

The Ironic Sense of Syria's War: A Feminist Lens on This Humanitarian Tragedy

Raad Khair Allah (Department of English and Comparative Literary, University of Warwick).

Introduction

The Syrian civil war has been one of the most devastating conflicts of our time, leaving in its wake a trail of destruction, displacement and loss, as well as a breakdown of basic services. It has turned the country into a stage where tragic events and actions are taking place. As the conflict unfolded, it became apparent that women and children were disproportionately affected, facing unique challenges and vulnerabilities amidst the chaos. This critical reflection aims to explore the intersection of feminism and the Syrian war, shedding light on the experiences of women and children and examining the broader implications of this crisis.

The Syrian war, which began in 2011, as a result of political unrest and demands for democratic reforms, quickly escalated into a complex and multifaceted conflict involving multiple factions and international interests. The consequences have been catastrophic, with millions of Syrians forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries or undertaking perilous journeys to Europe. Within this humanitarian crisis, the voices and experiences of women and children have often been overlooked and marginalised.

By adopting a feminist lens, this critical reflection seeks to uncover the distinct impact of the Syrian war on women and children. It delves into the gendered dimensions of the conflict, while examining the transformative framework that has emerged from this war, in which Syrian women have asserted their rights and fought for equality amidst the turmoil. The irony of the Syrian war lies in the contrast between the immense resilience and strength demonstrated by women amidst unimaginable adversity and the persistent marginalisation and erasure of their experiences in narratives of the conflict. This essay aims to challenge these narratives, highlighting the agency and resistance displayed by women and children in their struggle for survival and justice.

By critically reflecting on the feminist perspective of the Syrian war, we can deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics at play, question prevailing power structures, and explore potential avenues for intervention and support. Ultimately, this reflection serves as a call to action, urging us to recognise and address the unique challenges faced by women and children in conflict zones and advocate for their rights, empowerment, and meaningful participation in shaping post-war societies.

As we embark on this critical exploration, it is crucial to approach the subject matter with empathy, sensitivity and a commitment to amplifying the voices of those whose experiences have been silenced and overlooked. Through this lens, we can strive towards a more inclusive and just understanding of the Syrian war and its impact on the Syrian people, fostering a more compassionate and informed response to this ongoing humanitarian tragedy.

Shattered Innocence



Figure 1: Ahmed Akacha, Idlib, Idlib Governorate, Syria, Pexels 2024.

‘It is my doll’. ‘No, it is mine’.

These were the words I once heard from young children when I was walking back home from work. Not only those children’s dreams have been stolen by war, but also their simple rights to live in dignity and play as their peers do in other countries, often with more advanced toys. It was particularly sad when I approached the children and found out that the doll over which they were quarrelling was merely an old plastic doll without any distinctive features. One of these children might have cried for many months to make their poor parents buy it for them, or they might have got it from a skip on road.

I could recognise one girl, who was my neighbour’s daughter. When I asked the little girl what was happening, she bitterly replied with tears, like pearls, in her beautiful eyes: ‘they are trying to steal my doll as they always steal my bags of popcorn that I have to sell’. When I asked her about the popcorn bags, she replied that her mom asked her to quit school and that she needed her to help her make money to feed her younger siblings. Although the girl’s mother is a street food vendor, because she is always

targeted by the police, the family sometimes do not have enough money even to afford one loaf of bread.¹ This is exacerbated by the issue of the disappearance of the girl's father, the breadwinner of the family, who mysteriously disappeared three years ago, and unfortunately no one knows if he is still alive or not. Every day, in anticipation of his return, the girl's mother sets an extra place at the dinner table when she prepares their meal. This is a part of the Syrian children's suffering, born amidst the sounds of bomb and rocket explosions, instead of their fathers' voices. Many Syrian men have been brutally killed, in front of their families or in one of the prisons, or abducted and forced to fight with the armed groups.² As a result, some Syrian children in conflict-affected areas have been forced to work in order to survive.

Engaging in labour at a young age and being exposed to the harsh realities of war may perpetuate a cycle of poverty, limit children's access to education and skills development, and consequently hinder their overall socio-economic advancement as they transition into adulthood. Moreover, it can have a significance emotional and psychological toll on children. This highlights the profound human tragedy and the overall impact of this civil war on the wellbeing of Syrian children, which has created a situation where the events unfolding seem disconnected from reason or meaning. Therefore, children's protection and well-being need to be prioritised by working

¹ During the Syrian conflict, street vendors have faced various challenges and risks, including the potential for being targeted by law enforcement officials. The main reason why street vendors might be targeted by police is related to the issue of informal or unregulated street vending. In many cases, street vending occurs in violation of local regulations or permits, and authorities sometimes crack down on these activities as part of their efforts to maintain control, enforce order, or address safety concerns. Additionally, street vending can be seen as a potential source of revenue for authorities, leading to extortion or bribery demands from law enforcement officials. Furthermore, during times of conflict or unrest, authorities may view street vendors as potential security risks. Vendors operating in crowded areas or near sensitive locations might be seen as potential sources of instability or threats. As a result, they may face increased scrutiny or be targeted as part of security measures.

