

INTERVIEW: HANA MAKHMALBAF

KISHORE BUDHA

The then 18-year-old Iranian director Hana Makhmalbaf, whose film *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* won the The Special Jury Prize in the Competitive Section of the 55th San Sebastian International Film Festival, Spain, 2007, was interviewed just prior to her winning the prize. She talks about *Buddha* and the experience of making a film in Afghanistan and being a Makhmalbaf.



Figure 1 Hana on location (Pic. Courtesy Makhmalbaf Film House)

Kishore Budha (KB): Where does the film take place?

Hana Makhmalbaf (HM): Most of the film is shot under the remains of Buddha statues, which were destroyed by Taliban in 2001, in Bamian of Afghanistan.

KB: How did you select your cast?

HM: I visited many schools in Bamian and its suburbs for my actors. I saw thousands of children and auditioned hundreds until I cast the few whom I felt best suited my story.

KB: How did you find directing the children?

HM: Hard but rewarding at the same time. It was hard because they weren't familiar with cinema. A film has never been shot in their city before. They have never even had a local TV station so they could get used to seeing their own image in a box. It was rewarding to see all those different children with so much energy and beautiful innocent faces. In directing them I tried to take a different approach than usual. I tried to make it seem like a game to them. And you can see this playful theme in some parts of the actual film. If there is a meaning to the film, it can be found behind these kids' games.

KB: When you watch the film now, do you feel that you have said what you intended to by making it?

HM: By showing today's picture of Afghanistan, I tried to depict the effects of the recent years' violence on the country. So that the adults could see how their behaviour affects the younger generation. Children are the future adults. If they get used to violence, the future of the world will be in great danger. A teenage boy in the film says: "when I grow up I will kill you". Because as a child he has been through lots of violence so it has become part of his usual life. I think that children's real schools are observing and copying their parents' behaviour or other adults around them. For instance, a few years ago in their city, Bamian, one of the harshest massacre of all times happened, in which many men and boys were beheaded in front of their wives' and mothers' eyes. The irony is that; even those who had come to rescue Afghanistan, they first destroyed it and then didn't find the time to rebuild it, until the next so called rescue group came and went through the same destruction and violence again and again and again. First, it was the Russian communists, then the Taliban showed up, and now the Americans. One was communist, the other Muslim and the last one either atheist or Christian. But they all had one thing common, and that was "Violence". And this violence has been injected over and over from three different groups into the culture of the people in this country so strongly that you can see it in their children's play. The children in this country, unlike the American children who learn violence through Hollywood action films, have learnt it by witnessing some of the harshest violence happening to their relatives in front of their eyes. They have witnessed their fathers being beheaded in their gardens in front of their eyes.

KB: The title of the film is *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* but in reality weren't the Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban?

HM: Yes, you can say that they were. You can also see this at the beginning and the end of the film. But I got this title from a metaphorical quote from my father Mohsen Makhmalbaf which meant that even a statute can be ashamed of witnessing all this violence and harshness to innocent people and therefore, collapse. Not just because of the meaning behind the sentence but also most of the story takes place in front of the empty space of Buddha's statute so I felt the title serves the film right in both ways.

KB: Did you have the complete story in mind before shooting or did it unfold as you shot the film?

HM: At the beginning there was quite a poetic storyline. It was about a one-day journey of a six year old girl, who gets encouraged or rather, instigated by the boy next door to go to school. Since she doesn't have a notebook she sells their chicken's eggs to buy the basic stationery, but her earning is not enough to cover for the pencil



Figure 2 Still from Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame (Pic courtesy Makhmalbaf Film House)

so she takes her mother's lipstick instead to use as pencil. Unaware of the steps one needs to take to be enrolled in school, she goes to every school on her way but she gets rejected. When the first part of shooting in spring was over, during the editing I felt that the characters in the film were somehow incomplete. So I went back to my mother "the scriptwriter" and we started to work again on the plot and eventually, the second part of shooting and editing started. In fact, the one-day story that we see in the film was shot in three different seasons; spring, summer and autumn.

KB: How did the characters in the film develop?

HM: They were partly developed during the writing of the script and partly while shooting the film. As I started the shooting I saw and heard new things around the subject and also paid close attention to the children playing around us, and decided to bring some of those games and new information in my story. For example, I met a guy who was a communist during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and then he had become a Mullah during the Taliban and now he was working with the Americans. He has always been in close contact with the people in power during the past two decades. This man is being played by a boy in the film who always kills people but each time with a different name, representing different groups. Another example would be the boy who no matter what happens to him, keeps practicing the alphabet. Even when he is being tortured he still practices the alphabet and it seems that he is never going to learn it. Trying hard but no sign of progress! But beyond his overwhelming experiences there are some profound meanings. Unlike the other man, he has never been in power or close with the people in power but he has been smashed and abused by power. This is not an ordinary experience. This is something

experienced by many nations across the world. He is always being killed, tortured or threatened but never gives up trying; nor does he achieve any success; he has learnt that sometimes in life you need to literally die to be able to carry on. This is not an ordinary experience. The last thing he says to the girl in the film is: “Die so they will leave you alone.” The girl accepts to die in their game so she could get out of that violent vicious circle they are stuck in.



Figure 3 Still from *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* (Pic courtesy Makhmalbaf Film House)

KB: Who is the hero in the film?

