

# cinema



✱ Scenes from *The Black Tulip*, directed by Sonia Nassery Cole, and set in Afghanistan.

## *The Black Tulip* takes on the Taliban

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**S**ome movies tell riveting stories outside their own plots. These are preserved for posterity. Sometimes on film, often in print. Biographies of movie men and women make fascinating reading, for they reveal the pain and pleasure of those who have written the scripts or helmed the films or disappeared into the characters.

The trials and tribulations of Sonia Nassery Cole, the Afghan director who has just made *The Black Tulip* grip you, and I am sure the movie itself, her country's Oscar contender, will be as engaging.

Shot boldly on actual locations in Afghanistan, *The Black Tulip* narrates the story of a liberal Muslim family running a café in Kabul, and the harassment it faces from the Taliban.

After a recent premiere of the movie in Kabul, made with a grant from the American government, opinion was sharply divided. Some said that Cole's work spoke about a life that was far removed from reality. Women really do not kiss through the burqa, and foreign soldiers could not have been drinking with Taliban rebels, they averred.

Maybe so, but the film, made in the Dari language and subtitled in English, seemed to have come as a great relief in a country starved of cinema, music and other forms of entertainment, and where hardly any movies are being made even now.

However, what is greatly fascinating about *The Black Tulip* is the condition under which it was made, the tragic condition. Cole knew

that her script was a scathing critique of the Taliban and its horrendous ways that kept girls out of schools, women in virtual slavery and men without any amusement. There was no music, no merriment, no laughter, no joy. And, of course, no cinema or theatre.

Cole was prepared to die for the movie, but it was her leading actress who paid a dreadful price. Taliban militants found her just before principal photography was to begin in Kabul and cut off both her feet.

It was then that Cole realised what she was really up against, but her resolve got stronger, and she decided to play the lead role herself — as the owner of a café. “Come hell, come shine, I was going to make this film,” Cole (45) remarked. A debutant director who holds US and Afghan citizenship, Cole has been running a charity organisation that takes care of refugees and women's rights.

She now lives in Los Angeles and first caught media attention when as a teenager she wrote to President Ronald Reagan after fleeing Afghanistan in 1979. She has been part of Afghan relief efforts since then. *The Black Tulip* is sure to get her still greater attention, and it would help steer words and visuals towards a nation struggling to survive after catastrophic invasions and a tyrannical regime that broke the very spirit of a proud race.

Once, Afghanistan had a great cinema industry, but the Taliban banned it and closed down or destroyed theatres. But now motion pictures are slowly getting there, and *The Black Tulip* may well speed up this process.

Cole's only movie experience till she made *The Black Tulip* was directing *The*



*Breadwinner*, a 2007 short documentary about an eight-year-old Afghan boy who supports his family by selling calendars. For her first feature, she managed to tap government and philanthropic bodies. Diplomat Henry Kissinger is a friend of Cole's, ties that go back to her younger days. Singer Natalie Cole (no relation) recorded two songs for the movie.

Yet, the shooting itself was fraught with fear. Cole would start work at four in the morning, because there were fewer people on the streets and security was easier to provide then. But, before the film was wrapped up last autumn, Cole escaped being blown up by a bomb that shattered the windows of her hotel. Sometimes, she faced machinegun fire, sometimes nasty threats. And in the middle of the shooting, her cinematographer, a producer and a set designer abandoned her. One of them felt bad, but as he said he had not signed a contract for his own death.

*The Black Tulip*, has a main cast of 11, and begins in 2001, just before the Taliban was thrown out. The story stretches to the present day. A family opens a restaurant, called The Poet's Corner, hoping to cash in on new found liberalism. At The Poet's Corner, artists of all kinds are given the freedom to say what they want to — sort of the spot in London's Hyde Park. But the family soon finds out that the Taliban have not really gone, and pays a huge price for encouraging cultural liberty.

The real picture in Afghanistan is not very different even today.

Extremism is not religion-specific, though some would like us believe that it is. It exists as strongly in faiths other than Islam. In the mid-2000, Toronto-based Deepa Mehta was ready to shoot *Water*, a movie about the distress and deprivation of widows in Varanasi. Her two lead actresses, Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi, had even had their heads tonsured, but Hindu fanatics would not let Mehta begin the shoot.

They claimed that her plot defamed Indian culture, showing the widows in bad light, and went on a massive rampage.

After living in fear for several days, Mehta and her cast/crew packed up and left Varanasi. A few years later, Mehta made the movie in Sri Lanka with a different cast. It attracted a lot of attention and competed for the Oscars.

The widows of Varanasi still lead a wretched existence. Everybody knows about it. They have been widely written about the world over. Mehta was not allowed to film them in the actual location. She did not dare to.

Cole did, and in an even more frightful situation.

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