² During the Syrian war, men have been put in prisons for various reasons, often related to the conflict and its aftermath. They may be imprisoned for their involvement or perceived association with opposition groups, political activism, or expressing dissenting opinions against the government. This imprisonment includes individuals who have participated in protests, joined armed factions, or supported opposition movements. Men may be also detained on suspicion of involvement in armed activities or terrorism-related activities, including individuals associated with extremist organisations or alleged participation in acts of terrorism. Consequently, Syrian authorities may view them as potential threats to national security or stability, leading to their arrest and imprisonment. Additionally, in the midst of the conflict, arbitrary arrests have occurred, where individuals have been detained without clear charges or due process. Men may be caught up in these arbitrary arrests due to their age, location, or association with certain communities or groups. In some cases, they may be subjected to imprisonment as a form of collective punishment or retaliation against their communities or families. This can be a tactic employed by various parties involved in the conflict to exert control or to instill fear. Here, it is also important to note that various armed groups involved in the conflict, who have operated in different regions of the country including what is called the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is a loose coalition of different factions and groups rather than a single organised entity, have also established detention facilities, where they detain individuals for various reasons. These facilities may be used for holding captured combatants from opposing groups, suspected collaborators, or individuals considered a threat to their operations or security.

towards creating safer and more stable environments, where they can thrive and reach their full potential. Ensuring physical safety, access to basic services (such as healthcare, nutrition, clean water and quality education), psychosocial support, child protection systems, family reunification, alternative care, and collaboration and advocacy are all necessary to address the evolving needs and challenges faced by children in Syria.

Reclaiming Power

The war in Syria has had devastating effects not only on children, but also on women, who are both often the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society. Women in Syria have been subject to violence, including rape, sexual violence, harassment, forced marriage, trauma: for example, seeing their husbands murdered and other threats to their maternal health and well-being, such as limited access to healthcare, inadequate prenatal care, increased maternal mortality and displacement.

Syria has been deeply affected by the devastating war, which has turned the country into a place where the tragic consequences and senselessness of the situation have created a distressing and surreal reality. The international community has recognised the devastating impact of the conflict on war victims, and has taken steps to address their needs. Humanitarian organisations, such as UN Women, Care International, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), are working to provide assistance, including food, shelter, and healthcare services. However, much more needs to be done to protect the rights of both children and women in Syria while this bloody civil war and the humanitarian devastation persist.

While Syria's war has had a massively regressive effect on women's lives, especially on Arab feminist and progressive movements of all kinds, many women in Syria have been radicalised by this bitter conflict. The extreme violence, oppression and trauma they have been exposed to have led to a significant change in their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Some examples of beliefs that may have been altered include gender equality, self-empowerment, the transformative power of education and knowledge, community solidarity, advocacy and activism, and the enduring power of resilience and hope. Consequently, there have ironically been some positive developments in terms of women's empowerment and affirmative gender roles.



Figure 2: Thuraya, H. (2022) *Equity and Empowerment (E&E)*. Available at: <https://www.wilpf.org/women-in-syrias-economy-a-feminist-review-of-womens-economic-empowerment-projects/> (accessed 5 March 2024).

War has forced women in Syria out of their homes and into the public sphere. Often women have had to undertake work and duties that were usually assigned to men before the war. The war has subverted conventions: men and women are no longer definable by the space they occupy and the roles they play. Women have given up their traditional role in the domestic sphere – where they are responsible for caregiving and raising children, as well as managing the household and performing domestic tasks (such as cooking, cleaning and laundry) – and they seek to actively join men at all levels of society. In doing so, they now occupy a wide range of positions in the public sphere either through the work force, supportive roles, physical caregiving, or engagement in peace movements and local mediation, and in the literary, artistic as well as film making arenas.³

