In the last few decades, anti-imperialist approaches to Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) studies have primarily been concerned with the launch of the global war on terror; the targeting of Afghan women as the more recent objects of the saviorhood industrial complex; and how women’s plight has contributed to the entanglement of feminism, Orientalism, and global imperialism. Wazhmah Osman’s essential book, *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists*, however, sets out to address the underexplored question of how Afghans themselves make sense of their lives, futures, and the media in the aftermath of years of violence and conflict. Osman generatively intervenes in critical media studies through an exploration of the mechanisms and dynamics of cultural production in a geopolitical context changed by war and violence. Her book presents a nuanced and multilayered analysis of the various actors involved in shaping the television landscape in Afghanistan. From foreign media conglomerates and warlords to feminist activists and religious conservatives, the book examines how each group has used television as a tool to
promote their respective agendas. Thus, by shifting her focus to television as the most dominant, widely accessed, and popular media form in Afghanistan, Osman aims “to redirect the global dialogue about Afghanistan to local Afghans themselves.”

Inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod’s book *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*, Osman’s thoroughly researched book draws on ethnographic observations, more than one hundred interviews, and archival analysis. Building on this multidimensional methodology, Osman offers compelling insights on local and transnational television in Afghanistan, its emergence within the complex and multilayered discourses of imperialism and nationalism, the political economy of its production, and its controversial reception in the country. She acknowledges her positionality and fluid social location as a researcher who leans on both American- and Afghanness, uses her family ties, and reflects on her mixed ethnic makeup—crucial aspects of her feminist anti-imperialist ethnographic lens.

Osman’s book places televisual exposures at the center of imperialist militarism, globalization, and the Afghan nation-building project. In doing so, it examines how televisual productions constitute and frame dialogues around gender, sexuality, democracy, ethnic identity, religion, and human rights while also analyzing how these framings are received, negotiated, and contested by the larger public. Afghan television networks—the country’s most prominent and popular media outlets—can be both a major stumbling block and catalyst for change. As a result of their dynamic relationship with forces of imperialism and religious nationalism in Afghanistan, local television networks have become a source of complex potentials; through televisual forms, Afghans can develop agency and new subjectivities, as well as spaces for critique, democracy, and collective healing.

A recurring theme through the book, and a significant part of its theorization of media in Afghanistan, is the concept of the gaze, presented here in nuanced form. Osman productively uses the interwoven conceptual frames of “development gaze” and “imperial gaze,” with the former referring to the flawed and limited local developmental projects and movements “concerned with the betterment and development of Afghanistan and its people” and the latter implying the market-oriented and imperialist projects that expand the neocolonial interests of global powers. In chapter 4, Osman discusses these two categories of gaze as an extension of Abu-Lughod’s concept of “developmental realism” and shows that the cultural productions of Afghan TV stations mostly follow the development gaze. However, we also learn that international television productions in Afghanistan have made genuine efforts to represent ethnic minorities and encourage unity among Afghans, despite their historic focus on women and ethnic Pashtuns as the ultimate objects in need of liberation. Thus, the relationship between imperial and development gazes in Afghan television has created a contested media environment. It is the tension

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between the imperial gaze and the development gaze that Osman explores throughout her book. As her meticulous research demonstrates, it is not uncommon for both gazes to intersect, interact, overlap, and even oppose each other. Yet their interaction with people varies in terms of their actual material effects.

The book is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the development of Afghan media through discourses on globalization, secularism, cultural imperialism, and media ownership. The second skillfully sketches the complex dynamics of contemporary Afghan TV by examining the political economy of media, using the reception of TV productions and interviews with producers.

In chapter 1, “Legitimizing Modernization: Indigenous Modernities, Foreign Incursions, and Their Backlash,” Osman emphasizes how local developmental projects and imperialist and foreign agendas meet, intersect, and sometimes contradict one another in this context. She contends that though local reforms are often half-hearted, they have contributed to the betterment of the Afghan people, unlike British, Soviet, and US developmental interests that have been consistently market oriented and entwined with militarism, leaving Afghans vulnerable and marginalized. Chapter 2, “Imperialism, Globalization, and Development: Overlaps and Disjunctures,” extends the previous chapter’s concerns by offering case studies of developmental programs in the country. These initiatives fall into a broad spectrum of positive projects with a collaborative nature to top-down and problematic initiatives centered on capital-friendly agendas. Osman accounts for the full range of reformist possibilities, both local and global, which makes her arguments in these two chapters so intriguing; despite their opposing agendas, imperial and home-grown initiatives coexist in Afghanistan’s unique geopolitical context.

Chapter 3, “Afghan Television Production: A Distinctive Political Economy,” highlights the emergence of a distinctive economic model in Afghan television, resulting from unique media laws, public protests, and media infrastructures. In this vibrant environment, Afghan television stations, such as Tolo TV, Shamshad TV, Ariana Television Network, and others, fall into three categories: national, niche, and sectarian. Among these overlapping categories, niche stations, with their prominent role in preserving local and ethnic cultures, serve the multiethnic nation the most. The chapter also examines the role of transitional funding networks on programming; the rise of serial dramas, reality shows, and other genres; and how they influence conversations around gender, sexuality, religion, Westernization, and so on.

