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Chek and Hava

Komal Ashfaq

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master

of Fine Arts in Film and Animation

School of Film and Animation

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

Approval Date

(5/09/2021)

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Committee

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Abstract



Chek and Hava is an absurdist romantic comedy about using your boyfriend to rebel against your parents. While remaining light and easy to watch, it is additionally meant to have three intentionally designed layers:

1. The first layer is narrative in nature. It revolves around Hava bringing home her boyfriend Chek- an unemployed artist, that she knows her wealthy demigod parents will disapprove of. Her parents ultimately force Chek out of his carefree life and into a corporate career, accepting him and deflating Hava's rebellion. She finally breaks free by exiting the system of their beliefs and trying to form her persona independently rather than as a counter to her parents. She does this through refusing to allow their dictation of identity.
2. There is cultural and thematic symbolism within the characters' power dynamics- Mother is an Urdu-speaking ray of light, meant to be a symbol of the Muslim deification of motherhood/wifehood, the ultimate womanly aspiration. She wants Hava to be like her. She is also meant to be inescapable, like a prison searchlight. Father is a blue-skinned corporate man to signify the absurd appearance-based prejudices that persist today- unless you have money. He takes control of Chek to retain the family image. Hava has no control over her own life and so uses Chek as a rebellion point. Her confines and provisions have left her unable to form her own goals.
3. The third layer is visual language. The film has a rich visual language, littered with Islamic evil-eye motifs, surreal art-versus-corporate visual dynamics, South Asian-influenced décor and fashion, and animated/collage elements. It has conceptual abstractions in several nightmare sequences which are accompanied by poetry in my native language, Urdu.

Introduction



Creative inquiry:

Who are you as a person, when your identity is being dictated to you?

In early adulthood, you already aren't sure who you are. What happens when all your choices are dictated to you? This story comes from experiences within conservative cultures, notably South Asian family dynamics. They draw from the writer's own experiences navigating personal choices while living in an enforced dependence on your parents. This includes things like who you're allowed to love, what career you can choose, how often you can leave the house, and even what kind of hobbies you can develop.

Revolving around the above question, the creative inquiry is further sub-sectioned into the following:

1. What happens to a young person's identity when they are forced into certain roles and norms
2. How a young person fights these roles, but from within the system
3. The rationale between cultural and capitalistic requirements
4. How do you experience love, friendship, selfhood and growth within these systems

This film is based around my attempts at deconstructing cultural and capitalistic social norms that detract from forming one's own identity. It is specifically about a nuclear family where the forcefulness of the parental values obstructs the development of the lead character, Hava. The character Mother represents sociocultural trappings and Father represents capitalistic ones. Thematic abstraction is used to highlight the

absurdity inherent in enforced belief systems.

The plot is a cultural allegory about the confines of conservative parenthood and its effect on the identity formation of young people. It explores how immigrants and othered groups struggle for a western-centric image of success *and* try to meet cultural ideas of respectability. In doing so, they stunt the individual growth of their offspring. It also creates a bubble environment, where children rebel *within* the set of rules they exist in rather than try to break out of those rules entirely. For example, sneaking out instead of moving out.

The story stems from my experiences in my 20's living with a strict Muslim family in Pakistan, the absurd rules imposed upon my love life, and the resistance to my pursuit of the arts over more lucrative careers. Both the lead characters exhibit damage from the intrusiveness of Hava's parents.

At its core, the film is meant for an audience of young people from culturally conservative households and advocates for them to exercise agency. Unlike existing work with similar themes, the film does not offer American liberalism as the solution. Instead the solution is in anyone from any culture being able to make choices outside of an enforced system, whether that system is capitalism, culture or family.

Visual language

A lot of my creative and research inquiry stemmed from trying to capture the *feeling* of that world without depicting it literally or demonizing specific cultural beliefs. As such, I

leaned heavily into visualization, with art and music videos becoming a core part of the research.

As a result, this live action film is partly a hybrid art-piece, because of the originally created paintings, set design, and animated segments envisioned for its design. Hava inhabits a visually rich world of material wealth that is beautiful on the surface but garbage when you take a closer look. Objects will be shaped out of foil, food will be packaged and store-bought, materials will be tinsel and spray paint. The visuals communicate how surface-level some of our ritualized rules can be and how the curated image of success can be hollow.

Tone

Despite the themes, the film remains light and with elements of comedy. I believed it was necessary to lean on humor as a way to balance suspension of disbelief with leeway for sincere emotional performance. I am trying to fashion a tonal note similar to what is found in shows like *The Addams Family* (Levy, 1964), *Pushing Daisies* (Fuller, 2007), *The Good Place* (Schur, 2016) etc, all of which base themselves on a supernatural premise that is largely played for comedy, but grounds itself via an emotional core. The film was necessary to make because it is important to let conservative cultures know that young people need to develop independently, without their personal happiness seen as secondary to tradition and social pressure. I am unsure if the tone of the film communicated that without preachiness but am hoping that is the case.

Review of Research



Fine Art- Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt- Junk as sacred

Much of Hava's world is only superficially beautiful, as can be seen by the junk like materials used for props, including gold paper plates with soup cans served on them. Thematically, this functions as a comment about how surface-level some of our expectations around love can be, and how ritualizing those expectations makes them harder than necessary to discard. Additionally, it is meant to communicate to an atmosphere of unnecessary reverence imbued upon found objects. While there is a push in the western world to re-apply precolonial glory to traditional symbols and objects from cultures all around the world, there is something to be said about seeing through belief systems. This is a very important theme in my own film because it prismatically breaks up the conservative expectations of what is holy and the human experience of living in restrictions derived from divinity.

I got this idea from the works of artist Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt. He is a gay artist who self-professedly was a runaway street urchin. His artistic expression was sealed into its current form by his participation in the stonewall riots, for which he was recognized at the White House in 2011. It is possible that it is his Catholic school education that has led to the prevalence of Christian imagery in his works. The use of low-cost materials like tinsel, foil and paper may also be a reminder of his poverty as a young New Yorker. Before he was discovered, he was living on the streets. (Zucker, 1980) His rags to riches quality of life, forceful seeking of identity, and junk objects transformed into sacred art were all themes very relevant to my film.

His work is characterized by a complete refusal to be understated. It is within the found-object genre. As a gay man in the 60's he belonged to a time where homophobia was pushing for the erasure of the gay population. They were forced into hiding spaces, forming underground communities for safety in numbers and their spaces were often raided by policemen. Lanigan-Schmidt was a participant in the stonewall riots that changed all of that.

His art seems to flip the script on his experiences. It captures everyday life but also makes fun of revered objects, fusing the two and demanding we view them with the same lens of respect and reverence. The material evokes thought constantly because despite the junk medium being common, the social narrative constructed by him is rich and layered.

I am trying to achieve a similar tonal complexity in my film. Objects and symbols of power, such as divine light, evil eye jewelry, and gaunt stone heads fill up the narrative. Their level of threat keeps flowing and changing. From the points of view of mother and father, the objects are sacred, but from Hava's point of view they are dangerous or inert. From Chek's point of view they make no sense. The audience hopefully receives these mixed clues to layer their own perceptions of the visuals. However, the tone might also potentially be hard to pin down or understand, which is a risk I understand and often face in my films.

TV show- The Addams Family- Elevating character through abnormal design

The Addams family (Levy, 1964), created in 1938 by Charles Addams, is a universally known fictional family. It is noteworthy for marrying elements of horror with the traditional values of a nuclear family. It has now persisted in pop culture for 83 years, because of its singular appeal. The family exists within its own bubble of the dark and damned, but viewers are conditioned to connect with the characters because we can see the normalcy within the abnormal. That is, we still see a family and can follow character exchanges, motivations, and storylines as if they were regular people. The family itself is wealthy and self-absorbed, both unconcerned and unaware of making the world around them uncomfortable.

