

STRANGE BIRD, MANEKI FILMS & PHILISTINE FILMS PRESENT

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A woman with a joyful expression is the central focus, smiling broadly. She is wearing a white top with orange and white striped shoulder straps. The background is a lush cotton field with other people working, some wearing traditional headwraps. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is one of hope and community.

COTTON QUEEN

A FILM BY **SUZANNAH MIRGHANI**

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COTTON QUEEN

a film by **SUZANNAH MIRGHANI**

Germany, France, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan / 93 Min / Color / 1:37 / 5.1 / Arabic



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SYNOPSIS

In a cotton-farming village in Sudan, teenage Nafisa is raised on heroic tales of battling British colonisers told by her grandmother, the village matriarch Al-Sit. But when a young businessman arrives from abroad with a new development plan and genetically engineered cotton, Nafisa becomes the center of a power play to determine the future of the village. Awakening to her own strength, Nafisa sets out to save the cotton fields – and herself. Neither she nor her community will ever be the same again.



Interview with **SUZANNAH MIRGHANI**

Where does the title “Cotton Queen” come from, and how did a small village’s struggles for the future of its cotton become the focal point for your first feature film?

I will never forget the first time I saw a cotton field as a child. It was like nothing I had seen before. This is an image that has stayed with me for a long time: a natural yet magical setting, almost mystical, adorned by wisps of white floating through the air. I tried to fill the central character, Nafisa, with the same sense of wonder about her environment. In reality, of course, **cotton is not just a natural beauty but is tied to global forces of industry and economy.**

When I was writing the script for Cotton Queen, I did a lot of research into the history of cotton. When reading one particular article, a footnote about the “Cotton Queen” beauty pageant caught my eye, and I knew immediately that it would be the title of my film and would form the backbone of my story. **Beginning in the 1930s, this competition was an annual publicity event to promote Britain’s colonial cotton industry through the beauty of young girls working in the mills of northern England.** The winner would be crowned in a public ceremony and would become an ambassador for cotton, traveling all over the world to promote the fabric. **British colonizers imported the beauty pageant to its colonies, including Sudan.** I found this to be such an interesting history upon which to build my film—one that places young girls at the center of industry, colonialism, and patriarchy. My film is about how girls struggle to break free from these forces in their own ways across different generations.

As I was scouting for locations in Sudan, I spoke with many cotton farmers and discovered all the recent changes affecting them. **I was surprised to learn that there is no longer any indigenous Sudanese cotton—traditional cotton**

has been replaced with genetically modified varieties, imported from abroad. This has completely transformed the ways in which farmers operate, and their livelihoods have become more dependent on large corporations, effectively breaking down their traditional and communal networks.

I knew this was an important story, especially since no one was talking about how this affected the communities in the area, and the lives of individuals. In most developing countries, like Sudan, where cotton is still harvested by hand, women have always been the primary cotton-pickers, giving them longstanding and intimate relationships with cotton. Women’s fingerprints are also woven into cotton, both the public industrial side of the resource as well as how it is used in private spaces. Beyond the fields, women weave cotton into thread, making most of the fabric-based household items, including clothes and bedding.

In my film, I place Nafisa at the center of these macro issues, to tell a more simple and human story about how these challenges affect a small village, and a young girl in particular.

This conflict around the village’s cotton coincides with Nafisa’s transition from girl to woman – a moment when new restrictions and constraints appear, and Nafisa must decide if and how to assert herself.

Nafisa is an ordinary Sudanese girl, who is placed in an extraordinary situation. At the start of the film, we follow Nafisa and her friends as they live a carefree life, picking cotton in the fields, cooling off in the river, and chatting about boys. I reflected much of my own adolescent feelings in Nafisa, as her secret crush on a local boy inspires her to write poetry and to daydream. This idyllic existence is short-lived, and her girl-world is pierced by the reality of her surroundings. Nafisa has to grow up and to wake up.



Interview with **SUZANNAH MIRGHANI**

Her world is turned upside down by the arrival of a businessman, who not only wants to marry her but to also claim the entire village cotton industry. Unlike the other girls, who swoon over the handsome stranger, Nafisa is cautious of his advances on her and on her fields.

Adolescence has always struck me as the most interesting and complex period of a person's life, and this is especially true for girls, who experience intense personal developments—physical and emotional—as well as external social developments, where they become subject to stricter controls of their bodies and beings. Although Sudan has undergone dramatic changes in terms of state politics over the decades, the strong communal and familial bonds remain largely unchanged over time, and so, for many Sudanese girls, the relationship between adolescence and increased social control is a constant feature of daily life.

In *Cotton Queen*, we see how both Nafisa and her grandmother Al-Sit, in her day, tried to navigate their own independent paths across different generations. Al-Sit and Nafisa's struggles are mirrored across generations: Al-Sit had to survive the destruction of colonialism, and now Nafisa must confront neoliberal forces creeping into the village. **Every generation of Sudanese girls must navigate a path through the minefield of Sudanese political and cultural environments.**

What was so interesting to explore in the dynamics of these inter-generational relationships between women?

