

INTERVIEW WITH AGNIESZKA ZWIEFKA



**DIRECTOR OF “SCARS”, A DOCUMENTARY
SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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BEFORE WE TALK ABOUT THE FILM, CAN YOU SHARE YOUR OWN BACKSTORY?

I come from a journalist background. I was an investigative journalist for many years and I was doing many interesting stories for television. Yet I felt that I was always just scratching the surface. This is when I started to go back to my first love, which is cinema. The way I like to make films is to stay with people for many years, to really get to know them, to go beneath the surface and find out every tiny detail about the story that I can. There is an insane amount of work you have to put into making a documentary and people are mostly not aware of this. They think fiction is much more difficult, but this is not true. Documentaries need to be scripted, just as fiction does, and they have to have turning points and dramaturgy. However, we work with real people and you cannot just fire your protagonist, the way you can with an actor or a scriptwriter. There are also psychological challenges.

WAS THIS THE CASE FOR YOUR UPCOMING FILM “SCARS”?

After the four years I spent with the Tamil Tigers – or Tamil Tigresses I should say because we deliberately focus on women – I think I needed a break. It is challenging to listen to such sad stories and, let’s be honest, most documentaries are about sad stories. When you deal with it on a daily basis and there are many complications, sometimes it is just too much. I was joking with my producers that there should be some kind of psychotherapy for film-makers. I suppose they would be paid very well for specialising in this. What interested me initially in this story was that these women are both victims and perpetrators at the same time. You can’t say they are crystal-clear good people, but they are also not evil people. It was important to me to learn more about their motivations.

THE TAMIL TIGERS COME FROM SRI LANKA?

Yes, the war in Sri Lanka lasted for 25 years, from 1983 to 2009, and the Tamil Tigers were defeated at the end of it. There is a whole generation of people who grew up entirely in the context of this war. We go to countries such as Sri Lanka as tourists. This was my case – I was a tourist there. I was relaxing with a mojito in my hand on this perfect paradise beach when someone approached me. He turned out to be a human rights activist and he told me the story of this beach. A few years before, this was a place of genocide, where hundreds of people were killed, and some of their bodies are still lying under the white sand. Our perspective as western tourists does not include this kind of history about these places. We know that there was some kind of civil war between two nations living in the country, but we don't know that we are literally sunbathing where a genocide took place. When colonialism ended, the Sinhalese, who are in the majority, made their language the only official language after introducing in 1956 what they called the Sinhala Only Act. The Tamil would have to hire a translator to even submit a simple document to their government. That is where the discrimination started, and it just grew.



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IS THIS WHAT MOTIVATED MANY WOMEN TO JOIN THE TAMIL TIGERS?

The women who are the protagonists in the film had witnessed this discrimination and conflict since they were born. My protagonist, Vetri, did not go to a proper school because every time she tried to go to a school, it was bombed or all of the teachers died. She

had to change schools every two months. She was also witnessing the Sinhalese army killing innocent people. One day when she was studying in school, the Sinhalese army came with some Tamil men and cut their heads off with the children watching. One of the men who were killed was the father of my protagonist's best friend. The next day, she walked 30 kilometres to join the Tamil Tigers. She was just 16 and a half. Many others were just 12 when they joined. One of the girls had her first period on the battlefield and she was convinced that she was wounded because she did not know the source of the blood. So when you discover these kinds of motivation, you start to understand why these girls joined this organisation. I know my protagonist Vetri is not a saint and she was not always telling the truth. We had a very dramatic end to this story that I cannot tell, because it would be a spoiler.

IN THE COURSE OF MAKING THE DOCUMENTARY, DID YOU WITNESS ANY KIND OF TRANSFORMATION IN YOUR PROTAGONIST VETRI?

Yes, this is what happens when you spend four years making a film. You have a script when you start to shoot, something you think will work out, and then it turns out that the story goes in a completely different

direction. Now, for me this film is about a country full of scars, as the title suggests. But also, it is about a country and a people who do not want to face the truth, because the truth is very problematic for both sides. There is this quote I remembered recently from Aeschylus, which says “In war, truth is the first casualty”. I think our film is more or less about that.

THE TAMIL TIGERS HAD A HIGH NUMBER OF FEMALE FIGHTERS, WHICH SEEMS UNUSUAL FOR A PATRIARCHAL CULTURE. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS WAS? IT SEEMS VERY CONTRADICTIONARY.

Yes, Sri Lanka still has a patriarchal culture. The situation today is not much different than it was in the 80s

and 90s, when my protagonists were joining the organisation. And yet, the female Tigers made up almost half of the organisation, which is an insanely high number for any guerrilla organisation, but especially one in a patriarchal society. But it actually makes sense. These girls had a window open to escape from this culture, to be equal, to be able to carry guns as the men do and to wear clothes like the men do. Of course, some were kidnapped and did not have a choice. But for those who joined voluntarily, this was an escape from the patriarchal culture. We met this one fascinating woman who told us she cannot wear dresses anymore because she feels the girl she was died the day she joined the Tamil Tigers, when she changed her dress for an army combat uniform. Going back to wearing a dress or saree feels like a costume now. We also worked closely with many human rights activists and one of them told me that if anything good came out of this war, it was the fact that women felt more liberated – that they could decide about their lives.

