

To deal with issues
that do not



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To what extent do the films of Kim Longinotto succeed in representing women as agents of social and political change, rather than as victims? This essay will discuss the extent to which the films of British documentary filmmaker, Kim Longinotto succeeds in representing the women in her films as agents of social and political change, rather than as victims. The essay will analyse three of Longinotto's films: *Divorce Iranian Style* (Iran/UK, 1998), *The Day I Will Never Forget* (Kenya/UK, 2002), and *Sisters in Law* (Cameroon/UK, 2005). Kim Longinotto employs an observational, unobtrusive style of filmmaking, focusing mainly on women from different cultures, many of whom are marginalised and disenfranchised by the cultural traditions and religious laws that govern them.

Longinotto's films share many characteristics of other observational, direct cinema films, including a lack of interviews, little narration, and uncomplicated camera work. She also fosters a close relationship between the filmmaker, the subject, and the audience, to create a sense of realism and intimacy. However, despite Longinotto's similarities to the direct cinema style, she does not simply remain a silent observer, or an 'outsider', instead she seeks change, hope, and progress through her films. As Belinda Smill puts it, "rather than simply depicting difficult situations, the central thread of these documentary narratives is hopefulness and the ideal of female cultural agency" (2007: 177). The fact that Longinotto often tackles issues in non-western cultures where the women she films deal with issues that do not affect the majority of her western audience, means that she runs the risk of representing these women as victims, as the exotic 'other', or of her films appearing voyeuristic. However, Longinotto manages to avoid this

representation in a number of ways that this essay will explore. Belinda Smaill describes Longinotto's camera as locating "the cultural "other" as not outside of, but entrenched in, the complex paradigms of modernity".

She goes on to say that, "Longinotto necessarily renders the emotional and physical pain of marginality and individual agency, drawing attention to the relationship between pain – along with its representation – and political struggle" (2009: 45). *Divorce Iranian Style* depicts a family court in Tehran, where people go to attempt to settle issues with their divorces. The contrast between the way men and women are treated is evident from the beginning of the film.

Longinotto uses an English-speaking narrator sparingly and only when absolutely necessary. The narrator explains that men and women use separate entrances, men are searched for weapons, while women are inspected by the court's staff to ensure their appearance and attire is in line with Islamic dress code guidelines for women. One woman is told to remove her make-up while others are lent chadors to further cover themselves. It becomes clear that men can seek a divorce without reason, whereas if a woman wants a divorce she must prove that her husband cannot father a child, is insane, or has deceived her. These are the only grounds on which a woman can seek a divorce.

What Longinotto tackles in *Divorce Iranian Style* is the complex relationship between the traditional Islamic laws of the country and the increasing modernity of contemporary Iranian society. More specifically, she explores the ways in which the women in the film struggle to navigate their way

through a patriarchal system that grants them such limited power. Longinotto uses a clever juxtaposition of shots to translate this meaning to her audience. As Lindsey Moore explains, “ The informing discourse of the film is further revealed through the juxtaposition of court scenes with those in the mosque at prayer time and with shots outside, in which the late Ayatollah Khomeini’s portrait looms large on a billboard, thus linking religion, politics, the law, and patriarchal dominance”.

(2005: 24) Moore quotes Mir-Hosseini, Longinotto’s Iranian co-director, on their vision for the film, “ we tried to focus on commonalities rather than on the exotic and the different, to remind the viewer that marriage is a difficult institution . . . to give glimpses into the lives of ordinary people. Above all, we wanted to let the women speak, to show them as individuals” (2005: 22) Longinotto and Mir-Hosseini succeed in their representation of women as individuals, and, to an extent, as agents of social and political change. One of the film’s characters is Ziba, a 16-year-old girl who was married off by her parents to a much older man when she was 15. She wants to divorce her husband, who she accuses of being violent, and to go back to school.

The lack of power Ziba has fosters a desperation and hunger for change in her, and the other women in the film. Longinotto shows how this desperation manifests itself: in almost every scene of the film the audience see the women in the film assertively engaging with the judge at the court. They argue, negotiate, and fight their way through a system that is working against them. Moore elaborates on this, “ Women across the social spectrum are shown actively to participate in contemporary debates

ongendered rights in Islamic Iran. Women are not revealed as hopelessly oppressed but as an articulate force.