³ In the Syrian war, women have been actively involved in providing humanitarian aid and relief efforts. They have participated in distributing food, water, medical supplies, and other essential resources to those in need, often working with local and international organisations. They have also played a crucial role in providing healthcare services, particularly in areas where healthcare infrastructure has been disrupted. They have served as doctors, nurses, midwives, and community health workers, offering medical care and support to those affected by the conflict. In addition, they have been instrumental in promoting education and empowerment, especially for children and other women by establishing informal schools, community canters, and literacy programs to ensure that children have access to education and that women can enhance their skills and knowledge. Besides this, they have been actively engaged in providing psychosocial support to individuals and communities affected by the war, helping survivors cope with the psychological impacts of the conflict. Furthermore, they have been at the forefront of advocating for peace, human rights, gender equality and social justice. In this respect, they have played a critical role in documenting human rights abuses, violence against women and other atrocities committed during the war. They have also shared their stories, documented evidence and raised awareness about the situation in Syria through various media platforms. In doing all this, they

‘The Female War Gaze’

Waad Al-Khateeb, ‘who was forced to leave her native Syria’ (Ide 2023) due to the conflict, became involved in citizen journalism during the early stages of the Syrian civil war in 2011 until fleeing the country in 2016 (Postema 2024: 363). Although she was not a professional journalist or videographer at the time of reporting, she started documenting the conflict in Aleppo, initially using her mobile phone to film and upload footage to social media platforms. In 2016, Al-Khateeb began working with Channel 4 News in the UK, for which she produced a series of reports on the conflict in Syria.



Figure 3: Michell, W. (2019) Al-Khateeb shooting daily life in war. Available at: <https://www.screendaily.com/features/there-was-no-plan-at-all-except-to-survive-waad-al-kateab-edward-watts-on-their-cannes-title-for-sama/5139406.article> (accessed 5 March 2024).

Her documentary film *For Sama* (2019) was co-directed with Edward Watts, who had never been to Syria although he is well-versed in Middle East conflicts and past films include the Emmy- and BAFTA-nominated *Escape from Isis* (2015). Al-Khateeb was emerging from trauma and adjusting to life in the West, leading Watts to comment: ‘She’s a Syrian woman and I’m a British man so we are bringing different perspectives, the male-female dynamic can also be a real boost for creativity’ (cited in Mitchell 2019, n.p.). The film, named after Al-Khateeb’s daughter, Sama, who was born during the conflict, is a personal account of her experiences as a mother during the Syrian civil war, particularly the siege of Aleppo, which seemed like a ‘vast and ghostly mass grave’ (Mincheva 2020, 55).⁴ It is a powerful and emotional portrayal of the devastating impact of war on civilians, particularly women and children: for example, the original footage shows ‘a pile of very young children’s dead bodies’ abandoned at a hospital (Kellaway 2019, n.p.). Yet, Al-Khateeb chose to focus on Muhammad’s speechless mother. The film combines footage shot by Al-Khateeb herself to create a

have emerged as community leaders and decision-makers, filling gaps left by the absence or displacement of men.

⁴ Al-Khateeb’s narration is directly addressed to her daughter: ‘Sama. You are the most beautiful thing in our life. But what a life I’ve brought you into. You didn’t choose this. Will you ever forgive me?’ (Al-Khateeb, cited in Mincheva, 2020: 56).

deeply personal and affecting story that provides an unflinching view of motherhood and war. It has been well-received by both critics and audiences and is widely regarded as one of the most important and impactful documentary films of recent years, winning several awards, and being nominated for numerous others. As Dilyana Mincheva describes, *For Sama* ‘contains a variety of iconic, chaotic, and brutally honest scenes that are sometimes unbearable to watch’ (Mincheva 2020, 54).⁵



Figure 4: Curry, T. (2019) *For Sama* is addressed to Waad Al-Khateeb’s young daughter – an innocent counterpoint to the mayhem of the Syrian civil war. Available at: <https://www.anothermag.com/design-living/11912/waad-al-kateab-for-sama-aleppo-syria-civil-war-documentary-interview-2019> (accessed: 5 March 2024)

Al-Khateeb, whose moving narration and visualisation of what Mincheva terms the ‘female war gaze’ (Micheva 2020: 56), hopes that the immersive experience of watching a film can be more influential than her news reports, noting that ‘maybe this film can touch some people at some points. It could be something to make [audiences] push for a solution or help people still inside Syria’ (cited in Mitchell 2019, n.p.). Her subjective camera was her only weapon in this war, she says. Her camerawork provides an account of the war, which is not centred around grand events, heroism, religion or political analyses, as Mincheva points out.⁶ Instead, it focuses on the seeing and feeling aspects of being a woman and mother in that particular moment of history, as defined by Joey Soloway (2016). In other words, it takes the perspective of embodied female emotions and then makes them central to the narrative and visual representations within the filmic frame. In this context, women are the emotional – and therefore widely disregarded – storytellers of the war: ‘Women’s war has its own

⁵ For further information and a full description on these scenes, see Mincheva 2020: 54–55.