I had a similar blueprint for the family structure of Chek and Hava. Despite the seemingly normal exterior world, Hava's house and family exists in its own dark space. It can be entered by unwitting outsiders (Chek) but they will not fit in. The people who live here are caricatures of wealth, culture and aspirational symbols. This includes Hava herself, who is an almost comically helpless spoiled rich girl. Earlier iterations of the scripts had her appearance be exaggerated (extremely tall and wearing only traditional clothing).

Similar to the Addams Family dynamic, Mother, Father and Hava's interpersonal conflicts remain at the forefront of the story, whatever alien shape or form the characters may take.

Film- Rabbits by David Lynch (Lynch, Rabbits, 2002)- the functionality and logic of dreams

A large part of the inspiration for the film comes from images I have seen in nightmares. Mother derives from a Malaria hallucination I had as a child, where a golden ball of fire was scolding me. The junk-food covered dinner table derives from a dream in which I was trapped in a house where all the food on the table was in packages that could not be opened.

IMAGE AS TEXT- A VEHICLE FOR EMOTION

The cinematic execution of these images stems partly from the reality-bending dream-like landscapes of David Lynch. For my film, I replaced a lot of expository dialogue from the script with animated dream sequences. Similar to Lynch's films, there is an epistemological significance to Chek and Hava's dreams. In particular, I borrow ideas somewhat from his film *Rabbits* (Lynch, 2002), including the dissonance of casual dialogue with cryptic intent against cryptic images. The rabbits that inhabit the small room do not react to the disturbing sequences of events that come to pass, but as external viewers we feel lost.

In one of the dream sequences before meeting Hava's parents, Chek sees domineering glitching images of Hava in an old television set. An underwater Hava, surrounded by flowers, sees eyeballs open up all around and focus on her. Gaunt statues with blank eyes swim in and out of focus as Hava approaches them in a dark garden, with rhythmic poetry recited in the background. All of these sequences have relatively clear emotions associated with them- disturbance, fear, anticipation and the sense of being watched.

The dreamlike quality I am trying to mimic is also well put in this critique for *Mulholland Drive*:

"This elaborate process of evasion and self-justification cannot work. Sleepers awaken; the external world reasserts its hold. The process is doomed by internal contradictions as well. As evasions of Diane's sins, Betty's virtues lead Betty to emblems of those sins, thus reminding the dreamer of a nightmarish reality." (ANDREWS, 2004)

DREAM LOGIC AND THE INSPECTION OF RULES

The script also follows the logical structure of the human dream, present in many of Lynch's media, notably *Twin Peaks* (Lynch, 1990) and *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001). That is, when you are in a dream it is very difficult to realize you are within the dream even though day-to-day logic fails. For example, even when flying in a dream, you do not pause to consider that it is impossible in the real world. Flying feels like the real world. There is a similar aura within the script and images of *Chek and Hava* where the characters largely ignore fantastical elements around them and navigate in accordance with the fantastical rules. For example, Chek chooses a microchip to imbue himself with a corporate persona.

An extrapolation of dream logic is that the rules we abide in real life are similar. We take them for granted, never questioning their unnecessary nature. This is parallel to elements like Hava having to select a man for her parents approval or disapproval, rather than making an independent decision. The juxtaposition is meant to communicate that dream logic is similar to real life norms- we are placed into a situation where we are expected to abide by dictated expectations, however odd they may be if you begin to inspect or question them.

As in *Rabbits*: “The discrepancy between Rabbits’ unintelligibility and its intelligible reception by the off-screen audience emphasizes the contingency of language and the ability of convention to invent meaning out of nothing.” (Runkel, 2020)

Literature- Haruki Murakami- The added dimensions of Magical Realism

Some of the screenwriting inspiration came from the matter-of-fact magical realism of Haruki Murakami’s body of work. The Japanese author is famous for how he creates a detailed, corporeal world with heavy elaborations in its minutest corners and then somehow pulls ethereal vapors out of that world. It is as if his immersive cities and countrysides have ghosts layered atop them. His narrative fuses the two, somehow giving the impression of being even more real than real life for its added experience of dream and spirit. (LAI, 2007)

For example, in *Kafka on the Shore* (Murakami, 2002), the protagonist travels to the base of a well, where he is met by hallucinations about past lives and interacts with “real life” people who visit the surface of the well. He remains at the base of the well for a long time, but this situation is not remarked upon or considered unusual by the “real life” characters. In short, the spirit world is blended with the real world in a way that makes it remarkable to the reader/viewer but unremarkable to the characters within that world.

This coexistence and co-dependence of the supernatural and spiritual is a baseline for *Chek and Hava*. The “normal” world exists for Chek, and the murky separate world of darkness and ritual exists for Hava. The two cross in and out of each other’s spaces, acknowledging the differences but accepting their right to exist. The only elements of their setting that the two opt to question is when it encroaches their understanding of self. As long as the magic and systems stay outside of influencing them, they have no trouble with the existence of those systems.

Eventually, at the climax, they two have to step outside of the dream system and into the more grounded world that they prefer. The supernatural loses hold over them, which gives added gravitas to the potency of having choice.

Thesis parameters



The thesis parameters included the preproduction, filming and postproduction of a 20-minute partially animated film.

Concept:

The concept was originally developed from a string of dream images from nightmares. I knew I wanted to make the film intensely personal, but also bring in elements of my art knowledge, and have a social issue related theme. At the same time, I did not want the film to feel preachy. Accordingly, I tried to base it on image as much as possible because my weakness is becoming too expository. To add image density I drew out a series of images from nightmares I have had: A large blue skinned man, a very dark garden with the threat of something on the periphery, a menacing spark of light that was blocking my exit from my room.

In the meantime, I developed a story idea of a girl whose boyfriend offends her parents. This was partly derived from my own life experiences.

I combined the two areas in the script, and tried to keep image out of dialogue-based acknowledgement, rendering it while not in the foreground, as punctuation marks for the situations.

Preproduction:

Scripting: Scripting was completed over the summer, in August, and reviewed by several peers, colleagues and faculty members. It went through ten drafts in total until the month of shooting, October 2020.

Storyboarding: After the scripting, the preproduction was very heavily dependent on illustration. The storyboards made for the scene were detailed down to every single frame of cinematography, with key visuals colored. There was no way to communicate the effect I needed without the images.

The storyboard also substantially helped my camera team and I understand what shots were complex for camera movements, what camera movements could be motivated given the weight of the scene, and what angles/movements were unsuitable and unnecessary. The storyboards were completed in September 2020, and guided the location scouting process.

Location scouting: In September 2020, location scouting was done by producer Selma Pena and DoP Teng Chen. They visited several homes, graveyards, and cafes to figure out locations. After they shortlisted spaces, I visited those spaces with them and we figured out camera angles, focal areas, production design and lighting well in advance of the shooting.

Casting and rehearsals: The audition process began in August and continued into September. There were a total of 23 people who auditioned for all roles. All the auditions were done on zoom, and so have been recorded. Casting was finalized in early September, and there were a total of 15 rehearsals on zoom and in-person up until shoot date. The rehearsal calendar was planned weeks in advance so as to accommodate the actors' schedules. The female lead, Mahima Saigal, was a professional actor who had been on Broadway, and was in the US on an extraordinary talent visa. She was sourced via the Asian American Film Lab (Mahima Saigal, n.d.) and contacted via information on her website. The AAFL is a non-profit organization attempting gender and racial parity in film and TV.

