

A JIHAD FOR LOVE

A film by Parvez Sharma

Produced by Sandi DuBowski and Parvez Sharma

81 minutes, color, 2007

English and Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, Turkish & French w/English subtitles



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Synopsis

In a time when Islam is under tremendous attack from within and without, *A Jihad for Love* is a daring documentary filmed in twelve countries and nine languages. Muslim gay filmmaker Parvez Sharma has gone where the silence is loudest, filming with great risk in nations where government permission to make this film was not an option.

A Jihad for Love is Mr. Sharma's debut and is the world's first feature documentary to explore the complex global intersections between Islam and homosexuality. Parvez enters the many worlds of Islam by illuminating multiple stories as diverse as Islam itself. The film travels a wide geographic arc presenting us lives from India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, South Africa and France. Always filming in secret and as a Muslim, Parvez makes the film from within the faith, depicting Islam with the same respect that the film's characters show for it.

A Jihad for Love is produced by Sandi DuBowski (Director/Producer of the award-winning *Trembling Before G-d*) and Parvez Sharma in association with ZDF-Arte, Channel 4, LOGO, SBS-Australia, The Sundance Documentary Fund and The Katahdin Foundation.

In Western media, the concept of 'jihad' is often narrowly equated with holy war. But Jihad also has a deeper meaning, its literal Arabic being 'struggle' or 'to strive in the path of God'. In this film we meet several characters engaged in their personal Jihad's for love. The people in this film have a lot to teach us about love. Their pursuit of love has brought them into conflicts with their countries, families, and even themselves. Such is the quandary of being both homosexual and Muslim, a combination so taboo that very little about it has been documented.

As a result, the majority of gay and lesbian Muslims must travel a twisting, lonely and often dangerous road. The majority of Muslims believe that homosexuality is forbidden by the Qur'an and many scholars quote Hadith (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) to directly condemn homosexuality. Islam, already the second largest religion in the world is also the fastest growing. 50 nations have a Muslim majority. In a few of those nations laws interpreted from alleged Qur'anic prohibitions of male homosexuality (lesbianism is allegedly absent from the Qur'an) are enforced by religious, tribal or military authorities to monitor, entrap, imprison, torture and even execute homosexuals. Even for those who migrate to Europe or North America and adopt Western personae of "gay" or "queer," the relative freedoms of new homelands are mitigated by persistent racial profiling and intensified state surveillance after the attacks of 9/11 and train bombings in Madrid and London.

As a result, many gay and lesbian Muslims end up renouncing their religion completely. But the real-life characters of *A Jihad for Love* aren't willing to abandon a faith they cherish and that sustains them. Instead, they struggle to reconcile their ardent belief with the innate reality of their being. The international chorus of gay and lesbian Muslims brought together by *A Jihad for Love* doesn't seek to vilify or reject Islam, but rather negotiate a new relationship to it. In doing so, the film's extraordinary characters attempt to point the way for all Muslims to move beyond the hostile, war-torn present, toward a more hopeful future. As one can imagine, it was a difficult decision for the subjects to participate in the film due to the violence they could face. It took the filmmaker six years to finish this film and he like those who have stepped forward to tell their stories feel that they are Islam's most unlikely storytellers. All of them feel that this film is too important for over a billion Muslims-and all the non-Muslims in the world-for them to say no. They are willing to take the risk in their quest to lay equal claim to their profoundly held faith.

A Jihad for Love's characters each have vastly different personal takes on Islam, some observing a rigorously orthodox regimen, others leading highly secular lifestyles while remaining spiritually devout. As the camera attentively captures their stories, the film's characters emerge in all their human complexity, giving the viewer an honest rendering of their lives while complicating our assumptions about a monolithic Muslim community. Crucially, this film speaks with a Muslim voice, unlike other documentaries about sexual politics in Islam made by Western directors. In the hope of opening a dialogue that has been mostly non-existent in Islam's recent history, and defining jihad as a "struggle" rather than a "war," the film presents the struggle for love.