⁶ Al-Khateeb’s documentary – with its overt emphasis on the female gaze – is different from the documentary productions and testimonies about the Syrian war that received considerable public attention in the West in recent years, Dilyana Mincheva points out. Good examples of these acclaimed documentary texts are Feras Fayyad and Steen Johannessen’s *Last Men in Aleppo* (2017), Feras Fayyad’s *The Cave* (2019), Matthew Heineman’s *City of Ghosts* (2017) and Talal Derki’s *Of Fathers and Sons* (2017).

colours, its own smells, its own lighting and its own range of feelings. There are no heroes or incredible feats, there are simply people who are doing inhumanly human things' (Alexievich 2017: xvi).

According to Joey Soloway, the female gaze is not about women dominating the screen in an attempt to objectify the male body by presenting it as a female source of phantasmatic pleasure. Rather, it is a political lens that prioritises the experiences and emotions of women by revealing them in their incredible complexity and ambiguity. The term in Soloway's description does not function simply as a corrective to the male gaze but, rather, it has its own political function.⁷ Indeed, it begs a revolutionary rethinking of the industrial structures making up the cinema business:

I want you to see the female gaze as a conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool. It is a wrestling away! Perhaps a wrestling away of the point of view, of the power of the privilege propaganda for purposes of changing the way the world feels for women when they move their bodies through the world feeling themselves as the subject (Soloway, 2016).

Al-Khateeb echoed Soloway's articulation of the female gaze when describing her attempt to portray war in her film *For Sama*:

I feel that it is my perspective as Waad, and I am female, so of course it is [female]. I knew that most of the war reports like news or documentaries, or whatever, even if [they were] from a female perspective, [they were] all limited by male power or rules (cited in Montgomery 2019, n.p.).

These complex political economies of affect, which define much of the experimental works from the region, crystallise in Al-Khateeb's interpretation into a cinematic message, which is profoundly subjective yet fraught with 'affective empathy' (Mincheva 2020: 62) that transcends the personal story and raises universal questions of justice, redemption and hope.

Inspiring Worldwide

Generally speaking, women have historically been excluded from what Svetlana Alexievich refers to in Russian as *muzjestvo*, a type of masculine bravery.⁸ Yet, Syrian women have defied the notions of patriarchy and challenged the dominant power structures that have perpetuated inequality and oppression and viewed women as passive and submissive; instead, they have managed to assert themselves as active agents in their own lives, ironically through the upheavals to conventional structures brought about by the war. The war has given them a unique opportunity to speak for themselves, to present their points of view, and thereby to challenge authoritative stories. In addition, by disrupting the narrow definitions of femininity used to restrict

⁷ In her classic work, Laura Mulvey defines the male gaze as a triangle of viewing including the camera, the characters and the spectator, which privileges the male point of view and represents women as objects of male pleasure.

⁸ Svetlana Alexievich is the winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature. She uses documentary prose to present hours of intimate interviews (conducted between 1978 and 2004) with women who experienced the Second World War, either as soldiers in the Red Army, or as caregivers. For further information, see Alexievich (2017): 3-19.

women's roles and behaviours, the war has shown that there are many different ways to be a woman in Syria. This has opened up new possibilities and spaces for Syrian women to be seen and valued and thus to assert their agency and individual identities and so cumulatively to change the status quo. In doing so, Syrian women's capacity to shape and define their identities has increased. Such increased capacity has allowed them to participate actively in their communities and to contribute to the overall group identity, challenging traditional gender roles and fostering a more inclusive and equitable community identity. Thus, the war and the resulting shifting social orders have provided most Syrian women with opportunities to break out of gender stereotypes and stifling societal patterns. Yet, while progress has been made, the journey towards breaking out of gender stereotypes and stifling societal patterns is ongoing and requires sustained efforts on multiple fronts, including legal reforms, education and cultural shifts in post-war Syria.

By actively involving themselves in wider movements aimed at promoting gender equality and social justice, women in Syria are playing a central role in driving transformative change within the Syrian society. However, the impact of their efforts extends beyond the borders of Syria, as they contribute to creating a more just and equitable world for everyone. By advocating for gender equality and social justice, the actions of these women, challenging existing power structures, discriminatory practices, and systemic injustices aim to dismantle barriers and to create opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of gender, and to enjoy equal rights, opportunities and access to resources.