Jamie Burrows (Father) had a theater background and was sourced via the FVASA actors' master list. Jahan Ara Chughtai (Mother) had a theater background, and was a professional voice over artist. She was sourced via Instagram links crediting her in an advertisement by AIKaram Lawn. Davida Bloom (Mother) had a theater backgrounds as well and was sourced via Clara Riedlinger's contacts. Shaun Huff was a regular in RIT films and auditioned for the role via the SOFA Actors Network facebook group. Will Jarrett was a newcomer, a 3d animation student and was sourced through a prior friendship.

Props, wardrobe and costumes: Because of the visual richness of the storyboards, props and costumes were very close to what was envisioned. Chek, the male lead, was to wear purely neutral colors and pastels. Hava, the female lead, was to be dressed in emerald green. She was designed to give out the feeling of royalty, but green is also the

color of envy. South Asian decor was purchased and spread throughout the set, and many variations of evil eye products were present. Hava's jewelry had eye motifs. Many prop items had to be made by hand, including paintings for Chek and decor items.

Production:

The live action scenes were shot over a total of 4 days- 11th, 12th, 17th and 18th October 2020. There were a total of 89 shots in the film. There was a crew of 17 people in total, in rotating groups and on different days. Since this was a shoot in the middle of the covid-19 restrictions, all cast and crew were tested before shoot dates, crew remained masked, sanitizer was provided, and individual snack bags were provided to ensure no food was shared. Voice acting roles were done after the shoot. Since Mother as a character was a ball of light, she was a voiceover role. She was not present on set, and her lines and dubbing for Mother were done over 2 days in December 2020.

Total cast and crew

Hava- Mahima Saigal

Chek- Will Jarrett

Father- Jamie Burrows

Mother- Davida Brown and Jahan Ara

Barista- Rosie Sirk

Mourner- Selma Pena

Writer/director - Komal Ashfaq

Producer- Selma Pena

Director of Photography- Teng Chen

1st AC- Rylie Field

2nd AC- Brandon Granby

2nd AC- Lidmercy Marrero

2nd AC- Wen Tong

Boom op- Robert Stokes

Boom op- Jordan Williams

Sound Mixer- Addison Farrell

Grip/Gaff- Rosie Sirk

Grip/Gaff- Sam Nix

Postproduction:

The editing process took several months because of the number of iterations and cuts the film went through. A lot of expository lines were changed, ideas were rearranged, and entire scenes cut. In addition, there was a lot of animated scenes that were planned as a supplement that later were cut out due to a shift in focus on VFX problems and an inability to add them seamlessly into the narrative.

The mother character and some dream sequences required VFX work, which was commissioned to a professional VFX artist Mark Rogers. He worked well with me over a month, but disappeared before submitting the final render, 2 days before my deadline, leaving me to have to learn and do the VFX myself. Because of this, the VFX is not up to the mark and the one thing that has not gone as I envisioned in the film. Prior to festivals, I may have to redo it.

Design, implementation considerations and methodologies



Visuals functional as a story layer:

The film has a lot of visual symbols interwoven into the narrative, such as the following:

The Eye: Hava is followed by the evil eye in every scene she is in. Her jewelry is eye-themed, her bedroom is covered in eyes and her father's dining room is full of eye symbols. Chek's bedroom is full of sketches of Hava's eyes.

Ubiquitously now, the evil eye symbol is meant to ward off envious thoughts that can cause you harm. However, it is also a symbol of constant watchfulness. It is the ultimate symbol of parental presence, in terms of both love and control, safety and watchfulness.

The Holy Light: Hava's mother is a violent ray of light, echoing the divine role of motherhood in Abrahamic and South Asian religious practice. She also functions as an unopposable force, able to filter in through spaces. Like light, she is also immaterial and inherently formless because the role of mother is often at the expense of being an individual in traditional families.

A world without sustenance: Hava's home and the world of her parents is filled with artificial splendor. Symbolic of the surface-level quality of it all is that the food in the lavish dining room is junk and processed meals. Chek is served a microwave meal still packaged. The center of this world is hollow, without nutrition and without true support for Chek or Hava.

The making of Mother:

Although Mother required substantial postproduction work as a 3D animated ball of light, I still had to use practical effects to give a sense of realism to her presence. She had to affect her surroundings because she is volatile, her light changes color and intensity, and when angry she lets out a gust of powerful wind. To create her, I used a narrowly directed beam from a Tener light, a smoke machine to give visibility and density to her light rays, and a leaf blower to create a forceful gale upon her arrival. Other elements included crumbled gold leaf paper, so that particle flakes fly when she arrives at the scene. The VFX work included a particle simulated ball of fire created in After Effects, with falloff and events (such as lightning). There is a translucent fiery spherical surface encasing a white flame.

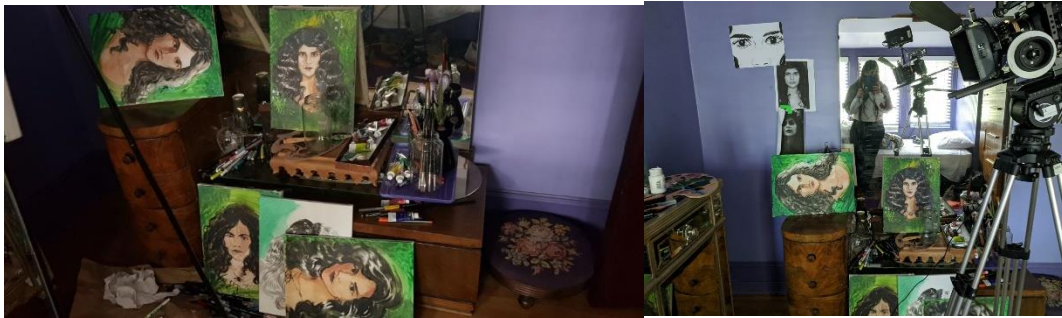


The making of Father:

Father is meant to be a kitschy blue-skinned figure, derived from the garbage-based art of Thomas Lanigan Schmidt, and surrounded by junk food. I applied and reapplied my actor's makeup myself over the shoot day, using 4 shades of blue, 1 shade of black, and a sheen of body-paint glitter that also helped seal the blue paint. To give him an added eeriness, father has his own red glow using a Halloween-light which simulates water caustics. The movement in the light brings out the glitter on his face. Since father is secondary to mother, the eye symbol is pointed at him too, in addition to Hava. Despite his appearance, he holds overinflated importance and control in the scene.



Chek's bedroom: Since Chek is a comparatively lower income character, his room was very small. Because he is a painter (albeit not a very good one) his room is littered in paint, portraits, unfinished canvases, brushes, and photo references of Hava. All the paintings were made by hand. There were 12 paintings made for the film. All the art supplies were my own.



The dinner table: Although there aren't many shots of the table itself (so that some subtlety remains) the table is covered with packaged, unopened junk food to contrast with the otherwise luxurious surroundings. The characters have gold plates and spoons, but they are made of paper and plastic. Sometimes there are microwaved meals, still in package, and sometimes there are full unopened spaghetti-o cans. As my actors put it, they were in a “lavish world without real sustenance”.