Within this film are three generations of Sudanese women—the traditional matriarchs, who hold power over a household; the materialistic mothers,

whose main goal in life is securing a lucrative future for their daughters; and the adolescent girls, who dream of love and wonder about their futures.

Growing up in Sudan, I was always curious about what goes through the mind of a girl when her path is chosen: How does she feel? What does she truly desire? Why does a young girl have no say and yet her grandmother is the ultimate decision-maker? How does one go from being voiceless and vulnerable to gaining power and prestige within her lifetime? These questions are at the core of this film as I explore opposite ends of the female power spectrum in Sudanese society.

The culture of matriarchy is deeply rooted in Sudan's family formations, and is a legacy from ancient Sudan, which was ruled by kings as well as queens. In many Sudanese families, the matriarch, like Al-Sit, is a very respected figure. Even though she might be a frail, old woman, she often controls the fate of the women and girls in the household, especially when it comes to questions of marriage. Because of the matriarch's deep knowledge about the history and lineage of the extended family, she is very often the matchmaker, and family members come to her for advice on who is suitable for whom.

The film takes a delicate approach to sensitive issues like female circumcision by grounding them so firmly in the everyday – in Nafisa's personal, partly magical experience.

This film highlights how Sudanese girls must navigate authority in all its forms, whether patriarchal or matriarchal—from the specter of colonialism, to familial authoritarianism, to the needs of contemporary capitalism. This film touches on broad social and political issues, from feminism to colonialism to neoliberalism.



Interview with **SUZANNAH MIRGHANI**

After the people’s popular 2019 revolution, the authoritarian military regime of 30 years collapsed and was replaced by a brief period of transitional civilian rule. Two of the first major changes was lifting ban on creative self-expression, including cinema, and instituting a ban on female circumcision (more correctly known as female genital mutilation or FGM). This film combines both those issues, and is my contribution to both reviving Sudanese cinema and to upholding women’s rights.

I have always had a fascination for the magical realism genre, which I attribute to my surreal childhood memories of Sudan. My family left Sudan when I was a teenager. I grew up with a romantic nostalgia for the country of my childhood—a feeling that has always colored my image of Sudan. I can no longer remember what was real and what was childhood fantasy. Sudan, for me, will always be a place filled with fairytales.

In my relationship to Sudan, I am always a young girl, who dreams. I created Nafisa’s character with the same attitude: a girl who sees beauty in her society, despite many of the harsh traditions.

While the practice of FGM is now officially banned, it is difficult to enforce a law on an ancient custom that is so deeply rooted in Sudanese cultural tradition. In many places, FGM is widely seen as both positive and necessary to preserve a girl’s honor in a conservative society. I see my film as a way of mediating between a new law and an ancient tradition. Such customs will not change overnight, but this film can be part of a broader conversation on the topic. By living the onscreen life of my young protagonist, by sharing her fears, and by enjoying her desires, my hope is that audiences will come to empathize with a young girl and to support her cause.

As the first female Sudanese filmmaker to write and direct a fiction feature, how does it feel for you to release this film now, as Sudan is in a fractured state? What are your hopes for the future, and what role do you think and hope film and the arts have to play?

Under al-Bashir’s dictatorial thirty-year rule, the military-Islamist government issued all kinds of oppressive laws against women, depriving them of basic rights, belittling their contributions to society, and excluding them from meaningful participation in political or public life. **This film imagines a new future for a generation of young girls who strive to break free from all forms of oppression, whether familial, social, or political, and to highlight the question of agency and personal choice.** This film is just one small example of empathizing with a young Sudanese girl’s predicament. We need more representations of women, especially now, when Sudan is experiencing dramatic nationwide transformations.

Sudan lived a brief period of creative and political freedom between the 2019 revolution against a 30-year-old authoritarian military regime and the ongoing war, which started in 2023. During those few years, we witnessed an explosion of creative self-expression, and **women found a more inclusive space and a more equitable society in which to live. This happened once and is possible again.** I see Nafisa, the protagonist, as a symbol of a new Sudan—one that is outspoken, takes action, and inspires positive change. *Cotton Queen* is a film made for the Sudanese people, especially women and girls.

You were ready to shoot COTTON QUEEN in Sudan and were scouting locations when civil strife broke out. What was the journey you took to rebuilding Sudan on the outskirts of Cairo for the film?

Interview with **SUZANNAH MIRGHANI**

The tragic, ongoing war in Sudan—raging since 2023—meant that we could not shoot the film there, which was my original intention. With the conflict ravaging Sudan, we moved production to Egypt. The proximity of these countries, shared cultures, and similar landscapes of Nile and cotton fields made the most sense. Egypt was also the first country where most displaced Sudanese people traveled to, escaping the war. Most, if not all, the Sudanese cast and crew members in the film are currently seeking refuge in Egypt. We were fortunate to be able to work with these Sudanese communities in Cairo, and to build a new and hopeful sense of Sudan, even in their current displacement.