Festival History

2008

The Tri-Continental Film Festival in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore, India

The Berlin Film Festival, Germany

Ambulante Documentary Film Festival, 16 cities in Mexico

Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival, Greece
Amnesty International Film Festival, Amsterdam, Holland
London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, UK
Natfilm Festival, Copenhagen, Denmark
Pink Apple Film Festival, Zurich, Switzerland
San Sebastian Human Rights Film Festival, Spain
Torino Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Italy
The Istanbul International Film Festival, Istanbul, Turkey
The Singapore International Film Festival
High Falls Film Festival, Rochester, NY, USA
Athens International Film Festival, Ohio, USA
Berkshire Film Festival, USA
Equality Forum, Philadelphia, PA
Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, USA
Boston Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, USA
Planete Doc Review, Warsaw, Poland

2007

Toronto International Film Festival, Canada
Rio Film Festival, Brazil
Morelia Film Festival, Mexico
Sheffield Documentary Film Festival, UK
Out in Africa Film Festival in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa
MIX BRASIL, Sao Paulo, Brasil
Image + Nation Film Festival, Montreal, Canada

Awards

MIX BRASIL, Sao Paulo Brasil – Award for Best Documentary
The Image + Nation Film Festival, Montreal, Canada – Award for Best Documentary
The Tri-Continental Film Festival, India – Jury Award for Best Documentary
One World International Human Rights Film Festival, Prague, Czech Republic – Rudolf Vrba Jury Special Mention
Torino Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Italy – Best Documentary

Director/Producer Parvez Sharma

Parvez Sharma is a Muslim gay filmmaker born and raised in India. For three years, Sharma worked as a broadcast journalist for Asia's premiere and most watched 24-hour news network, the Star News Channel/NDTV, covering major assignments across the Indian subcontinent and specializing in investigative/human rights stories and political profiles. He was the Assistant Director for the award-winning feature, *Dance of the Wind*, produced by Pandora Film in Germany and NFDC India with director Rajan Khosa which won awards at the London, Rotterdam and Nantes Film Festivals. In 2005, he was a Producer at Democracy Now!, the nationally broadcast radio and television program which airs on 225 stations across North America with award-winning host, Amy Goodman. He produced, edited and did additional camera for the DVD of Peter Friedman's Sundance Grand Jury Award winning film *Silverlake Life*. Parvez Sharma received his bachelor's degree in English Literature from Presidency College, University of Calcutta (India) and three Masters degrees: Mass Communication (Film and Television) from India's premier MCRC, Jamia Millia Islamia University; Broadcast Journalism (Masters Diploma) from the University of Wales College of Cardiff, UK; and Film and Video from American University's School of Communication. He has taught Indian film and other media courses at American University's Department of Anthropology and its School of Communication in Washington, DC.

In the nineties, Sharma was a print journalist for several prominent Indian newspapers including *The Telegraph*, *The Statesman*, *The Economic Times*, *The Business Standard*, and *India Currents Magazine*. While at *The Statesman* he reported on what was the first ever detailing of the lesbian experience within India for a national newspaper- *Emerging from the Shadows* (July 3, 1994) – which became a rallying point for lesbians around the country and was crucial in the formation of many lesbian organizations. As an activist he was instrumental in setting up the first organized LGBT effort in the eastern state of West Bengal, setting benchmarks for many other LGBT organizing efforts around the sub-continent. Parvez has spoken internationally on distinguished film/media panels and panels on issues crucial to LGBT communities in a South Asian and Muslim context. He was a featured speaker at Yale University Law School, at Ohio

State University, at the Persistent Vision Conference in San Francisco, The Open Society Institute in New York, The Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies in New York and at Amnesty International's Human Rights Conference – Global Pride, Global Action: Empowering the Spirit of Human Rights.

Sharma's first feature documentary, *A Jihad for Love* is co-produced with the UK's Channel 4, France's ARTE, Germany's ZDF, Australia's SBS, and U.S. LOGO. His work and the film have already been profiled by The New York Times, Variety, The Los Angeles Times, The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, Hollywood Reporter, indieWIRE, France's Tetu Magazine, San Francisco Gate, the UK's Gay Times, on NPR Morning Edition and NPR-Chicago and many others.

Parvez's feature debut is supported by more than 22 Foundations and 600 individual donors including the Sundance Documentary Fund, the Andy Warhol Foundation, The van Ameringen Foundation, The Hartley Film Foundation, The Mathilde Krim Foundation, The Andrew Tobias Foundation - Stonewall Community Foundation, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, The Fledgling Fund, The Bruce Bastion Foundation, The Foundation for Fairer Capitalism, The Ted Snowdon Foundation, and The Mark D. Hostetter and Alexander N. Habib Foundation. He was honored with a nomination for a 2007 Rockefeller Film/Video/Multimedia Fellowship.

With his wide range of experience in film, television and activism spanning three continents (Asia, Europe, and North America), and his proficiency in five languages (English, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and Punjabi), Sharma hopes to bring a rich cultural perspective and an honest and skillful depiction of Islam-and his very own communities- to this film and the courageous journeys it documents and the global dialogue it catalyzes.