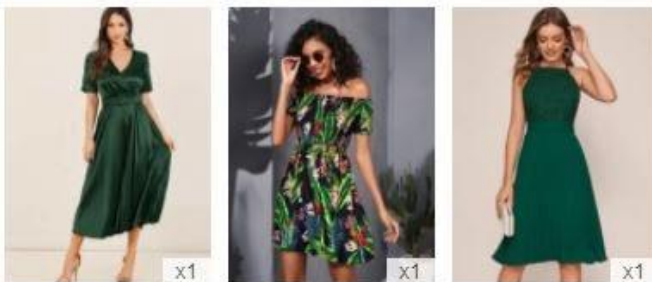


The house in the void: Hava lives in a house that doesn't give you a sense of time. It is perpetually dark. As you can see below, every single window is carefully blacked out. If a window is visible, it has black cloth behind the glass. This adds to an air of mystery, claustrophobia and eeriness to all scenes shot in Hava's house.

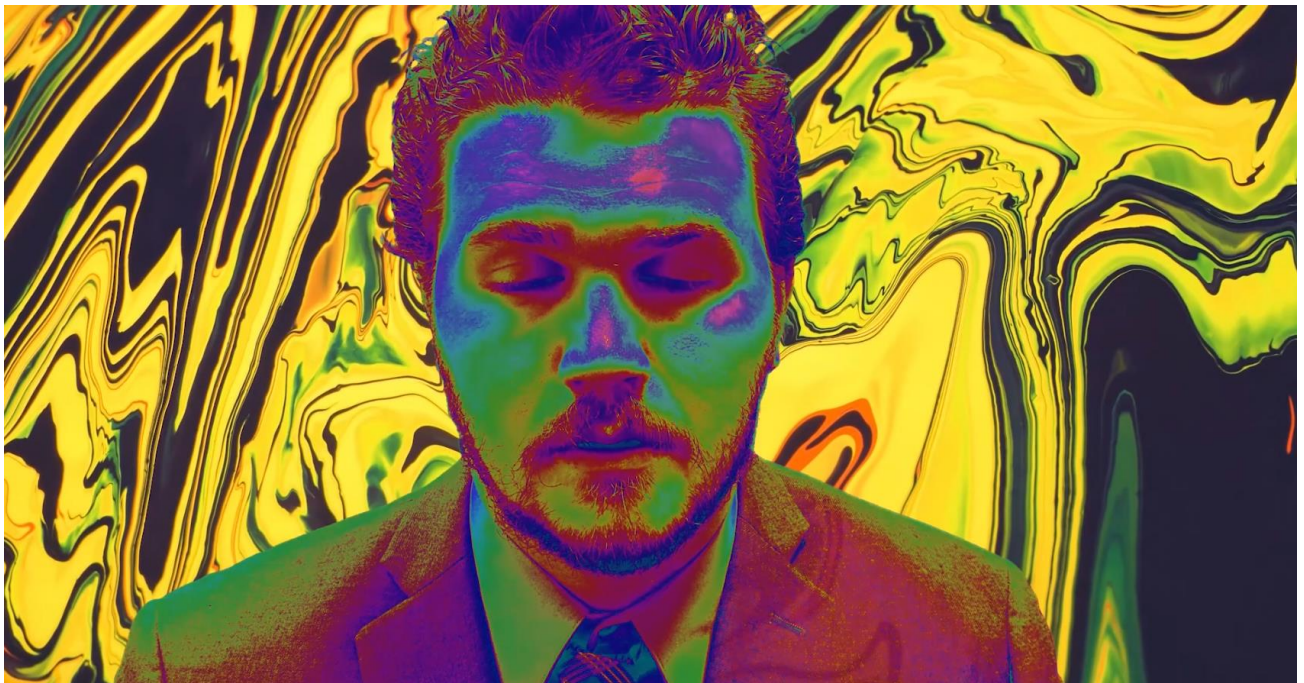


Props and wardrobe:

Since the film is highly stylized, I spent a lot of time planning and researching what to buy for production design. As an illustrator, I had to use my composition ideas to think of how to decorate the set. I bought Hava's wardrobe using an overall gold/green color theme. For the evil eye motif, a lot of eye themed jewelry was bought, including earrings, rings, and necklaces. An extremely heavy quantity of LED candles, evil eyes, Asian decor and bedsheets, dupattas and middle eastern lanterns were also purchased. I had to arrive three hours early to set so that I could decorate all the rooms, including placing the evil eyes, scattering Chek's paintings, adding candles, creating the dinner table etc. Some prop and wardrobe items can be seen below:



Concept, design and implementation iterations



Methodology based iterations

While the story remained mostly very true to its original iterations, elements where visual methodology had a lot of room for exploration evolved over the process. Most notably, dream and nightmare images and animated components changed.

For example, Chek was originally meant to have a nightmare where Hava's angry face was within an old TV screen. In the final iteration, the TV screen was against a galactic overlay with white noise over it within the sequence of Chek converting into a corporate man. This was meant as a glitch mimicking neurons as well as the galaxy, with Hava as a subconscious "channel" of control in his brain.

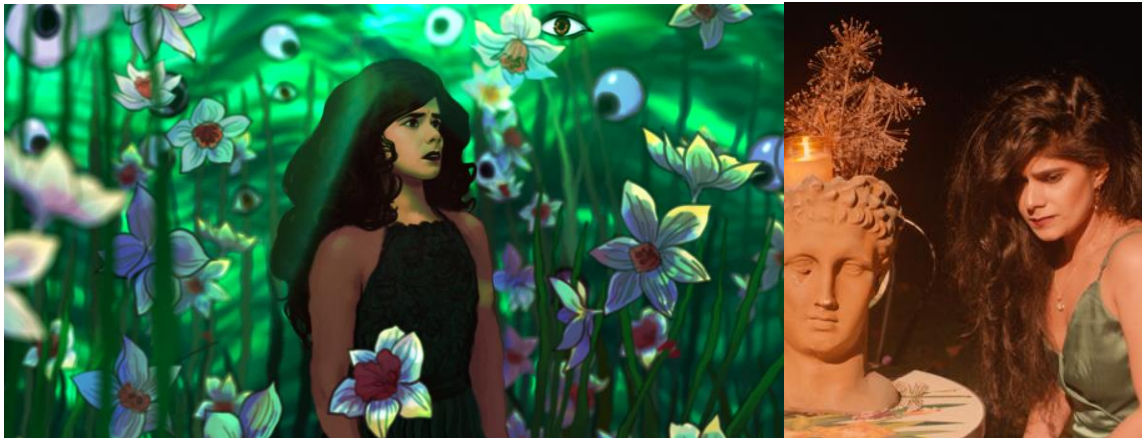


Similarly, the colors and themes for Chek's nightmares sequence were originally envisioned to be very drab and gray and the footage provided was designed as such. Instead, the final composite includes chromatic layers flowing through Chek's skin

against a backdrop of paint swirls and rainbow waves. This was done to emphasize what was intended as a hypnosis and rebirth process.



Finally, the statue sequences were meant to be supplemented with 2D animated sequences. However, since the two styles did not gel together well, the 2D animation was dropped. There are around 4 animated sequences completed for the film that ended up being deleted, and which include hundreds of assets.



Technical issues and troubleshooting



Financial constraints leading to technical problems:

The main reasons for most of my technical failures, as always, were financial. The budget for the film was calculated at approximately \$3000 to shoot, and \$2000 for postproduction. As a student, I worked 20 hours a week during the semester and the full 40 hours during breaks to come up with this money. This put a lot of constraints on my time as well. Luckily, around \$700 came in from crowdfunding.

The long work hours take away a substantial amount of creative time for minimum wage. To save money on rent, I moved to a much further house to live for free with a relative. However, this displaced me from SOFA resources. Overall, the film has cost \$5000, and I have gone into debt because of it, lost access to resources, worked excessive hours, taken on freelance work and spent many sleepless nights trying to do everything at once.

