

Intimacies from an Awful War. “For Sama” by Waad Al-Kateab and Edward Watts

A Film Review

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If you think you’ve seen enough of conflict, especially the war in Syria, you haven’t. From love of nation and loathing of military rule, from inchoate hope of redemption and improbable determination, indebted to lost friends and seeded in the birth of your child, comes an intimate demonstration of how war happens to you and how it tests humanity.

In the case of Syria, even as news of chaos and battles recede, it takes an exceptional story to return us outsiders to that battlefield. One headstrong woman’s remarkable work has actually managed this. So out of Syria, rising from the smashed pearl of the nation—beloved, stately, diligent Aleppo—comes the film “For Sama”.

“For Sama” is arguably a belated story, although even now when filmmaker and family are settled abroad, it feels very, very present. It’s a young mother’s diary to her baby girl whose innocent, sometimes sleepy, sometimes searching, wondering eyes reappear intermittently, even confidently. From a scratchy sonogram in her mother’s womb Sama emerges a swaddled newborn, then a toddler crawling over bedclothes to grope the lens of her mother’s camera, now bound tightly against her father’s chest stealing across a frontline to reenter their besieged home, then entertained by staff medics as they huddle together in a basement bomb shelter, later seated on a hospital attendant’s lap while nearby her father’s colleagues wrap the not-yet-cold body of a boy for delivery into the arms of a mother calling to his soul as she determinedly carries him off.

News headlines stopped reporting Syria’s death toll; only an occasional photo revisits the country’s collapsed neighborhoods. Experts’ pretense at disentangling the web of warring factions—Christian-this and Shi’ia-that, Hizbollah or Iranian, Kurd or Arab or Turkmen militants—are silent. Pronouncements of areas liberated or occupied, emptied or reclaimed seem as immaterial as US-sponsored or Russia-convened talks with opposition leaders.

The Free Syrian Army, an early American-backed operation now appears subsumed into ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’, an assemblage of America-supplied (probably U.S.-directed too) rebel groups removed to a protected territory—not unlike what was created in Iraq in 1991—dominated by Kurdish Syrians. (Elements of Israel and Iran are doubtless lurking in the shadow of U.S. and Russian lines.)

Millions of citizens who fled haven’t returned. They may never. Destroyed cities, fields, marketplaces and factories lie vacant. While government-secured areas allow some stability, a return to normal life is impossible to imagine. Opportunities for corruption are

greater than ever. How comforting is renewed agricultural production if prices are beyond a household's reach? Families whose young people fled, died, are imprisoned, incapacitated or remain missing move in a kind of stupor, unable to rebuild dwellings or restart their studies or their businesses.

As for the infamous, vilified jihadist-ISIS fighters:— have they been corralled and massacred, transferred to Turkey to regroup, ferried to camps for processing as refugees to Canada or rearmed to bolster rebel ranks in the secured Kurdish territory?

Image on the right: Filmmaker Al-Kateab



Five years earlier, after Waad Al-Kateab's studies at Aleppo University were interrupted by the eruption of protests on campuses there as across the nation, she and countless others joined the so-called Arab Spring. Some areas of opposition were swiftly and ruthlessly subdued. Neighborhoods that resist are viewed as rebel strongholds and thus face the full force of government shelling and siege. Al-Kateab metamorphoses into a citizen journalist, allying herself with others who refuse to leave and, camera in hand, joins a medical team of young doctors rushing to bombed sites to clear debris and attend the wounded.

Emboldened by the deaths of their comrades and by massacres they witness, this medical crew resolves to remain in a makeshift hospital even as the neighborhood is subjected to a vise-like siege—perhaps targeted because of the arrival of jihadist fighters there. Wisely, Waad (and a British Channel 4 News team who helped compose this film) doesn't address internal political distinctions. For her, government forces and Russian jets are the enemy: "Whatever jihadis do, it's nothing compared to the brutality of the regime", she declares

Al-Kateab keeps her camera rolling as she fearlessly and resolutely moves into the carnage, never so unhinged that she neglects tender moments of passion and pathos among medical staff, neighbors and wounded arriving at the clinic. They are a community exhibiting all that life offers: a fresh snowfall in the garden; a crushed tree tenderly replanted; her sandbagged bedroom; a rush (camera-in-hand) to the shelter; a room of lifeless bodies near medics attending those still breathing; a man's gift to his wife of a rare fresh fruit; dust-stained faces of two lads caressing and kissing the head of their newly dead brother wrapped in his shroud in the clinic corridor; a young woman filming how she'll announce her new found pregnancy to her husband.



Sama and medical staff

I resist a temptation to narrate more intimacies from “For Sama”. Simply, this is a rare document, one I can only summarize not as heroic but as the intimacy of war. These words may seem incompatible; they’re not really, not as felt and recorded by Ms. Al-Kateab, co-edited by fellow filmmaker Edward Watts, and narrated to baby Sama by filmmaker-mother.

While war creates hatred and despair and loss, perhaps because at the same time life becomes more precious and ethereal, war compels this kind of chronicle. Myself, while I’ve witnessed war firsthand and recorded it for others, nothing I’ve written, seen on screen or read approaches the intimacy and impact of Al-Kateab’s diary to her daughter.

It would be pointless to decipher the role of supplementary editors and foreign producers or to speculate on when the narration was written, and from where all the elements were drawn. One feels proud of this woman for her compassionate eye, her determination, her steady-hand and her tender questions.

“What would you like to say to your friends who left?” she inquires of a shy nine year-old neighbor.

“May Allah forgive you for leaving me here alone” is his unequivocal reply.

(My personal regret is the absence of equally intimate images and words from the other political side, not because citizens there lack parallel sentiments, but because the atmosphere in which they endure daily life chokes their ability to release them.)

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