To find the ideal shooting locations, we scouted different parts of Egypt, from Aswan to Minya to Fayoum. **Aswan was the first logical destination in my search for a replacement Sudan.** Give Aswan's proximity to Sudan, the people and culture gave the right "feeling," but the hilly landscapes were anything but. We moved further north to find the appropriate natural environment, cotton fields, and Nile. Once we found a setting that fit, we began building out our village sets, creating a series of Sudanese home facades and streets.

Because there is no film industry in Sudan, sometimes we're obliged to go down unconventional routes. I decided to make a short proof-of-concept in 2020 called *Al-Sit*, to showcase my vision for the feature and to demonstrate the skills of a Sudanese crew and the talents of a Sudanese cast—most of whom are first-time actors. The short film was well-received, highlighting the possibilities of Sudanese cinema and proving that there is international interest in knowing more about Sudanese culture. It is this kind of recognition and support that is so needed to encourage the growth of a sustained Sudanese film industry. Through cinema, audiences around the world can finally glimpse some of the fascinating stories that make up Sudanese society.

Can you speak about the role of music and songs in the film, as well as Nafisa's poetry?

Because of the many restrictions on Sudanese girls' behavior and their set social roles and expectations, there are not many ways in which they can maneuver, speak their minds, or break free from strict social control. **Music, songs, and poetry are some of the few places in which girls find release, where they can compose lyrics that would be unacceptable in any other social context.** Wedding songs and working songs are largely made up of naughty lyrics in which girls have fun and find a sense of freedom.

I hope my film helps to advance the rights of young girls to speak up for themselves in similar situations and I hope it gives the necessary space for those in positions of power to empathize with young girls who have been marginalized, despite the family's attempts at protecting them. There have not been many films made in Sudan and so there have not been many forms of cinematic representation of Sudanese women and the various roles they play in society. In this film, I was careful to depict various types of Sudanese women within the same household, those with extreme power, like the matriarch Al-Sit, as well as those who are still finding their voice and exploring their own strength and sense of self—such as the young protagonist, Nafisa.







SUZANNAH MIRGHANI

Suzannah Mirghani is a Sudanese-Russian filmmaker and editor at Georgetown University in Qatar. Her short film *Al-Sit* (2020) is on Netflix Middle East and won the Canal+ Award at Clermont-Ferrand, among other prizes. Her recent shorts include *Virtual Voice* (2021) and *Kamala Ibrahim Ishag: States of Oneness* (2022), commissioned by Serpentine Galleries. *Cotton Queen* (2025) won the ArteKino Award at L'Atelier de la Cinéfondation at Cannes Film Festival in 2022, and is Suzannah's first feature film.

COTTON QUEEN (93 minutes, Germany-France-Palestine-Sudan 2025)

KAMALA IBRAHIM ISHAG: STATES OF ONENESS (7 minutes, Sudan/UK 2022)

VIRTUAL VOICE (7 minutes, Sudan/Qatar, 2021)

AL-SIT (20 minutes, Sudan/Qatar, 2020)

CARAVAN (7 minutes, Sudan/Qatar, 2016)

HIND'S DREAM (9 minutes, Sudan/Qatar, 2014)





بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وزارة التربية والتعليم
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جنة للاختار



STRANGE BIRD

Strange Bird is a newly founded Munich-based production company headed by Caroline Daube. Dedicated to distinctive, auteur-driven films with strong international appeal, Strange Bird was founded in close partnership with leading creative agency WOLF Consultants to bring original stories to the global market, uniting ambitious storytelling with strategic communication, marketing & PR expertise.

CAST

Mihad Murtada

Rabha Mohamed Mahmoud

Talaat Fareed

Haram Bisheer

Mohamed Musa

Hassan Kassala

Fatma Farid

Aya Yassin Altageel

Tagali Magdy

Tibr Magdy

Nafisa

Al-Sit

Babiker

Aisha

Bilal

Nadir

Faiza

Khadija

Farida

Al - Toma

CREW

Written & Directed by

Cinematography

Editing

Music

Sound

Art Direction

Costumes

Set Designer

Produced by

Producer

Co-Producer

Co-Producers

Suzannah Mirghani

Frida Marzouk

Amparo Mejías, Simon Blasi, Frank Müller

Amine Bouhafa

Emmanuel Zouki, Laure Arto

Pierre Glemet

Simba Elmur

Marwa Amer

Caroline Daube

Didar Domehri

Annemarie Jacir

Ossama Bawardi

Mohamed Hefzy

Jessica Houry

Alaa Karkouti

Maher Diab

Jutta Feit

Julia I. Peters

Stefanie Plattner

Suzannah Mirghani

Gordon Spragg

Michael Arnon

Laurin Dietrich

Alexander Funk

Rasha Abu Rish

Sara Günter ZDF Das Kleine Fernsehspiel

Martin Gerhard ZDF Arte

Executive Producer

Commissioning Editors

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in Collaboration with ARTE

in Co-Production with Film Clinic, MAD Solutions and JIPPIE Film

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