However, I feel I was still able to communicate a huge portion of my original vision, and have enough material to refine further for festivals. The main problem is that I could not get good enough VFX artists for the budget decided for post-work, and I could not shoot enough scenes in the house because of the cost of renting the Airbnb location we shot at. Both these things I feel had a substantial negative impact.

I was also unable to hire animators to do some of the animated sequences, and so had to do them myself, painstakingly, frame by frame. I drew over 600 individual frames and

almost gave myself carpal tunnel, but had to keep working through it in incredible pain. In the end I cut these because I could not blend them into the narrative well enough.

The film was also a Carole Fielding Grant semifinalist, which would have helped a lot because then I would not have had to work every week, but I ultimately did not get it.

VFX quality

The most pressing challenge was that last minute, the VFX artist disappeared and became unavailable on all communication platforms. He began file uploads a week in advance of my submission deadline, but ultimately disappeared without completing the uploads of the final renders, leaving me with only a few renders and PNG sequences.

Since the film is heavily dependent on Mother, who is mostly VFX, I had to learn a new software, Adobe After Effects, and do the VFX myself, 48 hours before the submission deadline. I had to watch loads of tutorials, become familiar with a terrifying new software interface, and figure out a lot of VFX plugins and particle generators. In the end, Mother was created with a mixture of VFX Copilot sphere, hand-made textures, shockwave stock footage, and the limited knowledge I had of 3D animation.

At the end of the day, while not perfect, the VFX looks all right, and is based in enough practical effects to not be too distracting. It does give the film a low-budget vibe, but hopefully this will be easily rectified in the future prior to festival submissions.

Closed captions

Because of the last-minute rush to render the VFX after having to do it all myself, I did not see the captioning layer was toggled off among all the other layers. The film was bilingual, and so the closed captions were extremely important. I notified the people in charge the next day, after realizing the render had no captions baked in, and also offered to send in the .srt file. However, due to policy limitations and a lengthy appeal process, my request was denied and my film was to be screened without captions.

This would also mean that all my effort, work, tears, and the labor of my team would be for nothing because nobody would be able to understand the Urdu portions that Mother speaks in. In addition, it was also a huge accessibility concern in a school that has a large deaf and hard of hearing population.

Luckily, I was able to create my own personal link for captioned screenings on YouTube, and sent it out to all faculty members, explaining my situation and requesting feedback. A faculty member who is extremely supportive of students offered to forward my email to the student body as well, and so my film was largely seen with captions and everyone had access to the captioned link in screenings as well. Because of my email, I also received an outpouring of support from both faculty and students, and some excellent feedback that will greatly help me.

Audio problems

For the park scene, the lighting was perfect but the wind was extremely strong, creating huge difficulties for the audio mixer. My sound team did both the boom op and mic'd up the actors with lavs so that in a combination of the two we could salvage dialogue. One lav died, so we had the idea to do double the amount of takes, swapping lavs. In postproduction, a friend wrote a python script for me to clean noise out of audio. This, combined with some ADR work was done within a week of the shoot date, and led to fairly good quality audio with only occasional detractions from the wind.

However, some work remains to be done due to uneven results from the AI and the differences between the ADR and the AI-cleaned audio.

Lighting problems

There were two nightmare scenes shot in the garden of the location. However, there was no electricity in the garden and none of our stingers were long enough to allow lights to be brought outside. In addition, the house was on a hill, meaning transporting the lights downwards to the garden would be difficult. My DP and I fixed it by having the light brought to a window overlooking the space, pointing it downwards, and communicating with grip/gaff via phone.



Evaluation, Feedback and Screenings



Thesis Committee Evaluation and Feedback

Over the thesis year, the committee members provided me with a lot of invaluable feedback on the themes, cuts, edits and character changes for the film. Brian Price gave me extremely detailed feedback on my cuts, with both enthusiasm for what he liked and honesty for what he felt did not work, with very specific detail. He listened carefully to my concerns and distinguished between narrative motivations and character motivations with which the story could move forward. His feedback was robust, attentive and encouraging. Frank Deese offered macro-level story suggestions and refinements for dialogue, as well as presenting a constant stream of encouragement during the process. Thesis chair Ambarien Alqadar gave me advice on focusing the story and themes and would occasionally ask me to consider the intent and purpose of each scene when I was hesitant to cut something. As a result of their feedback, I cut out a lot of fluff and changed a lot of the pacing. I followed almost all the feedback from Brian Price for the final cut. His feedback is noted below:

Feedback from Brian Price

This looks really good. So much progress since the last cut I saw! Congrats!

Here are some thoughts (all very picky) I had while watching this cut:

Wow, love the opening, esp. the music crescendo. But there seems to be a slight sync problem on “Mother!”

The quality of the mother’s voice is really nice, but feels inconsistent throughout. Sometimes I hear more reverb, sometimes I hear a second voice in a lower

register (ala The Exorcist). All these sound filters sound great, but make sure her voice is consistent.

Also, in terms of consistency, I really like that the mother's presence casts a light on Hava when she talks (or at least gives her appearance an overexposed quality). Sometimes this seems to be missing, like when Hava is in bed. Perhaps the choice is that these visual and auditory cues change according to Mother's emotions. But I would suggest they remain consistent. The COLORS she exudes may vary with her emotion, but I'd suggest some visual cue of her presence in every scene she's present.

I don't always know what is going on, but I'm never bored. The exception is the brief moment at 2:10 (the opposite is foil?) when I have no clue what's happening. If you are looking for confusing moments, that's the chief one for me.

The cuts of Chek waking are a tad awkward, almost jump cuts. Maybe that is your intention but I think you can smooth them out. The rest of that scene is really nice and I love the artwork! Just a thought: could you come into this scene with a visual connection (from Hava's face in previous scene, cutting right to a painting of her face in this scene?)

The pacing feels off at the start of the coffee shot. Could we get a J-cut of the barista's dialog beginning in the cemetery?

I would cut Chek slamming the flowers down on the table. I'm confused by the motivation. Just have him hand them to her in the next shot.

Again, the pacing is slightly off at the start of the walk, can you cut in deeper to the hand-holding (not sure we need all three shots prior). And make sure to check the

sound levels here. The volume fluctuates (I realize you're fighting the wind here). But the OTS cuts during the conversation are really smooth. There is however an odd dimming at the very end. It almost starts to feel like a fade but it doesn't complete. Maybe it was an eclipse?

At the dining table, I think that Dad is revealed too quickly. He should be third, after Hava and Chek, if possible. And "there she is" is a bit OTN, can that shot start after the line?

I didn't get the line about Hava's skin.

I couldn't figure out if Mom was still present during the whole dining room scene. Did she leave? Her exit wasn't obvious, yet it felt odd that she doesn't "appear" through much of the scene after her entrance. On second view, I assume her last line was a farewell, so perhaps the subtitles will make that clear. Also, sound cuts out oddly at the end, prior to the J-cut.

In general, I did find the dining room still drags a tiny bit. Potential cuts: that skin line or the second half of Chek's reply to his aspirations or the two feet/punishment line). I actually think you could go right from the CU of Chek's eyes, to the sound of applause, to the next scene.

Odd cut between "heroin" and "blow." Can you smooth that out? (maybe go right from "heroin" to Chek's "No")

The two shots at 13:10 are very cool, but seem from another movie. I'd go from Chet on screen to Chet in cubicle.

Could we come in a little later on the second dinner scene? It really goes to a great place, but takes a bit long to get there. I know you want the awkwardness at the top,

with the silent looks, but I feel we got those already in the first dinner. I was confused by Hava's reaction to "Have you learned your lesson?" What does she throw on the floor and what is she wiping off with the napkin? Both actions seemed unclear. But I love the physical confrontation at the end. Just a thought: what if you intercut wiping off dad's blue face with angry shots of mother (rather than the cuts to black). I'd increase in tempo here until it crescendos with some kind of explosion (fade to white?) that dissolves more gradually into final tableau. The cut to black to final scene feels too abrupt.

