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Starless Nights

by

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Abstract

Starless Nights is a short narrative film about Ram and Maya, a Nepali couple in their thirties living in New York City. Ram is a filmmaker and Maya is a writer and actress, and they collaborate on their films. Their families opposed their marriage because they are from two different ethnic groups in Nepal. New York seemed like a place with creative freedom and opportunities. Ram is a dreamer and consumed with editing his film, while Maya has to be the one to earn a living in their adopted city. When Maya receives a job offer that requires her to be away from home for most of the week, their relationship is tested.

Starless Nights is a film about the filmmaking process and the life of a filmmaker. But it's also a story about immigration, home, and negotiation. We constantly negotiate in our lives to maintain our relationships, opportunities, and dreams.

Project Description

The film begins with Ram sitting at a dining room table editing a scene on a laptop. The room looks fancy and spacious with a large bookshelf. It's a quiet space but the city street sounds intrude with passing traffic and ambulance sirens. Ram pauses the video to make notes in his diary. On the paused frame, a woman stands facing the camera. The woman is his wife, Maya, who is the lead actress in the film that he's editing.

In the next scene, Ram comes home with a bottle of wine from Trader Joe's. Maya walks into the kitchen and, sensing a celebration, asks him if they received the Swiss grant they are waiting to hear about. Ram tries to hug her but she pulls away, telling him that she is still in her work clothes. "Change, and I will tell you," he says. As they sit drinking wine and eating, Ram tells her that the film that he's been editing has been invited to premiere at two major film festivals. Now it's up to them to choose which one they'd like to premiere in. If they choose Venice, they might even get to walk on the red carpet. Maya is excited and looks up pictures of the red carpet at Venice, but her excitement turns to worry. She says that they don't have any clothes that would be suitable for that kind of an event. And traveling to Venice is also going to cost them a lot.

Then Maya reveals that she has news for Ram. She got a job offer as a live-in nanny. Ram is upset that Maya would have to stay overnight at the job for much of each week. They've come all this way to New York, only to be separated. She reminds him that they need the money. She also reminds him that the fancy looking place where they've been staying is really a friend's place and they will be asked to leave soon.

Starless Nights is based on how my wife and I, as immigrants, struggled to make ends meet in New York City despite the critical acclaim and success of our films. It's a film specific to our relationship as filmmakers but it also hits on universal themes of financial struggle, negotiation, and making allowances — themes many people encounter when trying to achieve their goals. Our story of struggle doesn't feel at all different from Academy Award winner Ang Lee's story. In the essay "A Never-Ending

Dream” which resurfaced after he won the second Academy Award for the Best Achievement in Directing for *Life of Pi* in 2013, published in website, whatshihsaid.com, translated by Irene Shih, Lee writes,

There’s an old Chinese saying: “At 30, one stands firm.” Yet, I couldn’t even support myself. What could I do? Keep waiting, or give up my movie-making dream? To appease my own feelings of guilt, I took on all the housework – cooking, cleaning, taking care of our son – in addition to reading, reviewing films and writing scripts ... I enrolled in a computer course at a nearby community college. At a time when employment trumped all other considerations, it seemed that only a knowledge of computers could quickly make me employable. For the days that followed, I descended into malaise. My wife, noticing my unusual demeanor, discovered a schedule of classes tucked in my bag. She made no comment that night. The next morning, right before she got in her car to head off to work, my wife turned back and – standing there on our front steps – said, “Ang, don’t forget your dream.” And that dream of mine – drowned by demands of reality – came back to life. As my wife drove off. (Lee)

The story of *Starless Nights* unfolds over four meals on four nights in New York City. As we go from one night to the next, the tension in Maya and Ram’s relationship rises. They go from speaking in person to video chats, their meals degrade from fancy to cold instant noodles, and Ram goes from editing in a comfortable space sitting next to Maya to working in a tiny closet-sized bedroom alone. The city sounds start off quiet and become increasingly loud; by the end of the film it feels like they’re closing in.

