development. Plenty of facts on the ground have changed since Osman's fieldwork in 2008–2014, which laid the foundations for this book, and will doubtless continue to do so over the next weeks, months and years. The major themes, however, are likely still relevant and will be for some time to come. While other authors might have written in more depth on the political history of the region or have more to say about military and strategic implications, Osman has crafted a readable analysis of the media in Afghanistan during that time period as only she could.

Osman, W. (2020) *Television and the Afghan culture wars: brought to you by foreigners, warlords, and activists*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press (The Geopolitics of Information).