Producer Sandi DuBowski

Sandi DuBowski is a filmmaker and writer based in New York. His feature documentary, *Trembling Before G-d*, was in theatrical release in the United States, Israel, Canada, Germany, UK, and South Africa (in the U.S. with New Yorker Films). *Trembling Before G-d* was launched at New York's Film Forum to incredible audience, critical, and box office response and opened in over 80 U.S. cities. *Trembling* had a World Premiere at the Sundance Film Festival and has been the recipient of twelve awards including The Teddy Award for Best Documentary at the Berlin Film Festival, The Mayor's Prize for the Jewish Experience at the Jerusalem Film Festival, The GLAAD Media Award for Best Documentary, The Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary at OUTFEST Los Angeles, and The Council on Foundations Henry Hampton Award for Excellence in Film and Media. The film was nominated for the Independent Spirit Awards for the IFC/Directv Truer Than Fiction Award. The L.A. Weekly named it one of the 10 Best Films of the Year. It was broadcast on BBC, ARTE, Israel's Keshet/Channel Two, The Sundance Channel, HBO Latin America, Australia's ABC, Poland's Canal Plus, Canada's The Documentary Channel, and other TV stations. An estimated 8 million people saw the film worldwide. Feature stories on the project have appeared in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Boston Globe, The Washington Post, NPR's Fresh Air with Terry Gross, Filmmaker Magazine, The Jerusalem Post, The Globe and Mail, CNN, and BBC News among other print and media outlets.

At the World Premiere of *Trembling* at the Sundance Film Festival, director DuBowski and Rabbi Steve Greenberg, the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, hosted the first-ever Shabbat at Sundance and with partner Working Films, an unprecedented Mormon-Jewish gay dialogue. Since then, DuBowski has traveled to 100 cities around the world to conduct over 800 dialogues and events with 200,000 individuals across faith, sexuality, age, racial, and Jewish denominational lines. Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, The Creative Capital Foundation and other foundations awarded Greenberg and DuBowski seed funding to launch an Orthodox Community Education Project in the U.S., Israel and the U.K. with the film (already eighteen Orthodox synagogues have invited the film to screen). They trained 11 facilitators in Jerusalem who held screenings and led dialogues for 2,000 principals, teachers, school counselors and therapists across the nation, breaking the taboo on discussing the issue of homosexuality in the country's Orthodox (and secular) school systems. And they convened the first Orthodox Mental Health Conference on Homosexuality.

DuBowski created *Trembling on the Road*, a dramatic 40-minute featurette that captures the dialogues, protests, and reactions - poignant, funny, angry, inspiring - of *Trembling Before G-d*'s life-changing movement around the world. It is included on the *Trembling Before G-d* DVD, which contains three hours of original films about the making of the movie and its movement, and was nominated for Best Documentary DVD of 2003 by the International Press Academy. In August 2007, DuBowski launched a Web 2.0. portal - www.filmsthatchangetheworld.com. Its first initiative is to spotlight, share and landmark the 5th Anniversary Celebration of *Trembling on the Road* by engaging 100,000 people

through global house parties and online events.

DuBowski is a recipient of the Rockefeller Foundation's Film/Video/Multimedia Fellowship. In addition, his work has received support from Skywalker Sound - a division of Lucas Digital, Ltd. as well as over sixty foundations including The Creative Capital Foundation, The Steven Spielberg Righteous Persons Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, Artslink, The Jerome Foundation, The Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media, The H. van Ameringen Foundation, and The National Foundation for Jewish Culture's Fund for Jewish Documentary Filmmaking.

DuBowski was selected to participate in ReBoot: A Network in Jewish Innovation, The Rockwood Leadership Program's Art of Leadership, and The Conversation at the Aspen Institute. DuBowski signed with Keppler Associates, one of the country's largest agencies specializing in professional speaking engagements. He has been featured at Yale University, University of Chicago, Harvard University, and over 50 universities nationwide. He has served on juries for The 10th Anniversary Hamptons Film Festival, The National Foundation for Jewish Culture, The International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences (The Webby Awards), The Council on Foundations Henry Hampton Award for Excellence in Film and Media, and the McKnight Filmmaking Fellowship. He has written for Filmmaker Magazine and International Documentary Magazine, and spoken on numerous panels at conferences and festivals - The Toronto International Film Festival, The Sundance Film Festival, The Sheffield Documentary Film Festival, International Documentary Association, The Hot Docs Film Festival, ShowBiz Expo, BritDoc, The Open Society Institute, and The Independent Feature Project.