Through Syrian women harnessing such opportunities amidst the suffering, radical social transformation is possible in other similar parts of the world. In other words, their efforts have a universal significance as they will likely inspire other women, who are suffering from the same situations around the world. Therefore, their contributions not only address the specific challenges faced by women in Syria, but also align with the broader goal of creating a more just and equitable society globally. Such actions can inspire and contribute to a worldwide movement for gender equality and social justice, reinforcing the belief that the pursuit of justice and equality is a collective endeavour that transcends national boundaries. The overturning of oppression between genders in Syrian society and the creation of more equal societies with the capacity for all to engage in critical debates help to prevent future civil and international conflicts.

Hence, the 'doll' seems to symbolise not only the Syrian civil war, but also the broader conflict, highlighting a fundamental issue in human relationships. It signifies a deep-rooted problem in the way people interact and engage with one another. As Watts points out, the end result of the film *For Sama* is 'a story about the core of human beings transcending political and geographical context. This is not just another film about Syria, this is a film about you, whoever you are, and what's in your soul' (cited in Mitchell 2019, n.p.). In short, 'it mediates an ethical truth about the human condition in ruins' (Mincheva 2020: 54). This moral problem is clearly evident in the marginalisation of women's roles in society, which then negatively impacts on our understanding and ways of being with each other in terms of human relations more generally. Thus, the war exemplifies a competitive rationale, which is me versus world or zero-sum logic, and so the 'doll' is a symbol of cultural, social, and political dynamic. In other words, the conflict is driven by a competitive mindset, where

different factions or parties involved perceive the situation as a zero-sum game. Each side seeks to gain an advantage or secure their own interests, often at the expense of others, rather than seeking cooperative or mutually beneficial solutions. This competitive rationale can contribute to the escalation of violence, hinder diplomatic efforts, and prolong the conflict, as parties involved are less inclined to find common ground or to engage in peaceful resolutions.

Conclusion

Despite the rhetoric of protecting women and children, the reality is that they have borne the brunt of the violence and have been left to suffer the consequences of the Syrian civil war. Yet, the paradoxical reward for going through the painful nightmare of this war is that this civil war has presaged and created frameworks in which Syrian women's political, social and economic claims for equality have been made. Intervening to stop the war and reconstructing Syria, which has become a tragic theatre of the absurd, are imperative. However, it is also important to consider how these societal changes that are empowering women can be taken forward and how children's dreams can be recovered alongside their rights to live in dignity and opportunities to learn and to play together peacefully.

References

Alexievich, S. (2017) *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*. New York: Random House.

Al-Khateeb, W., and Watts, E. (2019) *For Sama* [Documentary]. Aleppo, Syria: PBS Frontline.

Ide, W. (2023) 'We Dare to Dream review – Waad al-Kateab's Uplifting Portrait of Olympic Refugee Team'. *The Guardian* (3 December).

Kellaway, K. (2019) 'My Daughter Was Raised During the Siege of Aleppo. I Had to Make a Film for Her'. *The Guardian* (25 August).

Mincheva, D. (2020) 'Cinematic Islamic Feminism and the Female War Gaze: Reflections on Waad Al-Kateab's *For Sama*'. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, (20): 54-70:

<https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue20/HTML/ArticleMincheva.html>.

Mitchell, W. (2019) "'There was no plan at all, except to survive": Waad al-Kateab, Edward Watts on their Cannes title "For Sama"'. *Screen Daily* (14 May): <https://www.screendaily.com/features/there-was-no-plan-at-all-except-to-survive-waad-al-kateab-edward-watts-on-their-cannes-title-for-sama/5139406.article> (accessed 7 March 2024).

Montgomery, H. (2019) 'For Sama and the Female Perspective on War'. BBC Culture (13 September): <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190912-for-sama-and-the-female-perspective-on-war> (accessed 7 March 2024).

Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. *Screen*, 16(3): 6-18.

Postema, S. (2024) 'Journalistic Theater: A Case Study of Reporting on People's Emotional Response to Current Affairs with the Body as Medium', *International Journal of Communication*, 18: 363-383: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/20529/4439>.

Soloway, J. (2016) 'Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze', Master Class: TIFF 2016, YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I> MASTER CLASS | (accessed 7 March 2024).

LIAS Working Paper Series

The Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies is an interdisciplinary centre of excellence based at the University of Leicester. Dedicated to creating a collaborative and inspiring environment, it brings together researchers from across all disciplines to deliver ambitious, transformative, and impactful research.

Since 2018, the Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies has published a working paper series. The series allows our projects and partners to publish interdisciplinary research in a range of formats in order to stimulate debate about emerging research areas and complex research questions.

Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies,
University of Leicester,
University Road,
Leicester,
LE1 7RH,
United Kingdom
le.ac.uk/research/institutes/lias
lias@leicester.ac.uk