The final voice-over, superimposed on the face of each of the main characters in slow motion, indicates that all have achieved some degree of success in their dealings with the court” (2005: 23) However, Moore also argues that Longino does not entirely avoid presenting the women in the film as victims or as the exotic ‘ other’. She describes a scene that “ does not altogether resist voyeurism” (2005: 24) where a woman attempts to shield herself from the camera with her face veil. The camera, however, remains focused on her veiled face. *The Day I Will Never Forget* explores the practice of female genital mutilation in Somali communities in Kenya. Unlike in *Divorce Iranian Style*, but in keeping with the narrative of most of her other films, Longino chooses a strong female character that acts as an advocate for the other women in the film.

As with *Sisters in Law* and some of Longino's other films, these characters represent strength, power, hope, and social and political progress. Fardousa Ali Mohamed is this character in *The Day I Will Never Forget*. Having undergone FGM herself as a child, Fardousa is a nurse who campaigns to change attitudes to FGM in Kenya. She offers a surgical procedure to women who have gone through FGM that allows for less painful sex and childbirth, and also lowers the risks of infection associated with both. As with many of her films, Longino wanted to make a film about the struggle to change tradition, more specifically women's struggle to change tradition, tradition that is in place for the satisfaction and convenience of men. As she puts it in an interview with Belinda Smill, “ tradition always impacts on

women...that's what annoys me, when people go on about how wonderful tradition is, because it is always instigated by men and it is always for the benefit of men".

(Smaill, 2007: 186) As with *Divorce Iranian Style*, *The Day I Will Never Forget* is an observational film. Longinotto uses minimal voice-over, only where absolutely necessary, and few interviews. The film could be said to take a cinema verite approach, as, rather than doing interviews, Longinotto facilitates discussions about FGM between a diverse range of women involved in the procedure, including young women who've undergone it and female village elders who work as circumcisers. These discussions reveal to the audience just how much cultural pressure there is for young girls to be circumcised. They also show just how misinformed some of the village elders are about FGM. One of the elders tells some of the younger women that it does no hurt and that is a good experience.

Another claims that after circumcision women no longer have any sexual desire for men. While Fardohsa is clearly represented as an agent for social and political change, not all the women in the film are represented this way. As with *Divorce Iranian Style*, Longinotto tackles the issue of the struggle between tradition, the emerging contemporary society, and a westernised legal system. This is often portrayed in the context of older women (traditional) versus young women (contemporary). Smaill says, " While many of the women in *The Day I Will Never Forget* are depicted as struggling with the weight of cultural expectation...these women are juxtaposed with women like Fardohsa who work within the confines of the culture to effect change.

The Day I Will Never Forget brings to light the misinformation and attitudes that perpetuate FGC.

This casts some subjects, such as the female elders who perform the practice, as simplistic and perhaps even ignorant of the trauma they inflict and why. In stark contrast Fardohsa is associated with the discourses of medicine and science". Is it possible that through Longinotto's portrayal of the ignorance of the elders, that they are represented as victims of this "primitive" African tradition? It's possible that Longinotto represents them in this way to avoid them being depicted as perpetrators, as many of them are circumcisers.

Is it easier to portray them as old women who don't know any better and are simply following tradition? Longinotto succeeds, however, in representing the younger generation as agents of social and political change. This, in turn, may eventually succeed in changing the attitudes of the older women. The second half of the film focuses on sixteen girls who take their parents to court to prevent them from circumcising them. They win their case. This is a hugely empowering moment in the film. These girls don't just win the rights to their own bodies, they also effect change throughout the community, make older women question the practice, and protect future generations.

Longinotto says in an interview with Catherine Fowler, "I love the way the mothers come out absolutely beaming; they've shifted, the daughters have taken over something that maybe the mothers would have wanted. The girls have changed the whole premise of everything; they're saying, we don't want to get married, we want to stay at school and we don't want to have loads of

babies. All the mothers can do is stand and watch and be really impressed, and the fathers can be angry. I don't really see it as a film about FGM. I see it as a film about girls changing their lives, a film about change and rebellion really". (2004: 103) Longinotto's decision to include a distressing scene depicting two young girls undergoing FGM was borne out of a desire to effect change, not just by Longinotto herself, but also by Fardohsa and some of the girls in the film.