Executive Producer Linda Saetre

A native of Norway, Linda Saetre is Founder of the New York based Saetre Corp, an international and multilingual media consulting firm. Saetre consults with and for high-end clients in the US, Europe, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

Saetre also serves as VP of Bonne Pioche International, the development and sales arm of production company Bonne Pioche, of the Oscar-winning documentary MARCH OF THE PENGUINS, which grossed over \$126 million worldwide and the upcoming Fox and the Child (Picturehouse). She and her staff are responsible for co-production and marketing and work tightly with the Hollywood studios and agencies as well as BBC, Channel Four, HBO, Sundance Channel, National Geographic and ABC. The Discovery Channel premiered the HD feature Paris 2010: The Great Flood, of which she is the Executive Producer, which is presented alongside other projects at www.bonnepioche.us.

Saetre graduated from New York's The New School for Social Research MEDIA Graduate Program in 1998. She also studied in Norway, Spain, France and England. After graduating, Saetre went on to work for independent film company Fox Lorber, producer Jim Stark (Factotum starring Matt Dillon, Down by Law, Coffee and Cigarettes) and Wellspring Media with five years as Executive Director of Sales and Co-Production. At Wellspring she spearheaded international acquisitions, sales and production of films and documentaries including Jonathan Caouette's Tarnation and The Beauty Academy of Kabul, which she executive produced and sold in Cannes.

She is a contributing writer to New York Times best selling authors Dave Eggers' and Vendela Vida's literary magazine The Believer and is fluent in Spanish, French, English, German and all Scandinavian languages. Saetre lives between New York – Paris – Oslo and her staff speaks Chinese, Arabic, Italian and Portugese.

Clients: BBC, HBO, MTV, Discovery Channel, National Geographic, RAI, Canal+, as well as all the leading film distributors and studios (Fox Searchlight, Warner, SONY, Disney etc). Saetre attends every major film and TV market.

Executive Producer Andrew Herwitz

Herwitz is the President of The Film Sales Company. Since its inception in 2002, The Film Sales Company has sold over 80 Films for Domestic and International distribution, including *Waitress*, *Crazy Love*, *Iraq in Fragments* (Academy Award Nominee '07), *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Born into Brothels* (Academy Award Winner, Best Documentary '05), *My Architect* (Academy Award Nominee '04), and *Kontroll*. The company has also raised financing for numerous fiction and documentary projects. Prior to establishing the company, Mr. Herwitz worked at Miramax for six years where he ran the Acquisitions department. He previously practiced entertainment law at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison LLP in New York City.

Selected Press

*CRITICS PICK! “Eye opening, brave.” – Sara Cardace, *New York Magazine*

“Fascinating and provocative...important.” – David Wiegand, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“A passionate, essential first step (to) expose the plight of a severely underappreciated stratum of the Muslim world...both haunting and inspiring.” – S. James Snyder, *New York Sun*

“Powerful, striking...critical viewing! provides a powerful voice for a marginalized population of the GLBT community.” – Gary Kramer, *SF Bay Times*

Critic’s Pick! “Powerful.” – Philip Kennicott, *Washington Post*

“Provocative, deeply felt, original and emotionally complex.” – Jim Ridley, *Village Voice*

“Heartfelt debut... gains depth of feeling as it goes and even develops something of a nail-biting narrative.”
– Nathan Lee, *New York Times*

“Revealing and moving...a gifted filmmaker.” – Bret Stephens, *Wall Street Journal*

“Dignity and despair woven tightly together...courageous.” – *The Guardian*

“Rich with compelling, often heartbreaking stories...a much-needed reminder that the foundation of any great religion consists of love and understanding.” – Phil Hall, *Film Threat*

“A much-needed cinematic wake-up call ... a frank, complex and at times heartbreaking look at the difficult lives lived by gays, lesbians and transgendered people in predominantly Islamic countries.”
– R.M. Vaughan, *Toronto Globe and Mail*

“Lifts the veil of secrecy...frankly brave.” – NPR, *Talk of the Nation*

“Numerous compelling stories...socially groundbreaking work.” – Kevin B. Lee, *Slant Magazine*

“A powerful look at the world of gay, lesbian and transgender Muslims.” – Philip Kennicott, *Access Atlanta*

“Fascinating!” – Jason A. Heidemann, *Time Out Chicago*

“An almost unbearably candid view inside the lives of queer Muslims...this film will both inspire and anger.”
– David Lamble, *Bay Area Reporter*

“Courageous...the documentary's greatest strength (is) its intimate portraits of individual lives.”
– Michael Hardy, *Boston Globe*

“At once a heartbreaking and hopeful documentary about the plight of homosexuals (men and women) within the Islamic faith.” – Douglas Weaver, *LA Independent*

“A powerful, honest and humane documentary that perhaps could not have been made had not someone summoned the courage to do so.” – Dan Bennett, *San Diego North County Times*

“An important story, and one that took no small amount of courage to make. It deserves to be seen.”
– Jean Lowerison, *San Diego Metro*