

Suzi Mirgani, Boundary-Breaking Filmmaker Representing Sudanese Women on Screen

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With *Cotton Queen* winning international attention, the GU-Q scholar-artist shines a spotlight on Sudan's stories—on screen and in Academia. Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q) scholar and filmmaker Dr. Suzi Mirghani reached a cultural milestone last weekend when her debut feature film *Cotton Queen* was screened during International Critics' Week of the Venice Film Festival. The film follows teenage Nafisa, who comes of age in a Sudanese cotton-farming village under the watchful eye of her grandmother, as modern ambitions clash with deep-rooted traditions. Dr. Mirghani, who creates under the moniker Suzannah Mirghani, is one of only a few Sudanese women to write and direct a

feature-length drama about Sudan, and the first to do so for Cinema. “There are only around ten feature length dramas ever shown in theatres by Sudanese filmmakers—none by women,” she noted. With the war in Sudan ongoing since April 2023, the film is also a production triumph. “I waited for over a year for the war to finish so I could film in Sudan. I wanted to spend the considerable film budget in my country, but eventually chose to film in Egypt, where my Sudanese actors had taken refuge.” Born to Sudanese and Russian parents, Dr. Mirgani spent her formative years in Sudan before moving with her family to Doha at 16, where she went on to build her career as both a filmmaker and academic. Due to the intersection of her subject matter and life in the Gulf region, the film secured support from every major film grant-maker in the Middle East—including the Doha Film Institute (DFI), Red Sea Film Fund, and the Arab Fund for Art and Culture. “I am indebted to my mentor at DFI, Annemarie Jacir, who encouraged me to bring this story to light and became my creative producer, and the support from GU-Q, which allowed me not to have to choose between my academic and creative work,” said Mirgani. Her filmmaking emerged from her academic research as Assistant Director for Publications at GU-Q’s Center for International and Regional Studies. “The idea for the film emerged from a research project on Food Security in the Middle East,” she explains, adding: “I became interested in the connections between Africa and the Gulf region, home to a large Sudanese diaspora, and how remittances and exchange have mutually contributed to development.” She developed a film short “Al Sit,” which now streams on Netflix, and is the author and editor of a number of books examining the intersection of politics and popular culture. Dr. Mirgani’s cinematic voice, rooted in rich imagery and deep cultural insight, arrives at a critical moment for Sudanese storytelling. Alongside her film work, she is at the helm of GU-Q’s upcoming Hiwaraat conference, “Seeing Sudan: Politics through Art.” The three-day event, which kicks off on September 18, will gather leading artists, academics, authors, journalists, and activists to confront Sudan’s devastating war that has displaced nearly nine million people, and caused widespread famine and death. With Cotton Queen sharing Sudanese stories on the global stage and Seeing Sudan convening critical dialogue in Doha, Dr. Mirgani continues to bridge worlds—illuminating her homeland’s struggles and strengths through both art and scholarship.

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