In Smail's interview Longinotto recalls one of the girls saying, " you have to have that scene in because how are we going to change unless our fathers and brothers see the kind of horror of it" (2007: 184) *Sisters in Law*, Longinotto's second film set in Africa, again focuses on the struggle between tradition, religious law, and a westernised legal system. Set in the town of Kumba in Cameroon, Longinotto again frames the film around a strong female character that represents power, hope, strength, and, in the case of this film, real authority. State prosecutor Vera Ngassa and court president Beatrice Ntuba are in charge of Kumba's court. They are well respected in the area and the surrounding villages. This becomes evident to the audience in the film's very first scene. A woman comes into Vera's office with her young child, her estranged husband and her father. The woman's father has given her child to her husband and the woman is trying to get the child back.

Vera chastises the father, saying, " your daughter has become merchandise. What is a woman to you? 80, 000 Francs and a pig? That's what you men do. You just harvest children all over the place without marrying the mothers". Longinotto juxtaposes several different cases throughout the film,

including a 10-year-old rape victim, a six-year-old abuse victim, and the case of Amina, a woman who is seeking a divorce from an abusive husband.

This juxtaposition gives the film real emotional power, enabling the audience to really engage and connect with the film. Longiniotto says in her interview with Smail, that she wants “to allow to the audience to make a sort of leap where they can feel what the person in the film is feeling, through cultures” (2007: 181) There is a certain ease in representing the charismatic, passionate Vera as an agent of social and political change. It is clear that she is of a higher social class than most of her plaintiffs: she speaks fluent English and holds a high-level job. This has afforded her rights that the female plaintiffs in the film do not have, for example an education, therefore power, and the chance to gain a job in authority. Class is not a topic that is really examined in the film, but this is in keeping with Longiniotto’s observational style. She avoids spoon-feeding her audience and lets them find their own meaning in her films. Vera and Beatrice’s social standing and language skills also allow Longiniotto to make *Sisters in Law* a strictly observational film.

She would not have been able to employ such an unobtrusive style to the film had it not been for Vera and Beatrice. She would have had to translate many of the subjects’ native language, Pidgin, and possibly use voiceover to explain parts of the court system. Longiniotto, however, still manages to avoid representing the female plaintiffs in the film as victims, and, in fact the strength of her subjects is evident in all her scenes. Longiniotto’s representation of Amina, the woman seeking a divorce, is one of determination and strength. Witnesses are constantly discrediting her and her entire village is against her. Yet, with the support of Vera and Beatrice

she does not give up and she is eventually granted her divorce. At the end of the film the audience learn that this was the first time in seventeen years that a woman had won the right to divorce her husband on the grounds of abuse. Smaill says: " Leaving this revelation until the end of the film, Longinotto places a final emphasis on the changes inaugurated by the female officials and their work to enfranchise women and children" (2009: 58) Longinotto also shows how Amina herself empowers change in other women.

After she returns from court, there is a scene where Amina is celebrating with her female friends. They say to her, " you've opened our eyes; we've been suffering in silence." White says of this scene: " These seven women who are not directly involved are transformed, through the double " truth-telling" processes of documentary witnessing and court testimony, to the extent that they themselves become advocates" (2006: 124) The access granted to Longinotto allows for a rounded representation of her subjects. The relationships she builds with her subjects and other local women who help her make her films give her the chance to film in places she would not usually have had access to, and therefore give her the chance to represent the 'whole' person. Towards the end of *Sisters in Law* there is a scene with Lum Rose, the aunt convicted of abusing her six-year-old niece, in prison.

In an interview with Mayer, Longinotto explains, " it would have been impossible for us to have got permission to film there, and Vera just swept us in with her. It was very much her making things happen and us filming it." (2009: 113) Vera says to Lum Rose, " we do not hate you" and offers to bring her medication to her. It is a softer side to Vera that the viewer sees now.