I confess that I don't understand the significance of the final shot. Is this picture of Hava somehow different from the others he's drawn? As the final image, I do wish it had a bit more clarity. Perhaps some ADR could clear it up, without being too OTN? Or perhaps you are going for the ambiguity of it.

Audience Feedback from screenings:

The film screened Sunday May 9th at around 5 30 pm on the YouTube livestream for SOFA Sunday Afternoon Block 4. I received a largely warm and positive response to the film, with people telling me they loved my ambition and were engaged and intrigued in the film. Most of the critical points talked about how some areas, notably sound and VFX, were still unrefined. Many people told me that despite time constraints, they found the VFX work impressive and believable enough. A lot of the positive comments talked about how entertaining the film was, keeping them engaged for 18 minutes without feeling like it, and how the world and characters drew them in. Attached below is some of the written feedback I received:

DAN LATOURETTE, ADJUNCT FACULTY, SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION, ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Obviously there is polish to be done, but we all know that. Anyway, this is one of the coolest films I've seen from sofa in a while. Not only the surreal mixed in with very real issues but just the fact you paint your main characters as gradients - they have good and bad parts. Mahima was an incredible choice here and her exchanges with her mother ground that fantastical nature. I like that opening scene a lot because we are overwhelmed with the imagery but the dialogue is familiar and that sets us up for more. At first the intro of Chek was hard for me to wrap my head around but his first exchanges with Hava made it funnier and far more interesting than I remember. I like just like how you throw caution into the wind and go for it visually and narratively. It was just really fun to watch so I hope you are happy with it because it's still an obvious accomplishment.

MUNJAL YAGNIK, FACULTY, SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION, ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Congrats on a really fantastic film. Huge step up from all your past work. Worthy of a graduate thesis project. I was happy to see you present your work today! Keep growing and inspiring! CT, Really excellent and expressive work. This was a hard film to DP and your creative intent was well captured.

HOSS WHEELER, MFA 2D ANIMATION, 2021

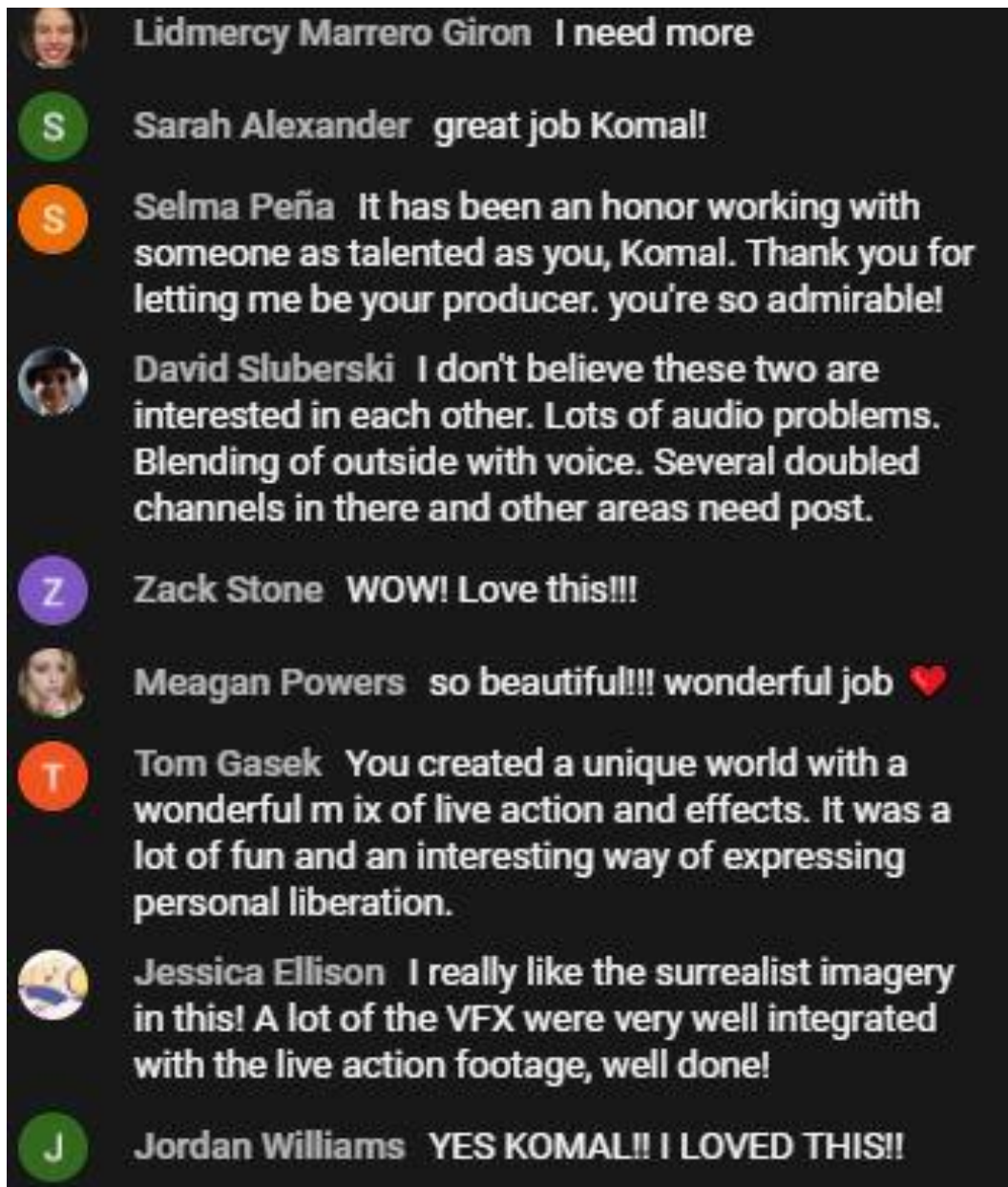
First off I think you made a really great film and it has a lot of really cool concepts. I don't think the captions take away too much since almost all of it is in English except the opening and the scene in the end. You can still get the main idea even if it's not captioned so don't worry too much about screenings. I do have some feedback for you and it will seem a little critical but that's only because I know you do great work. And I'd

expect the same in return. I think the main thing that stuck out was a good part of the dialogue felt on the nose and could've used a little more subtext. Like when Chek says "stop walking all over me." That felt a little out of nowhere and maybe could've used a little more character building at the beginning to get a better sense of their relationship. You do establish their relationship but it feels very to the point. It could just use a couple more moments to really let the audience connect. The ending dialogue too where they're talking about what the parents wanted and that she doesn't like herself also felt really expositional like they had to state what happened in case the audience missed it. I'm not great at writing dialogue so I can't really give you an example of what I think could feel more fluid.

A few other nit picky things. For me the tone was a little hard to pin down. I couldn't tell if it was supposed to be funny or serious. Like with Chek stealing the flowers from the grave. That being said the interviewer asking about Chek's porn habits was funny. I know you had to do vfx at the last second yourself so take this with a grain of salt. Maybe consider if you are able to have someone go through and do another edit. I think the father could have used something else to emphasize what he is in terms of visuals. I think he was supposed to represent the universe? He just felt a little out of place as a painted man next to a literal sun. Maybe just like a shadow with some swirling behind him like a black hole or twinkling stars or something. I think the father could have also used a little reverb in his voice too to emphasize that. As for the rest of the vfx that warp sequence after Chek ate the chip felt like after effects vomited into the film. Like everything and the kitchen sink was thrown in there. I get what it was going for but

maybe a more controlled thematically tied warp would fit better. Even if it's just like flashing lights or something to represent the energy of the parents as beings.