Starless Nights is the first short narrative I’ve made since completing my two recent feature films. While writing the script, I was inspired by works of filmmaker Pawel Pawlikowski (*Ida, Cold War*) and Robert Bresson (*A man Escaped, Four Nights of Dreamer, and L’Argent*). Bresson, in his book “Notes on Cinematograph,” writes,

“Cinematograph is a writing with images in movement and with sounds – nothing rings more false in a film than that natural tone of the theater copying life and traced over studied sentiments” (Bresson 2). Filmmaker Pawel Powlikowski, is quoted in *The Guardian* article “How we made *Ida*: Paweł Pawlikowski on the journey from script to film” in 2014:

The film I was after would be made of strong graphic images and sounds. It would work through suggestion rather than explanation. It would mainly consist of self-contained scenes, done from one angle, in one continuous take, with no informational dialogue, no functional shots, no plot devices or any of the usual tricks cinema uses to suggest or elicit emotion. A film in which form, emotion, idea would be one (Powlikowski).

Sound and Picture are two ingredients of cinema, and each is independent of the other. But, still, in most films images are in the foreground and sound plays a supporting role. Bresson and Powlikowski’s films are different, since sound and picture have equal weight, and integrate with one other very well. After seeing their films, I was inspired to try writing with sound and picture, and thinking about them independently.

Initially I wanted my thesis to be my third feature, but financial limitations and the global pandemic shifted my focus to creating a short film, and one that would have only a few actors and as few locations as possible. Though the project pivoted into a new idea, it complements my past work in that it’s inspired by conscious cinema, films based on personal or lived experience with socio-political undertones. Filmmaker Robert Bresson’s statement “Make Visible what, without you, might never have been seen” (Bresson 7) has been my creative guide.

My last feature film, *White Sun*, which I wrote, produced, and directed, explores life in a Nepali mountain village in the wake of civil war. It follows characters like Durga, an empowered single mother who is forced to beg a man to sign paternity papers so her daughter can attend a school because the country's law unjustly prevents her from passing citizenship to her daughter.

My upcoming feature, *The Sky Is Mine*, set again in Nepal, unfolds against the backdrop of violent protests by the dark-skinned Madhesi ethnic group. It is the story of Pooja, the first female superintendent in the Nepal police force—a light-skinned, tough, no-nonsense cop—and Mamata, an outspoken dark-skinned Madhesi who sympathizes with the protestors. These women are thrown together as they search for two kidnapped boys. The film explores race, gender, discrimination, and national borders.

In *Starless Nights*, the scene Ram is struggling to edit is from *White Sun*. In the scene the woman, Durga, is meeting with her ex-husband Chandra for the first time since the beginning of the Civil War, in which Chandra fought with Maoists against the regime for an "equal" society for all. But when asked by Durga to help sign paternity papers for her daughter, he refuses. In *Starless Nights*, I wanted to reverse these traditional gender roles during a moment with Ram and Maya in the kitchen. Ram is cooking fish, and Maya fears that the smell of their dinner will cause them to be kicked out of the apartment or remain on her clothes and affect her job. Earlier that day at a job interview, Maya was told by the employer that she smelled of Indian food. This made her fear for her job prospects and she brought the fear home. "Now all the clothes will smell like fish," she shouts. "They will never let us stay here again. Use your common

sense sometimes." Ram doesn't answer. He quietly continues cooking. Maya opens the windows herself. She walks back to the kitchen, after having changed into different clothes, and apologizes to Ram. Ram hugs her in return. In Nepali society it's not common for a man to stay home and cook and clean while a woman looks for a job and sustains their life and future. I try to challenge those kinds of traditions whenever possible through my works.

