

SOPHIE HOGAN / 11. 5. 2023

Storytelling as a form of escape. Interview with Apoorva Satish

Born and raised in Chennai, a colorful conglomerate of urban villages, Apoorva Satish was fascinated by the power of Tamil film in state politics, igniting a passion for creating films that are socially and politically aware. She received her MFA degree from FAMU, Prague. Her graduation film *Kanya* premiered at the Busan International Film Festival (2020) in the Wide Angle: Asian short film competition category and later the film also competed in the 2021 Student Academy Awards. Apoorva Satish is currently based in Prague and developing her debut feature film. Národní filmový archiv, Prague is screening in Ponrepo cinema on the **15th of May 2023 at 6 PM** the film *Kanya* followed by the discussion and film *Salaam Bombay* (1988) directed by Mira Nair at 8:30 PM. (There is free admission to both screenings.)

How did you get involved in filmmaking?

I never wanted to be a filmmaker; I was actually training to be a pilot because I loved physics. My parents were really against it for some reason, I think they were worried about me dying in mid-air! My dad wanted me to take over the business, but I didn't want to and ended up on a filmmaking course. After I graduated, I thought, maybe I could be interested in writing and directing, it sounds like a lot of fun. I ended up attending a program in Israel. The day I landed was the day the Gaza War began, there was no way I could go back home, so I thought I might as well do this workshop! The first thing they taught me was how to survive a rocket bomb attack. I think I spent most of my 3 months there in bomb shelters. Sharing stories with other people in the bomb shelter almost made me forget what was going on outside, and I realized this was what I wanted to do. Storytelling has always been a form of escape for me.

No matter what happens in my life, when I go back to writing stories, none of it matters.

How did you develop the idea for *Kanya*?

When I was doing my master's at FAMU, I was encouraged to make films that could be shot in Prague, so I was writing Czech films for Czech audiences. I was a foreigner with too little knowledge about the culture to write something powerful. I have always leaned towards writing stories that are more personal to me. I thought for my thesis film, I should try and write about one of my own experiences, instead of another Czech film. I guess it was my own experience of the ritual that made me want to create a coming-of-age film about a girl who doesn't understand what is going on within her body. I had the skeleton of an idea from a short story I wrote ages ago, the story deals with a swimmer and her new marriage. My cinematographer read the story and encouraged me to try and incorporate it into the film.

Could you tell us a little more about the ceremony and traditions explored in the film?

In the past, in my great-grandmother's time, this ritual was the way of informing the community that you had a woman who was ready to give birth, and this was when child marriage was legal in India. My great-grandmother met my great-grandfather through this ritual when she was only 11 or 12 years old, she gave birth to my grandmother when she was 13. Of course, child marriage is now illegal in India, but we still want to hold onto these traditions and have the ceremony to let the community know that a woman has started her journey into womanhood.

Are the themes and events based on your own experience?

Yes. When I got my period, I had no idea what was happening to my body, it is a very taboo topic in India. Luckily, my mum gave me some hints of what changes were to come, but I didn't realize how big of a deal getting my period was going to be. My mum called everyone in my family to tell them the news, but I was so confused about what was going on. I remember all these interesting rituals, but I didn't know what they meant. I think it was the most awkward experience I have ever had. I found it really crazy that this ritual has such a strange history. I am not against the ritual, I just feel

like, as a woman, I should have had the choice. In that sense, I would say *Kanya* is a journey to understanding these rituals and why they exist in the first place.

What has the reception of the film been like?

My thesis film, *Kanya*, has opened up a lot of avenues for me, it has been to a lot of international film festivals, and people have started noticing me. I have also signed with an agency. I would say the film has been more well-received outside of India. I think this is due to the way the film is treated, rather than the topic. It could also be due to the number of films coming out of India. Indian audiences are used to very straightforward narratives that are easy to digest. When my short film was released, I think it was very difficult for the majority of the audience to understand it. I found audiences who identified as female understood it without question. I was very pleasantly surprised that the National Film Archive wanted to screen this, it is a huge honor.

Has the final piece changed from what you envisioned at the start of the process?

Yes, I think so. When it started it was supposed to be a longer, more narrative film, and halfway through the shooting I realized I wanted it to be more of an audio-visual experience, so we cut down the shots significantly. We made the film by working backward, we had the images first and then worked back to the story. We were just about to start the shoot, but the day before, my mum told me this very interesting story of how she knew what it meant to have her period. When she was a kid, and my grandmother had her period, she had to cook for the family. This is because, even now, in India, when you get your period you are not supposed to touch anybody or anything that anyone else touches, because you are considered impure for those 4 days. I still don't understand why. My mum used to ask my grandmother why she wasn't cooking, and every single month she would tell my mum she had been bitten by a dog. She told me this story about 12 hours before the shoot and I knew this had to be in the film somehow. I think the story of the dog in the film is an homage to all the women in my life who have also had to go through this.

Something I found striking was the audio track, could you tell me more about it?

I knew that I wanted something not too melodramatic, and I wanted to include a lot of Indian instruments that are less common in film scores. There are a lot of traditional instruments, such as the Chitra vina, which has over 30 strings. I used this instrument as part of the soundtrack, mainly for the water sequences. I felt for these scenes, I needed the music to be more surreal. For the ritual, I knew I wanted it to sound like an Indian prayer or a hymn, but I didn't want there to be any kind of language. Whatever you hear in the music is actually gibberish! We ended up manipulating the sound on the tracks a lot, which was inspired by Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson. In the end, we spent about 4 or 5 months just trying to get the music right.

What was your favorite part of the process?

I think my favorite and the hardest part was shooting underwater, it was something that I had never done before. When shooting underwater you need to have a deeper understanding of physics, so my earlier passion became very useful! The underwater sequences were shot in a waterpark outside of Prague. They have a 30m deep pit of water used for SCUBA diving certifications. We rented out the pit, but the filming was very difficult as the pit was narrow and deep, and we wanted the water in the film to seem extremely wide and vast. We ended up shooting the entire underwater sequence vertically and added a black screen to the background of the pit to make it look like an endless pit of water. It was a very interesting and challenging task also due to the safety issues that came with working with the set lights so close to water, as well as finding the right underwater camera. Nobody had done this before at FAMU, so we were basically learning everything on the go!

Do you hope anything will change because of this film? And if so what?

I don't know if anything will change because of this one film, I would have to make a couple more films to change anything! I definitely think that the women who belonged to my mother's generation could now understand where I was coming from, understanding that their children should have the choice of whether to have this ritual or not, so I thought that was a big win for me. It was not my intention to change anything on a larger scale because I feel like that needs to happen organically. I want my film to be something that sparks a conversation.

Finally, what are your future plans?

I still have my debut feature film to make, I still have a lot more to do. I feel like I am the kind of filmmaker who likes to be adventurous, so I think I will try to do something different, something I have never done before. My debut feature film, for example, is a dramatic satire that is focused on the relationship between a father and a daughter. I have also started writing a comedy series that I am trying to onboard with an Indian platform. I am also working on a horror short film I want to develop into a feature. I think I am still trying to find my voice in terms of filmmaking, so I definitely want to explore different genres and not put myself in a box.