DO THE WOMEN WHO FOUGHT WITH THE TAMIL TIGERS HAVE TO BE IN HIDING NOW?

No, they are not in hiding because most of them had to go through rehabilitation camps after the war. They are somewhat in hiding from the community because no one wants to marry a former Tamil Tiger. And so they might not want to reveal that about themselves. But when you've been in Sri Lanka for some time and you walk down the streets, you can easily tell who was a Tamil Tiger fighter just because of the way they walk, like men. Some of them also have short hair. They also wear trousers, or if they wear dresses, they don't wear anything traditional. No Tamil Tiger fighter would wear a saree, unless for a religious ceremony or an important family gathering. In four years, I saw my protagonist wear a saree just once. I wore a saree much more often, so that I could blend in and not offend the cultural norms. The other way you can identify former Tamil Tiger fighters is that many of them are missing some limbs or have severe scars. They stand out from

the crowd. The women who joined the organisation as teenagers, and spent 20 years as members of it, cannot go back. This is their life and much of it was spent on the battlefield. It is also difficult for the women who left Sri Lanka.

THIS FILM FOCUSES ON WOMEN, AND YOU, THE FILMMAKER, ARE ALSO A WOMAN. WAS THAT EVER A PROBLEM WHILE FILMING?

No, actually it was a benefit. I wanted initially to have a female director of photography (DOP) as well, but she could not travel because she was pregnant. I ended



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up with a male DOP and that was initially more of a problem, but he did a great job. I think women need to tell the stories of other women. When you look around the fiction and non-fiction films that are produced today, the vast majority of main characters are still men. I'm working on a fiction script right now that features two female protagonists. I have been talking to some well-known actresses about it and they tell me it is very rare that they get a script where the women are actually in power. Usually, they get scripts where they are wives, teachers, nurses or even doctors, but the main character or the character in power is usually a man. There are some interesting studies that show the percentage of dialogue spoken by men versus women in films. I cannot quote it by memory but the difference is huge. I think we deserve more stories about women told in an honest way. I could easily make my protagonists seem like evil people or like saints being used by men, but this is not the truth. The truth is much more complex. I want to show them as human

beings above all.

SPEAKING OF YOUR DOP, THE SRI LANKAN LANDSCAPE SEEMS TO PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE FILM AND TO EVEN HAVE ITS OWN CHARACTER. IS PART OF THE FILM ALSO TELLING YOUR OWN PERSONAL LOVE STORY WITH THE COUNTRY?

Oh yes, it is a love-hate relationship. If you ask me what I feel towards this country, it's a mix of already missing it and never wanting to go back. We made some conscious decisions from the very beginning when we started to shoot about the visual style that we wanted to create, which was an atmosphere of hell in paradise. We wanted to show the beauty of Sri Lanka, but a different kind of beauty than you see as a tourist. Sri Lanka is full of destroyed and desecrated places and that reflects the mood of the people. The Sri Lankan Government will never hire me as a tourist guide writer. It is a very beautiful country, but this is not the focus of the film.



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IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME TO ONE SINGLE MOMENT IN THESE PAST FOUR YEARS, WHICH ONE WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Oh wow! You know, there were a lot of beautiful moments with the people and the country. The best moments, however – the ones where we really learned something – were the ones that were the most painful for us to shoot. It was when Vetri visited one of her friends who had half of her face destroyed. She was a ghost, living in a ghost town, because it was in Mul-

laitivu, which is the place where the war ended. Even now, nine years after the war, it is full of ruins, and yet with the most beautiful beach you can imagine. These women do not cry, and it was sometimes a challenge for us to be close to them because of that. But in this moment, Vetri broke down and so did I. I think of this moment as a symbol of what war does to people.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE PEOPLE WILL TAKE AWAY FROM WATCHING THIS FILM?

When I started making this film, I thought it would be about powerful women. I thought that the fact that these fighters were female would be the most important thing. But I think I ended up making a pacifist film. War, no matter what it is for, and even if you do not have the choice of whether to participate or not, is the most horrible thing that can happen to people. This is especially true with a civil war that lasts for decades. There is not a single human being in Sri Lanka, even the young ones, that has not been affected by this war. And it's not just about the casualties. There are still

families who have people that disappeared and are still being held hostage in camps in unknown locations. When you see this, you get the idea that in war there are no winners. Yes, the Sinhalese may have won the war officially, on paper, but still so many of them are affected by the war on both sides.

WOULD YOU SAY WAR STILL AFFECTS ALL OF US NOW?

I am from Poland and this experience also made me think of my grandparents who witnessed the Second World War. My grandmother was sent to Siberia and she came back years after the war. When she came back to Poland, she never left the country. She was scared that something horrible would happen to her and her family right until the end of her life. I think she also infected my mother with this fear. We can say that wars end, and they do, but I think it takes one or two

generations for them to really end. This is what I see in Sri Lanka now. People are not honest with each other. There was never reconciliation in Sri Lanka and there was never a war crimes tribunal. There was never an attempt to say who did what and try to move on. In people's minds, the war continues, just not with weapons. It continues with the media and other things.