Research Analysis

In many ways my whole life has been research for my films, including *Starless Nights*. I was born into the Madhesi ethnic group in a small rural town in Nepal. Madhesi make up about one third of the population but we have no representation in the government, the army, or the police. When I was a child, my family moved to an area that was predominantly populated by light-skinned, higher caste people and I was constantly bullied. It was only when I started going to the movie theater and seeing arthouse and independent films in Kathmandu as a young adult that I could grapple with the deeply rooted racism in our society and how it had impacted me. I saw myself in the films of Spike Lee, Robert Bresson, Abbas Kiarostami, and Yasujiro Ozu. I was inspired by the power of cinema to tell stories that allowed people to see from others' perspectives, to understand our differences.

Since there weren't any film schools in Nepal, I studied management in college and tried to learn the filmmaking craft slowly through jobs. I worked as a journalist for a local newspaper, and assisted filmmaker Tsering Rhitar Sherpa on his film *Karma*,

which is where I met my wife, Asha. She was a cast member, and I was the assistant to the director. We have collaborated ever since. In 2008 we co-founded Aadi Production in Kathmandu, which by now has produced two internationally acclaimed narrative features and several shorts. In 2011 we shot our first narrative feature film, *Highway*, which was a bus journey from an eastern town to Kathmandu. The journey was challenged by civil disobedience protests blockading the trip, a frequent phenomenon since the end of the civil war in 2006. The film explored many issues including peace, governance, personal rights and gay marriage. The film screened at top festivals and garnered us a lot of support, though not financially. *Starless Nights* is a dramatization of that time when we were working on our second feature film, *White Sun*. We had so much encouragement from the film community, but we struggled to afford to live and navigate a new country, trying to make a home, and experiencing a new version of the oppression and racism we had experienced in Nepal.

My wife and I moved to New York City in 2011, and while in New York I had access to an extensive virtual library of films via Mubi, Kanopy and the Criterion Collection. I was also fortunate to travel to different countries screening my films at festivals, and I watched many of the films presented. I was especially inspired by Robert Bresson's films, including *Pickpocket*, *A Man Escaped* and *L'Argent*. And while writing and editing *Starless Nights*, I read several writings by and about him. In his book *Notes on Cinematography*, Bresson writes "Don't let your backgrounds (avenues, squares, public gardens, subway) absorb the faces you are applying to them." (Bresson.15), Because of the pandemic I was forced to set the story indoors, and his

writings and films encouraged me to think about the background and space differently than I would have initially.

I found it hard to write *Starless Nights*, perhaps because it was too autobiographical. When I was researching how other filmmakers develop and write, I encountered an article in *The Guardian* titled “How we made *Ida*: Paweł Pawlikowski on the journey from script to film.” I had loved Pawlikowski’s *Ida* and *Cold War*, and found his process very inspiring. He said,

Some characters are easy to write. I know them: they’re like some aspects of myself or like people I’ve known. Wanda was one of those. Others are much more elusive and difficult to capture on paper, though I know they exist. *Ida* belonged to the latter category. We gave her some temporary dialogue in the script, to have something down on paper, but I knew that it wouldn’t be until I cast the right actress that the character would thicken out and ring true; only then could I find her the right words. The writing never stops. The inventing, the distilling, keeps going during the whole process, the casting, the rehearsing, the scouting, the sleepless nights. (Pawlikowski)

Asha—my wife, writer, and actor—was going to play Maya, but we didn’t yet have Ram cast. Finding Ram, the location and crew were the next big challenge.

Thesis Production Process

In the first draft of *Starless Nights* the story was told from Maya’s point of view. Since she is the one who was going out to work, I structured the script around her interaction with the outside world—on the subway, the city streets, people she met at the employment agency, and rich New Yorkers who interviewed her for the nanny position. Due to COVID and financial constraints, however, my wife and I suddenly had to leave the city and move back to Nepal. We found ourselves with a movie to be made,

set in New York City, but we had to produce it in Nepal. Because Nepal and New York don't look alike, I had to keep everything inside, and in tight frames. Asha and I decided to change the point of view to Ram's and we worked with sound to create the city's presence. Bresson writes, "What is for the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear – to find a kinship between image, sound, and silence. To give them an air of being glad to be together, of having chosen their place" (Bresson 26). This concept became a creative guide for me. The sound design, with its layers of street sounds and ambiance, created the feeling of New York City.