HM: No one, not even the girl. Because she does not achieve her goal at the end. She even accepts to die temporarily, or collapses like the Buddha statue, when she is asked to by the boys towards the end of the film. She has no other choice. She goes a long way to different schools to learn a humorous anecdote. But no one teaches her the short story she is looking for. But she learns other things during her journey in real life. Not only are there no heroes in this film for me, but also describing and trying to simplify the characters in the film, who represent people in real life, is quite difficult for me. Each character represents different layers of life in the film. It also depends on the way I am going to look at this film. For example, look at the girls and the boys next to each other. When the boys are seriously playing their fathers in the wars, the girls are also lost in performing as their mothers; putting make up on their faces. This all happens in a country where guns can be made out of tiny sticks, schools can be invaded by just a lipstick or a city can be bombarded in your imagination with a simple toy like a kite, as in the film.

KB: Tell us about your last two films and your experience in cinema up to now?

HM: My second experience was *Joy of Madness*, which was a behind the scene documentary of the film *At Five in the Afternoon*, shot by digital camera with no team but myself. At first, the idea was to shoot the problems Samira, my sister was facing

while shooting her film in Afghanistan but eventually the final film turned out to be about the situation of women in Kabul after the American invasion. My first film, *The Day My Aunt Was Ill*, was a short film made in our home with a simple handycam when I was eight. There is a nine-year gap between my first short film and my first feature film *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame*. During those nine years I was constantly active in some other professional films as stills photographer, assistant director, etc.

KB: Why in Afghanistan and not in Iran?

HM: Any story that may interest me and anywhere it may be possible to obtain permission for making I will make my films. I have many stories that take place in Iran and hopefully one day when I have the permission I will make them. Now is not an easy time.

KB: How do you anticipate the future of Afghanistan?

HM: The Taliban are gone but their impact still remains on this culture. Continuous wars in Afghanistan have destroyed the culture more than the country. The violence that has raided the souls of the children through wars in this country may erupt as new complex in the future. Ahmad Shah Massoud used to say: "A good politician is not one who analyses the future well. He is one who well understands today." When I am in Afghanistan I feel that the world does not even comprehend Afghanistan's present day problems. How does it suppose to build its future?!

KB: Why does the young Hana make films? Does she want to be a filmmaker like the rest of her family members or does she have a word of her own to say?

HM: As an 18 year old girl living in Iran under current conditions and having to bear with ideological, political and social pressures I have a lot to say. But I write most of them in the form of short stories for myself. If writing does not reduce any pain from those who sympathise with me, at least it reduces my own psychological pressures. My word in this film despite not being made in Iran is about common sufferings that exist both in Iran and Afghanistan.

KB: Both societies have cultural/political problems alike. When did you become interested in cinema?

HM: Since childhood when I was 8 years old. At first I wanted to become a painter and made friends with a great Iranian woman painter. When I saw her loneliness in long days of painting a picture, I told myself that I liked painting but not the loneliness that came with it. Cinema was more dynamic. When my father was working, waves of different energies emerged around his films that enchanted me as well. I used to get excited over the words: sound, camera, action. There was a strange power in these three words. That's why I quit elementary school after second grade at age eight. That was only a few months after my sister Samira had quit middle school. I studied in my father's classes along with her and attended my family film projects as photographer, continuity, assistant director and made behind-the-scene documentary films.

KB: How did your father consent to your quitting school?

HM: Since my father did not believe in the schooling system in Iran that taught us ideologies rather than science he said to me: “If you can get yourself prepared for more studies, welcome to our school.” And my work became harder since that moment because in my father’s school I learned cinema and outside I had to study the subjects that my peers were studying in schools.

KB: What kind of problems did this way of studying bring forth?

HM: Before anything, the jealousy of my peers. When they saw that I read books in a month that took them one year to read and took the tests and pursued my interest instead, they became jealous of me. Once after a few years I missed conventional school so I returned to school for two weeks but the teachers’ menacing treatment of students, the classical method of education and the political-ideological overtone of all subjects disappointed me again. One day before the mirror I felt like an old woman and ran away from school again.

KB: Do you think cinema is a tough job or an easy one?

HM: As I moved forward the difficulty of this job became more evident. In childhood I used to hear the word censorship but today I see it. This last film script stayed in the ministry of culture for months in Iran. But it was never issued a permit. Today, cinema has practically exiled us. My father officially lives like gypsies in order to get away from censorship. My last film was made in Afghanistan, edited in Tajikistan and laboratory work was done in Germany.

KB: How do you perceive Samira? How different is she from you?

HM: I see her on the outside and myself on the inside. I can not compare my inners with her outers. But she is a scout. Not only for me but for many of her peers. And not just in Iran either. She has given the young generation and especially women self-confidence. On one hand she is crazy and makes her films with her mania. She believes with reason you can only eat pizza. And that is why she believes the ex-president of Iran failed because he was not mad enough. Samira believes that the mad drive the history forward and the wise control it. I am not as mad as she is but I was the first to make films when I was nine-years-old. My film was shown in the Locarno Festival. Samira took on after I did. These comparisons do not resolve anything. Perhaps both of us one day will quit cinema and live like others. I have gradually reached the conclusion that a filmmaker is not someone who knows how to make films, rather one who does not know how to live like others.

The interview and pictures were organised thanks to Makhmalbaf Film House

About Interviewer: Dr Kishore Budha is one of the editors of *Wide Screen*. He has published a chapter on genre and nationalism in Hindi films in the book *Filming the Line of Control* (Routledge). His forthcoming book includes *Historical Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (Scarecrow Press).