In chapter 4, “Producers and Production: The Development Gaze and the Imperial Gaze,” Osman turns to an in-depth analysis of Afghan television productions. By returning to the tension between the imperial gaze and the development gaze, she argues that Western media theorizations cannot capture the complex dynamics of non-Western media in a country that has become the battleground for global players and local actors. A combination of violence on the streets, marginalization of ethnic minorities, and pro-justice efforts of local producers have made television productions an increasingly important part of Afghan society. Thus, while the development gaze and the imperial gaze have both played crucial roles in shaping the
television landscape in Afghanistan, it is ultimately the agency of Afghan producers, writers, and audiences that has the greatest impact on the content and meaning of television programming in the country. The chapter includes several case studies that illustrate these dynamics, including the local animated series *Yassin and Kaka Raouf*, which reflects the development of education-entertainment programming in Afghan television productions. The series juxtaposes the portrayals of life cruelties—as the two war orphans Yassin and his sister Amina face many brutalities and their Kaka (uncle) Raouf has lost his family in the war—and the fight for democracy, justice, and a better life, which according to the book makes it an “entertaining, informative, well-produced, and well-executed” program.4

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to the representation of gender, highlighting how this contested terrain is an expression of women’s marginalization in society. Osman states, “Afghan women have become the ultimate markers of the Afghan nation, and in their televisual representation, they are burdened with embodying all the cultural codes of the nation.”5 Chapter 5, “Reaching Vulnerable and Dangerous Populations: Women and the Pashtuns,” focuses on the how televisual representations, supported by either an imperial gaze or an internal development one, have instrumentalized the issues of rescuing women and preserving ethnic Pashtuns to advance their respective agendas. She highlights the fact that both women and Pashtuns have been historically excluded from positions of power in Afghanistan, making them particularly vulnerable to oppression. As a result, many local media producers and productions actively attempt to address this marginalization by featuring stories about culturally sensitive issues such as gendered violence, honor killing, and experiences of ethnic Pashtuns. Osman notes that despite both gazes’ focus on saving women from their submissive patriarchal conditions, the goal of local reformist media producers is to transform women’s living conditions, whereas the international efforts for uplift reproduce subjugating effects. Similarly, chapter 6, “Reception and Audiences: The Demands and Desires of Afghan People,” raises the question of women’s visibility from the audiences’ perspective. Osman argues that Afghan audiences have a diverse set of desires and demands when it comes to television programs and that these demands are shaped by a variety of factors, including cultural and religious beliefs, political ideologies, and socioeconomic status. Here, Osman’s analysis of audiences’ responses to television programming reveals that Indian and Turkish dramas and entertainment programs are more popular among audiences as they provide a distraction for people who grapple with routine, on-the-ground struggles. Yet she acknowledges that if these audiences seek sangeen (a Persian word for “heavy”) content, they prefer to turn to local Afghan dramas, which resonate more with the everyday violence they experience. Thus, this chapter demonstrates the multifaceted and complex relationship between Afghan audiences and television programming and argues that producers must be attuned to the diverse demands of their viewers to create programming that resonates with them.

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4 Osman, 145.
5 Osman, 156.
Osman’s *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars* is an excellent addition not only to the scholarship on Afghanistan and the MENASA studies field but also to critical cultural studies, anthropology, gender studies, and decolonial studies. Similar to the ethnographies and critical analyses offered by Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* and Andrew Skuse, Marie Gillespie, and Gerry Power in *Drama for Development: Cultural Translation and Social Change*, Osman rejects the linear and causal relationship between popular cultural productions and ideological belief systems. Through her meticulous research and passionate storytelling, she reveals how media productions can be both a catalyst and a reflection of the political and cultural struggles in a particular context. Her book won the 2021 Outstanding Book Award from the Activism, Communication, and Social Justice Interest Group of the International Communication Association for its in-depth and nuanced investigation of the role of television in a society marked by excruciating conflicts.

Ultimately, Osman’s book is a powerful mediation on the complexities of imperialism; the struggle for cultural agency; and the role of media in offering possibilities of justice, imagining, and healing. Her theorization of Afghan television depends on a dialectical relationship between foreign powers, warlords, and activists, all of whom have created a dynamic of intertwined fragility and empowerment in Afghan media. Although Afghanistan has been suffering from extreme conditions of vulnerability, marginalization, and violence, Osman maintains that television has served as a platform for hope and empowerment. Despite its fragility and entanglement with global political and economic forces, television has enabled Afghan people to reimagine new possibilities for their future. Such insightful arguments about the complexity of the media landscape are products of her in-depth ethnographic work, her cultural fluency, and her anti-imperialist feminist intervention in scholarship on the Global South.

**Bahareh Badiei** is a PhD candidate in the Journalism and Media Studies Department at Rutgers University. Her research focuses on feminist media theory, dialectics of digital activism, and the MENA region. She examines how diasporic feminist projects may simultaneously reproduce imperialist practices and contribute to neo-Orientalist approaches while rupturing the violence of such agendas and open spaces for genuine maneuvers of transnational feminism.

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