Once I pivoted to focus on Ram's point of view, it was actually freeing to be inside the limited location spaces and play with how Ram embodies them. Ram is completely consumed by the film that he is editing and as the film progresses, the space around him becomes tighter and tighter until there is nothing except him and his laptop screen. His world is limited, whereas Maya interacts with the outside world. When she is home, she opens windows, letting the sounds and space widen.

Ram is editing a scene where Chandra, the main character in *White Sun*, has just returned home and is back in Durga's life after many years away fighting against the regime. Though he wants to regain a relationship with Durga, he refuses to take responsibility and sign the paternity papers for Durga's daughter. The relationship in *Starless Nights* mirrors this dynamic. Ram feels that making films is a way to make the world a better place, but he avoids the real-world responsibilities required to earn a living and pay the bills.

When the film was focused on Maya's perspective and at the time we lived in New York City, we had already come a long way with pre-production. Asha was always going to play Maya, but it was difficult to find the actor to play Ram. I had wanted him to be dark skinned and speak the language and to have acting experience. Eventually we found an actor of Indian origin who was willing to learn the lines for the film but then we suddenly had to move back to Nepal, rework the script and start the planning process all over again, with location scouting and casting. I no longer could work with classmates in Hunter's Integrated Media Arts program, so I also had to find a cinematographer. There is a saying in Nepal: "When you look for rocks, you find God." Incredibly, the actor from our second feature film became available to play Ram and, unexpectedly, the cinematographer who had shot that film was planning to be in Nepal to shoot a documentary. Finally, everything seemed to be falling into place. Initially the cinematographer had three days he could devote to *Starless Nights*, but then his documentary shoot got extended and his three days turned into two days and then, due to the European Union's ban on Nepali airlines for not following flying safety rules, he could no longer fly to us but had to spend an entire day driving and arrived at midnight with only 10 hours the next day to shoot before his flight home. I had never shot an entire film so quickly. I couldn't sleep. Bresson has rightly said, "film is a voyage, and you can never be sure what will happen next. Be ready to discover" (Bresson 12).

The editing process was another challenge. Nepal was experiencing another countrywide lockdown and everything closed. I had no access to a film studio or technicians. I am not a sound technician or sound editor, so doing everything myself

made it a challenge. Also, my thesis advisors are in New York. I had to edit and upload cuts to Vimeo for feedback. But luckily Andrew Lund, Kelly Anderson, and Michael Gitlin, all my three advisors, made themselves available even during odd hours due to our time difference. It's always hard to translate a story shot in one culture to another, but the feedback from my advisors helped me make my story clear and effective to a broader audience, and to get the New York City sounds right. At first, I wasn't using black frames to punctuate the separation of the different days in the film, and I didn't use music as I generally tend to play with non-musical sounds. The conversations with my advisors also helped me to figure out what to tighten in the edit, and what shots to extend for emotional impact.

Audience and Exhibition

My earlier films have been screened internationally, and released theatrically in over two dozen countries, including the United States. They have premiered at major festivals like Venice, Berlin, Toronto, Busan, and New Directors/New Films. They've also screened at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Lincoln Center in New York, and at universities including Harvard, Yale, University of British Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, New York University, and various CUNY schools. My second feature has been distributed online on Mubi, Hulu, Amazon Prime, Kanopy, iTunes and on VOD platforms, including Sundance television.

We believe that *Starless Nights* will speak to a larger audience and we'll seek to onboard a world sales company and premiere it at a major international film festival with

a sales market like Locarno, Venice, Quinzaine or Toronto, and apply for all the top-tier regional film festivals worldwide, including festivals in the United States.

We would also seek a broadcast deal with channels like New Yorker, PBS, and other Internet streaming sales. And we believe it will resonate with the education market, universities that teach cinema, and universities with Himalayan or South Asia study programs. We plan to create honest and open discussions around the film and the life of the filmmaker as we screen in different towns and villages and will partner with local organizations to host debates.

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