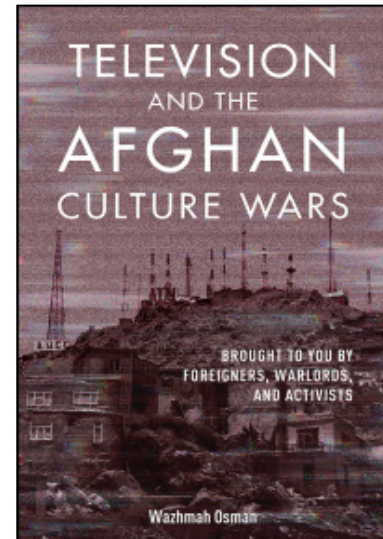


Wazhmah Osman, **Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists**, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020, 272 pp., \$94.02 (hardcover), \$19.95 (e-book).

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In ***Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists***, author Wazhmah Osman x-rays the dynamics of Afghanistan culture, Western civilization, and the effect of decades-long war and conflict that is represented in television programming and business. By considering the underestimated power of media audiences and everyday Afghans, the author challenges stereotypical narratives about Afghan culture, and presents the society as diverse instead of monolithic, and the media landscape as more pluralistic. Osman highlights the fundamental reformative role of the media in Afghan society in challenging repressive cultures, especially as it relates to gender roles, while encouraging an engaging and economically sustained public sphere, supported by the people. In addition, the topic of the empowerment of women figures prominently throughout the book.



Television is expressed as a widely accessible medium to Afghans; hence it is considered in this work. The author reviews content from local and transnational television production and the reception of the media in Afghanistan. The book attempts to answer questions about televisual representations of culturally charged issues, such as women’s rights, gender, sexuality, human rights, religion, etc., and how they are contested and framed by local cultural producers. It also covers the pushback from Afghan institutions—particularly religious and conservative institutions, about the effect of television and the circulation of images of Afghan women, predominantly on television—and the role of television in fueling social debates. Television is described as a necessary tool for the task of Afghanistan nation-building and liberation after decades of unrest and violence.

The book combines data culled from multiple methodologies, including over 100 interviews, and varying types of field work conducted by the author. Osman adopted production and reception studies and content analysis methods to examine the most popular genres in the Afghan television space, while exploring the everyday influence of television, a fast-growing and widely adopted media form in Afghanistan. She conducted ethnographic studies from 2008 to 2014 and used various types of ethnographic observation, participant observation, and interviews about Afghanistan’s televisual content. Osman adopted mostly formally structured interviews conducted in her main language of Dari, and Pashto, two regional official languages. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2009 to 2010 with various individuals, including production staff and TV station owners.

Irrespective of the issues of political regimes, threats and violence, and censorship faced by the media, Afghanistan media producers use their work for activism, as they savor their work's popularity, to challenge local conservative groups and the international community. Osman makes inferences to how opinions and perceptions are shaped because of transnational versus local television content.

The book includes an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. Across each section, the author captures the present and projects the future state of Afghanistan's culture, as well as that of women and the role of the media. Beginning with the introduction, Osman presents herself as an insider, an Afghan who is not only propelled by her research interest, but also by her ties to the society that she explores. Osman's work is not only influenced by her roots but also based on her experiences and depth of knowledge as a journalist, filmmaker, NGO humanitarian volunteer, activist, and academic. She attempts to set the dynamics of gender, race and ethnicity and how they are expressed on television to not only represent the Afghanistan society but to shape their perceptions about themselves and their society. She also explains her methodology and provides a synopsis for each chapter.

In chapter 1, the author engages with the concepts of modernization and foreign influences in Afghanistan, providing a historical trail and the effect of such intrusion on the nation. In chapter 2, the book tackles globalization and cultural imperialism and their effect on social development. The author suggests here, as in chapter 1, that Western and post-9/11 interventions, though structured to benefit the agendas of the sponsors, have also provided developmental benefits for Afghanistan. In chapter 3, the book considers the thriving Afghan television industry through a political, economic, and cultural lens. The chapter also emphasizes the role of national production content in contradicting the claims and distributions of foreign aids, as well as television ownership and its political influence on content. The exploration of television content includes a variety of genres, including news, PSAs, talk shows, reality shows, dramatic serials, and political satires.

Chapters 4 and 5 are related in how they explore television productions about and for minority and vulnerable groups, along with the disenfranchised. Chapter 5 focuses on vulnerable and dangerous populations—e.g., the Pashtuns and ethnic Hazaras. The chapter explores these groups in relation to race, ethnicity, and class and further suggests television as an alternative public sphere through which social abnormalities are discussed and distributed, even to remote areas, using local dialects. Osman discusses these shows as breaking from the norm, to challenge the status quo about what is culturally and socially acceptable in the society. Lastly, chapter 6 focuses on media audiences in Afghanistan, audience needs, reception, and audience ratings. The book suggests diverse audience needs, including a general favoritism and enthusiasm toward Indian and Turkish productions. The chapter also indicates that Afghan media audiences hold journalists in high esteem, expecting television to play a critical political role in bringing justice to international warlords, government officials, and individuals engaged in encouraging gender violence. Most importantly, the chapter highlights the voices of women, loudest in the film industry compared to other media platforms, but making their mark on the media scene to shape narratives about their own representations. Furthermore, the author highlights the need for television to play the dual role of reflection for justice purposes and entertainment of the Afghan people. In other words, the need for justice and entertainment cannot be separated from the medium and the people.

The book concludes by discussing the future of Afghan media and suggests that Afghan media, specifically television, remains strong, and it may remain a dominant medium for a long time. The author reiterates the effect of identity and cultural battles in Afghan society. While television plays an important role and the media receives public support from viewership, there is not enough political protection for media professionals, in terms of providing for their safety and combating censorship.

The book is well organized and effectively laid out. The images carry the reader along, through the author's ethnography and analysis. While the book maintains a more generalized social and cultural approach and mainly centers on the role of television in reforming Afghanistan, the author makes repeated emphasis on gender roles. Granted, gender and ethnicity play a fundamental role in Afghanistan's cultural fabric, and the discussions on women are not fully centered as the main goal of the book, but this element is obvious enough not to miss and raises curiosity about women in Afghanistan culture. In addition, those interested in the concepts of gender and feminism may benefit more from a much more in-depth and critically robust discussion of Zan TV and Banu TV, two stations dedicated to women in Afghanistan. The discussions may have added to the larger narrative on the role of the media, in providing a counter and alternative discourse for women and gender revolutions, especially in highly religious and culturally sensitive regions (see Matar, 2007; Nourai-Simone, 2014).

In conclusion, *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars* will serve media owners and producers, journalists, business entities, academics, and students. It may be a helpful resource for international communication and media classes, globalization and media classes, and for research on media systems in Afghanistan.

References

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