This is in contrast to her righteousness and anger towards the defendants in court. It represents the empathetic, human side to her. Longinotto's representation of these two powerful, outspoken African women, runs the risk of appearing voyeuristic to a western audience, in the sense that they may have a tendency to sensationalise these women and react to them with a "you go girl!" kind of attitude, as White puts it.

This is not the simplistic, patronising reaction that Longinotto hoped to achieve from *Sisters in Law*. White highlights this by saying, "Do North American audiences simply see barbaric African men chastised and chastened by women's over-the-top moral righteousness, a "you go girl" style of comeuppance?" (2006: 126) Longinotto's observational style also runs the risk of appearing voyeuristic. As with many ethnographic films with an observational style, *Sisters in Law* lacks cultural context. While this allows the audience to have their own, individual reactions to the film, there is the possibility that it may give them a simplistic view of the complicated legal system in Cameroon. White quotes a New York Times review of the film by Nathan Lee who says, "Who are these women and can they please take over the world soon?" White goes on to say: "Lee's comment reflects a potential liability of the film's limited contextualizing of what we see. Not knowing where these women come from enables him to exaggerate and even gently mock their power. While wishing they could "take over the world" is a wonderful clincher for the review, it evokes the global at the expense of the local and the particular forms of women's solidarity that the film takes such care to convey.

Is a lack of cultural specificity the price of the (art house) ticket?" (2006: 125) Despite the risks of *Sister in Law* appearing voyeuristic, Longniotto's representation of the women in the film as agents of social and political change is far more powerful. Longniotto goes further than simply documenting this change and actually affects it. The film has been shown all over Africa by an African television station. In an interview with Mayer, Longniotto describes going to Cape Town to screen the film.

She says, "It was amazing; lots of girls came up after and said, "we've been raped and we're really proud that the little girl's standing up in the film and confronting her rapist. We've never told anyone we've been raped, and we're going to go home and tell." (2009: 117) The fact that Longniotto's film has the power to inspire the confidence in young African girls to speak up about rape and to, in turn, potentially open up a dialogue about the subject, is a sign of immense social and political progress in Africa. In conclusion, Longniotto's choice to include certain scenes in her films, for example, the scene of the two girls undergoing FGM in *The Day I Will Never Forget*, may be deemed sensationalist by some western viewers. This choice, coupled with Longniotto's observational style and, as a result, lack of context, may result in some western audiences viewing the women in her films as victims or as the exotic 'other'.

However, as Smaill says of Longniotto's films, "They seek out the experiences and processes that position women as agents of social change. The relationships of antagonism in which these female subjects are embedded also bring to light the narratives of pain and injury that are, in some cases, part of their experiences" (2009: 61) By leaving the scene in

Longniotto creates a reaction, which in turn creates dialogue about FGM, which in turn begins to break down the taboo. Longniotto quotes one of the women who helped her with the film in an interview with Fowler, “ She said that as soon as we start talking about it among ourselves we might say we don’t want it done. You can’t do it to 100 girls against their will” (2009: 105) Longniotto describes many people’s reactions to this scene in Fowler’s interview, “ They said, ‘ Look, I’m really glad you showed it’ because part of the taboo is not looking back to what it is, because it is torture and people say it’s culture” (2004: 105) Longniotto’s films promote change within the countries in which they’re made. Both *Divorce Iranian Style* and *The Day I Will Never Forget* have been shown in Iran and Kenya respectively. Smaill describes the potential effect this has on these cultures, “ The films potentially participate in the transactions that take place between political groups within these cultures and that alter social perceptions. Like her cinema of transaction, this activism is a shared project” (2009: 68) Perhaps the most significant indicator of social and political change is the scene at the end of *Sisters in Law* where Vera is teaching a law class to a group of women. She introduces Amina to the class and tells them about her court victory, the first case of abuse by a spouse that had been won in seventeen years.

What this class of women represents is change that does not end with Amina’s victory, but social and political change that is on going and hopeful. Vera is the agent that has facilitated this change. It is the same with the girls who take their parents to court and win the rights not to be circumcised in *The Day I Will Never Forget*.

Mayer quotes Longnietto in an interview, “ The sixteen girls who jointogether...they’re changing their village from the inside out, so they’rechanging things in a bigger way” (2009: 112).