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DIRECTOR PROFILE: MAI MASRI

LATIKA PADGAONKAR

There's no one quite like her. A Palestinian woman with a camera, tracking every Middle East conflict for close to thirty years: the various Israeli invasions of Lebanon and the country's protracted civil war, the Intifada, the Palestinian uprising of 2000. But she has done it in her own way. Her concern has been not the war or the rubble, but the human angle, the daily lives, the daily losses, the daily frustrations. Living "*with* war and *inside* it, and on the frontlines and fault-lines, yet focusing on ordinary people in extraordinary situations" as she puts it, Mai Masri has relentlessly chronicled life in refugee camps, the hopes and fears of children and women and the changes she sees around her. She has a gentle, smiling face and great dignity. Her life has been one of resilience and patience. Most of all, she has not lost hope.

I met Mai at the Moqavemat Festival in Tehran, which paid her and her Lebanese director- husband Jean Chamoun, a tribute by screening some of their films. "I come from one country for long under occupation (Palestine), and another (she lives in Beirut) at war with itself. Assassinations, civil strife, uprisings are a way of life for me."

In 1982, Mai Masri, one of the best-known documentary filmmakers in the Middle East (she was born to a Palestinian father and an American mother), was living near the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila in Beirut when the Israel-allied Lebanese Phalangist militia went on a rampage of massacre and rape. "We walked the streets after the carnage," she said. It was eerie. Death was everywhere. Suddenly, I heard sounds of children's laughter. I saw their faces framed by the

holes in the bombed-out walls. And I felt the dead were coming back to life. That is what sealed my fate. I decided to become a filmmaker.”

For Mai, making films is therapeutic. As a young activist, she took part in demonstrations, volunteered in Palestinian refugee camps. But as a filmmaker, the dangers on the ground, she realised, were very real. She has shot her films amidst gunfire, snipers’ bullets, bombings and even gangsters of all description. “But the camera, too, is a weapon. It gives me the strength I wouldn’t normally have.” As a director of documentaries, she keeps alternatives in mind. When she went to her hometown Nablus for the first time, the city was under curfew. “I sneaked in, filmed secretly, and adapted to the (dangerous) circumstances. It was better than any preconceived idea I had for my film,” she said.

The most significant factor for her in her cinematic journey has been the relationship of Palestine with the image. Or, rather, with the reclaiming of the image. Under the Ottomans, the British and later Israel, Palestine was depicted as a “shadow-land”, a land of swamps, a land without people. The Lumiere brothers were the first to offer the world images of Jerusalem in 1896. Always, Palestine was viewed through others’ eyes right until the beginning of the struggle in the 60s. To give back the country its own image after being for so long slanted through the eyes of others was nothing less than a “moral victory”. But it wasn’t easy. “In the early 80s when I began filming, people were as suspicious about the camera as they were of spies and planes. This fear was broken during the first Intifada when they began understanding the power of the image.”

Children of Shatila (1998) begins with explosive images of the 1982 massacre. But Masri soon leaves the material destruction behind to concentrate on the stories of two children who must carry on living, learning, laughing. *33 Days* (2007), filmed during the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon, follows the lives of different people: a children’s theatre director who take shelter with the children in a theatre after their homes are destroyed, an aid-worker who coordinates relief efforts, a journalist with an underground TV station trying to cope with war and her new-born baby. *Beirut Diaries: Truth, Lies and Videos* (2006) is about the resistance of young Lebanese to the sectarian divides in their society which convulsed Lebanon following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. The young discuss the role of the Hizbollah, the Syrian occupation, Israel and their own turmoil. *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* (2001) explores the lives of two teenage girls in refugee camps who live far apart but communicate and become friends despite the barriers separating them. Their initial exchange of emails ends in a dramatic

meeting of several children at a fence on the Lebanon-Israel border. “It was an emotionally charged moment,” said Mai. “They spoke, cried, grabbed fistfuls of earth from the other side.” From the profits the film made, Mai provided scholarships to the children of camps. “Children are a motor of change. They are spontaneous, unaffected and fun to work with creatively. They are the imagination of the future.”

This border meeting of children was one of the most exhilarating moments of her life. “As we filmed this touching human event, my crew was crying behind the camera. We knew we were living history, and our image was a document of that moment.”

But for Mai, a documentary is not simply recording but capturing the poetry behind the image – such as the framed faces of children in Shatila. She takes no liberty with truth, and her sense of injustice may be deeply embedded, but her films carry hope and play on the contrast between life and death, poetry and desolation, reality and imagination. “Each Palestinian has a film in his head which he plays and replays to himself—heard stories and real experiences which he reconstructs.”

Her award-winning documentaries are a search for truth, but they are not *about* war. They dwell on real stories of the young, of survival and laughter and love in the enviroing ugliness. “War,” says Masri, “brings out the best and worst in people.” These films, shown on TV, in halls and at festivals the world over, have moved people to action – and sometimes to miracles! One Japanese musician wanted to send musical instruments to children in the camps. In Spain, a young Israeli couple met Mai after watching *33 Days*. The woman was trembling, but happy she was so upset. In Amsterdam, the same film so moved an Israeli-Dutch producer, she spent the night wandering in the rain but took enough inspiration to make *Arna’s Children* (Danniel, Mer-Khamis, 2004) and launch a human rights festival. And in Italy, a mute child burst into speech on seeing her film.

Fine-grained depictions of fragments of life in Palestine and Lebanon, these documentaries embody—in the midst of ruins—not just the strength of the spirit but the centrality of creative expression. What Mai sees around her today is a strong network and participation of women, an optimism in the new generation and the shedding of fear.

Acknowledgment

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About the Author: Latika Padgaonkar has taught at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and has worked as a foreign correspondent for the Indian news daily *The Telegraph*. She was the executive editor of *Cinemaya*, The Asian Film Quarterly and the Director of the Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema. A member of the Editorial Board of *Wide Screen*, she writes on cinema and literature for various newspapers, journals and websites, and is a regular at film festival juries as a member of the NETPAC team. She has translated two books and edited four, including two on Asian cinema and one on Kenji Mizoguchi.

Contact: latikapad@yahoo.com