SCREENINGS COMMENTS





Adrian Placencia That was insanely good! The characters, the premise, the dialogue. It was all so distinguished and evocative. Loved it!!



Linge Liu so many films about moms 😊



Lidmercy Marrero Giron ^ this was so ambitious and I just love this story so much and ahh. Breathtaking. The mom as light the dad



TingYu Chang Beautiful film!! Congratulation! Komal!



Liz Fan great job Komal!! Congratulations!



Lidmercy Marrero Giron So creative and incredibly well thought. I admire your work so much, Komal, and I hope you can continue creating!



Will Jarrett Turned out great, Komal



Yue Zhang Good job, yeah I agree the captioned version is easier to understand, that is amazing you did the VFX too, that is cool, reminded me of TLOTR



Lidmercy Marrero Giron Mom power on mother's day



Suzan1200 Very well done. The world building is complex in a good way. I want to go back and rewatch and see all the things I've perhaps missed the first time.



Mari Jaye Blanchard Mahima was excellent in this role. It was refreshing to see her let the artifice go in the final scene.



Suzan1200 And even though the mother was a ball of light, I could feel her emotions



Teng Chen It's really your style and story. I am surprised by the fine cut. Interesting editing, now I can see there's a bigger story behind. I know how much effort you put in. Congratulations, Komal



Lidmercy Marrero Giron What an awesome team 🙌



Flip Phillips I am very pro-practical ball of light.



Selma Peña We love you!!! you're SOFA's MVP



Suzan1200 I don't think the vfx is shoddy. For two day learning, it's quite an amazing feat



Emma Oshio Amazed that the film is over 18 minutes, it didn't feel like that long. Congratulations to Komal! 🍷



Anosha Ashfaq So dynamic and well done! Great job all around!



Joseph Jackson Congrats Komal



Selma Peña I agree with Munjal, this is going places!



Amy Adrion @RIT FVASA Are there still 4 more films this afternoon?



RIT FVASA @Amy Adrion yes, the show must go on 😊



Sarah Gaygen Komal you're so awesooooome! 😭 I only just got to tune in at the last bit since work is finally winding down, but what I saw looked so cool! Can't wait to watch the whole thing when I get home!



Kit Kitaka komal you are an inspiration everything you do is amazing thank u for all u do <3



amy ash beautiful work komal



Matteas Corner Congratulations Komal!!



Komal Ashfaq you guys!! thank you so much ❤️



Komal Ashfaq i'll refine it a lot before festivals

Conclusion



While this film was a challenge, and still has refinements to undergo, the reactions from faculty and the school community make me feel that it was fairly successful. The world struck people as interesting and believable, and many students reached out to let me know they would love to follow these characters in more stories about them. Character building is, I feel, one of my stronger traits. Distinct character is the core of everything I try to make, with everything else following along. In this instance I feel I have been successful. People talked about the characters like they were real people.

Secondly, as a genre experiment, I found this film difficult to compress into the exact tone I wanted. However, I appreciate the learning experience and opportunity to try to mix genres together like this. I combined a rom com with a bit of fantasy and still retained cultural elements without making culture the gimmick. However, I was less successful at establishing tone, because much of the criticism said they could not tell if it was supposed to be one thing or the other, most commonly wondering about whether it was comedy or drama. My intent was to have elements of both, just like in real life, but I fear I may have muddied up the tonal clarity through that ambition.

Finally, I feel satisfied that I told a cultural story from a cultural perspective, without othering or exoticizing myself or my lead actor. They are superseded by fantastical elements, which makes it easier to go along with things like arranged marriage, parental approval of who you love, and the inability of a grown woman to leave her home. All these restrictions are relatively unusual outside of conservative pockets, but my audience did not feel the need for me to explain them. I also hope I avoided the East-Bad/ West-Good dichotomy that often encompasses many films about these issues, by focusing instead on agency and lack of agency rather than a contest of what culture is better.

I also learned an immense number of things from the team who helped me out. It was the most perfect team, from the casting to the crew. They genuinely wanted me to do well, and that is very difficult to come by in the competitive world of film. I hope I can repay the favor to every single one of them, and that we all as a community at this school can continue elevating each others' work.

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Appendix A- Stills

Screencaps:







Chek and Hava

Written and directed by
Komal Ashfaq

Producer
Selma Pena

Cast

Hava- Mahima Saigal
Chek- Will Jarrett
Father- Jamie Burrows
Mother- Davida Bloom and Jahan Ara Chughtai
Interviewer- Shaun Huff
Barista- Rosie Sirk
Mourner- Selma Pena

Executive Producers

Mari Jaye Blanchard
Kiran Sohail Azeemi
Justin Buzzard
Kevin Bauer

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the MFA degree in the
School of Film and Animation,
Rochester Institute of Technology

