

The *Breadwinner*, or, The Cinema as Secular Hegemony

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On November 17th, 2017, about one month after the 16th anniversary of America's invasion of Afghanistan, Nora Twomey's filmic adaptation of the children's novel *The Breadwinner* was released in the US to critical acclaim. Some of the acclaim has been well deserved, as *The Breadwinner* proves to be a beautifully animated film with a simple but touching storyline and cast of lovable characters. However, the aesthetic qualities of the film are marred by its uncritically secular investments, most vivid in the film's orientalist portrayal of Afghanistan, lack of cultural and historical accuracy, and indirect support of imperialist interventions. In this work, I contend that in its ineffective attempt to reveal the struggle of Afghan women, *The Breadwinner* dangerously simplifies contemporary historical and cultural formations in Afghanistan to suit (and reproduce) an audience with liberal sensibilities.



The Breadwinner follows the story of a young Afghan girl named Parwana (Saara Chaudry). Parwana lives in the slums of Kabul with her father, mother and two siblings

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during the decline of the Taliban Regime in 2001. After her father is wrongfully imprisoned by the Taliban, she is forced to dress as a boy in order to work and provide for her family. As the narrative progresses, Parwana attempts to make contact with her father who is jailed at the infamous Pul-e-Charkhi prison. Desperately in need of a male relative able to provide for the family, Parwana's mother decides to marry off her older daughter to distant family members in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif. A male relative arrives to pick up Parwana's sister and mother at the end of the film, at the same time as the onset of the US invasion. It is in this moment of chaos and the relentless bombing of Kabul that Parwana successfully enlists the help of Razaq, an Afghan man she befriended, in breaking out her father. Miles away, her mother decides that she does not want to leave for Mazar-e-Sharif without Parwana and forces her male relative to let her and her family out of his car. The film's ending is left ambiguous as Parwana and her father attempt to reunite with the rest of their family.



The Breadwinner presents a compelling narrative and features an intelligent and courageous female protagonist. The film's plot is multilayered and rich, and characters seamlessly tell stories within stories. The characters, while simple and flat, are also lovable; Parwana's struggle leaves the viewer rooting for her against all odds, and her father Nurullah is a picture of pure care and dedication, at least by a liberal bourgeois standard. Whereas the original novel by Deborah Ellis is mediocre at best—the storyline cliché, the characters one-dimensional—the film is masterfully animated and visually enticing. More importantly, the narrative suits the film-form. However, when one begins to look more deeply at specific elements of the film, *The Breadwinner's* attractive façade begins to fall apart.

The film's inattention to empirical detail is most vivid in its stories-within-the-story plot line. Consider the manner in which Parwana's father tells her the "history" of Afghanistan. He adequately summarizes the ancient history of Afghanistan, referencing the Silk Road, Cyrus the Great and Genghis Khan, but as he moves into the contemporary realities of the region his descriptions become muddled and misleading. The father barely mentions the Afghan civil war, let alone its role in the domination of Afghan women. He summarizes it in one sentence: "First came a coup d'état, then an invasion and then a civil war." There is no mention of how the US funded and armed several groups that took part in this civil war, or how it cost the lives of thousands of Afghan civilians. In the essay "Feminism, Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency" anthropologists Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind discuss the historical amnesia of American civil society organizations regarding the US's role in the civil war. They assert that "the narrow focus on Taliban rule by the Feminist Majority and other groups, and their silence on the channeling of US aid to the most brutal and violent Afghan groups (of which the Taliban were only one), must be seen

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as a dangerous simplification of a vastly more complicated problem.”²¹ This simplification relies upon the extrication of the Taliban—the film’s primary antagonist—from any historical context, and the transformation of the movement’s history into a moralistic tale of good and evil. Notably, many civilians in Afghanistan supported the Taliban as a force of stability towards the end of the civil war. From the standpoint of many locals during this time, the Taliban brought order to the war-torn country where the rape and murder of women and children was a common occurrence. By ignoring this history and America’s role in the Afghan Civil War, *The Breadwinner* constructs a generic and fictitious villain.



Notably, unlike the film, the original novel actually engages with some Afghan history and folklore. For instance, in one chapter of the book, Parwana’s father tells his daughter of the bravery of the female Afghan freedom fighter Malalai of Maiwand during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880). The film omits this well-known and beloved Afghan story, and instead has Parwana narrate the tale of the “Elephant King,” a story with no basis in Afghan mythology or history. The overly simplified “Elephant King” narrative

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tells the story of a prince who attempts to stop the evil reign of the angry elephant king. At the end of the story the prince does not lose hope and is able to bring light and peace to the dark elephant king. This simplistic analogy represents post-civil war history in Afghanistan as a battle between the people of Afghanistan (“innocent civilians”) and external agitators, i.e. the Taliban.

The film is Islamophobic from the beginning: Islam and the shari‘a are repeatedly represented as external evils that have consumed the streets of Kabul. When Parwana’s father explains the history of Afghanistan, for example, Islam is only mentioned in relation to repression and the arrival of the Taliban. In one scene, the bars of a jail cell slowly transform into the netting of a burqa, and a voice yells, “If a woman shows herself, she will be cursed by the Islamic Sharia.” In another scene, Idrees—the primary antagonist of the film—proclaims that he has “joined the Taliban and now [fights] the enemies of Islam.” It is only in a scene featuring Parwana, her sister and her mother peacefully praying in the privacy of their home that Islam is not represented as a threat. Whenever Islam appears in the film’s public sphere, it is depicted as restraining and nefarious. In short, *The Breadwinner* tells us: Islam is only tolerable when subjected to the political doctrine of secularism’s divide between public and private. The film also propagates orientalist tropes about the burqa critiqued ad nauseam by an endless number of scholars, activists, and journalists since the early 2000s. Most notably, it elides the fact that Islam and veiling as a form of virtue-ethics have been part of the quotidian life of Afghans for centuries prior to the arrival of the Taliban.ⁱⁱ One could even argue that the burqa has pre-Islamic roots in Pakhtun cultural history.ⁱⁱⁱ



The Breadwinner promotes a brand of feminism which appears concerned about the conditions of women in Afghanistan, but ultimately reinforces orientalist narratives about the hyper-victimization of Muslim women, and mobilizes them in the service of war-making. This is partially carried out by distorting basic empirical realities in Afghanistan. As Mahmood and Hirschkind remind us:

[T]he Taliban decree to ban girls and women from schools affected only a tiny minority of urban dwellers since the majority of the population reside in the rural areas where there are few schools... Likewise, rarely was it mentioned that the Taliban policy of disarming the population, and strict surveillance of all major areas under their control had made it possible for the first time in year for women to move outside their homes without fear of being raped (of course, being beaten for a variety of moral transgressions remained a distinct possibility).^{iv}

This failure to understand and illustrate the actual socio-cultural situation of a majority of Afghan women and America's historical relationship with the country exemplifies how *The Breadwinner* strategically paints an incomplete picture of Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most reprehensible aspect of *The Breadwinner's* plot is the deus ex machina role the US military is given in the film's conclusion. In the last segment of *The*

Breadwinner, just as Parwana has lost all hope in freeing her father, the military begins its invasion of Kabul. It is only through the chaos of bombs dropping from US fighter jets that Parwana is able to rescue her father from prison. Not a single civilian death is shown in this scene. In reality, conservative estimates report that 3,000+ Afghan civilians were killed in Operation Enduring Freedom alone, yet all the film shows is how the operation helped save one Afghan father.^v The original novel, written before Operation Enduring Freedom commenced, had a radically different ending. Is it simply a coincidence that this conclusion was tacked on to the film's narrative mere months after Trump renewed America's intention to "fight to win" the war in Afghanistan?

The film's erasures and ideological investments come as no surprise, given Angelina Jolie's executive role in the film's production. In August 2017, the celebrity mogul became infamous for racist techniques she employed while casting Cambodian orphans for her film *First They Killed My Father*.^{vi} She also came under criticism for her 2014 film *Unbroken*, which uncritically glorifies US soldiers' role in Japan during WWII. While admittedly there were some Afghans involved in the production of *The Breadwinner*, they held little influence. Afghans mainly contributed to surface elements of the film meant to crystallize a more 'authentic' image of Afghanistan's Otherness. For example, the Nahid Women Choir of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music were involved in the musical score, but they only served in an advisory role, as the Danna Brothers were identified as the main composers of the film.

The global War on Terror and its specific iteration in Afghanistan—as a site and a society—have subjected its population both at the level of physical and cultural genocide. As drones and fighter jets mutilate and massacre the bodies of Afghan men, women and

children, films like *The Breadwinner* broadly evacuate the culture and history of Afghans, and specifically obfuscate the country's multidimensional and virtuous traditions of Islam.

Perhaps what is needed is not better historical and cultural representation, but also an engaged critique of the secular, and a cinematic deconstruction of the US war machine and its overseas contingency operations.

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Endnotes

ⁱSaba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind, "Feminism, the Taliban and the Politics of Counterinsurgency" in *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2002): 345.

ⁱⁱ Alan Taylor, "Afghanistan in the 1950s and 60s" in *The Atlantic*, 2 July, 2013. Accessed 3 March, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/07/afghanistan-in-the-1950s-and-60s/100544/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sahar Amer, *What Is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 61.

^{iv} Mahmood and Hirschkind, "Feminism, the Taliban and the Politics of Counterinsurgency," 345-346.

^v “Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan, 2001-2012: A Guide” in *The Nation*, 19 September, 2013. Accessed 4 March, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/civilian-casualties-afghanistan-2001-2012-guide/>.

^{vi} Evgenia Peretz, “Angelina Jolie Solo” in *Vanity Fair*, 26 July, 2017. Accessed 5 March, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/07/angelina-jolie-cover-story>.