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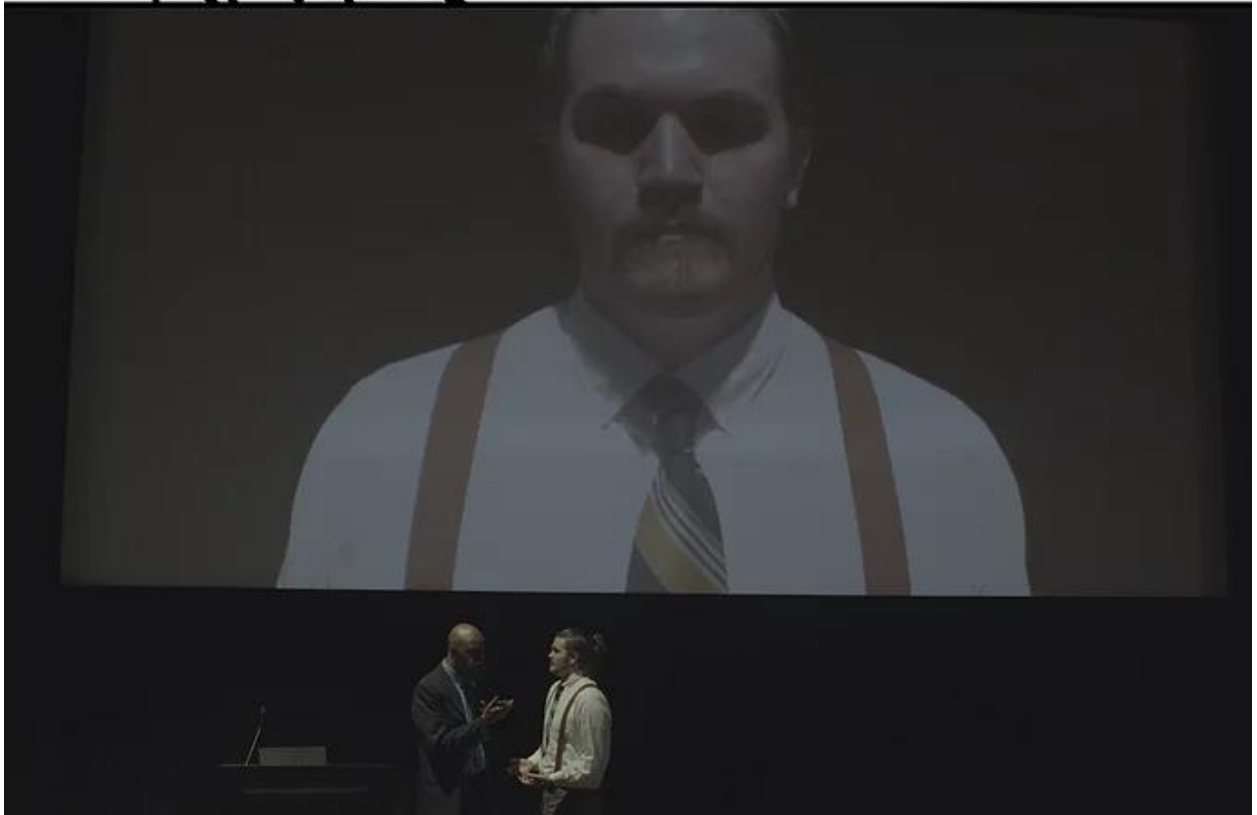
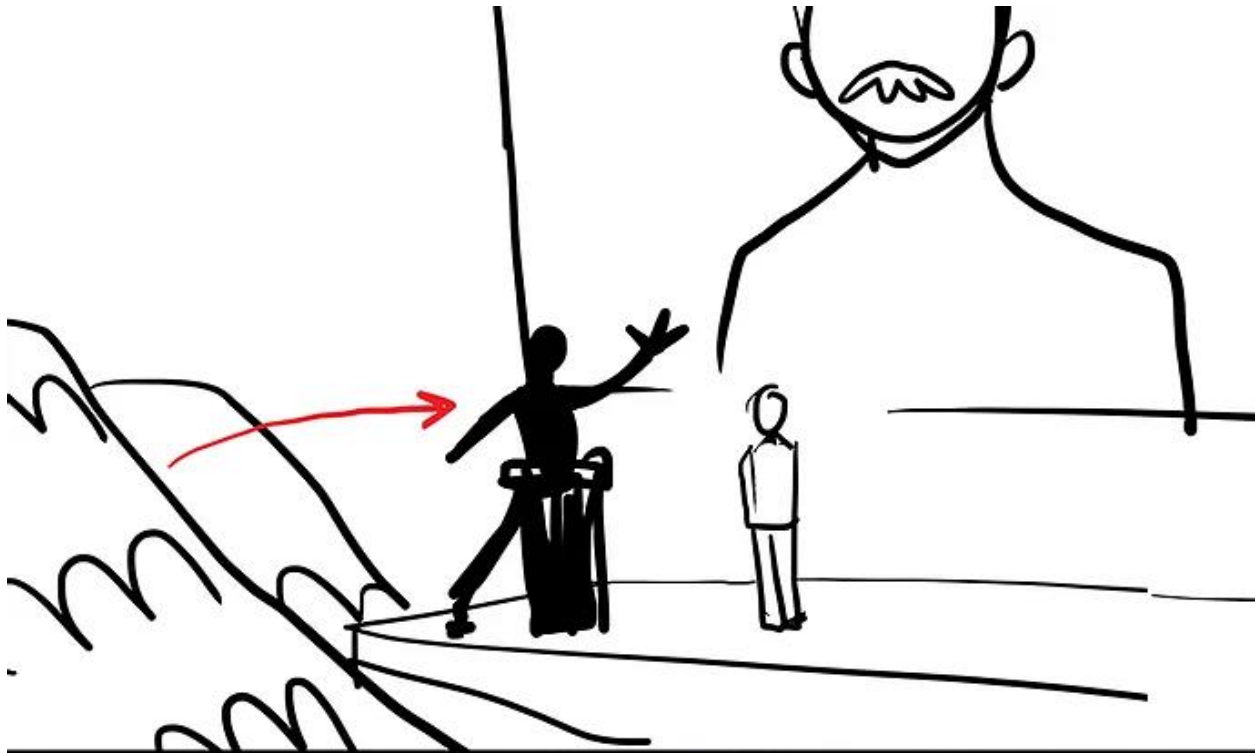
Appendix B- Storyboards











Appendix C- Behind the Scenes













Appendix D- Chek and Hava- Thesis Proposal

CHEK AND HAVA

THESIS PROPOSAL: KOMAL ASHFAQ- APRIL 2020

THESIS ADVISOR: AMBARIEN ALQADAR

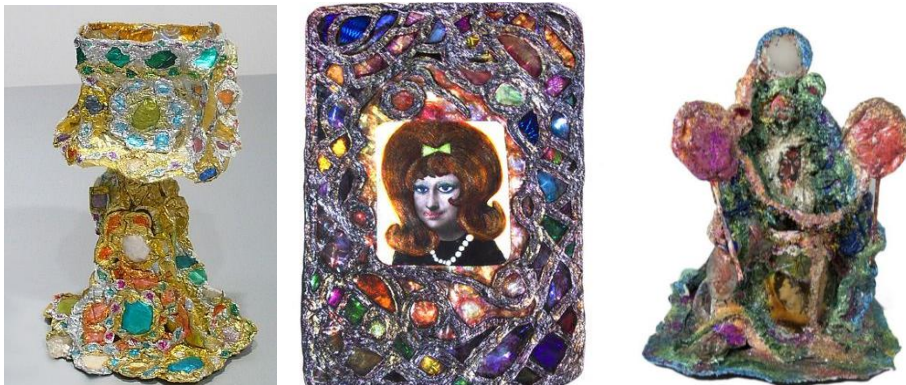
LOGLINE: A RAY OF LIGHT AND HER BLUE HUSBAND IMPOSE RULES UPON THEIR DAUGHTER'S BOYFRIEND.

Introduction:

This is a simple love story about trying to get parental approval for your relationship. It's based on South Asian experiences around parental expectations of material worth in people you want to marry. Hava is projected as wealthy while Chek is extremely poor- their class differences make for a surreal sort of visual comedy. The wealth dynamics will remain rooted in the characters' agency.

The film is partially an art-piece, because of the quantity of originally created pieces envisioned for the set design. The characters inhabit a visually rich world of material wealth that is beautiful on the surface but largely garbage when you take a closer look- partly like artist Thomas Lannigan Schmidt's work. Objects will be shaped out of foil, thrift store material, paint, bubble wrap and tinsel. Some original paintings will be made for it.

Thematically, the story functions as an age-old comment about how surface-level some of our expectations around love can be, and how ritualizing those expectations makes them harder than necessary to discard.



(Art objects by Thomas Lannigan Schmidt)

Plot summary:

It's pitch black and then a sliver of light expands enough for one open eye- it expands further on a woman in emerald satin sheets. There are rose petals in the bed. There is a

fluctuation from dark to light, but even at its brightest, most of the room stays drenched in shadow.

The woman is **Hava** (South Asian/Middle Eastern). She gets up, applies lipstick, sprinkles rose water on her face. She feels regal, she feels like a deity, she can't be pinned down anywhere in time. Her eyes are gold.

She is at an ornately set vanity table in pitch black- many of the objects have an eyeball and teardrop motif. The light on her brightens until she is almost blown out and a syrupy voice calls out from extremely far away- "breakfast honey!"

Hava wraps herself in a green dress and says "None for me, I'm going out for coffee."

And pat- we're suddenly in the mundane real world. Hava's green sticks out in the little coffee shop. A waitress asks for her order, but she says she's waiting on someone.

In the meantime, there is a graveyard. An old woman is crying at a tombstone, putting down fresh roses. She says some prayers. A man peers at her from behind the trees- he is tall but shabby. His clothes are old and stained. This is **Chek**.

When the woman leaves, he darts to the grave, steals the roses and runs off. The woman sees him and cries out. She tries to give chase- a warden gets involved- but he speeds ahead, ducks into an alley and loses them- clutching his precious red roses.

Chek meets Hava at the coffee shop, red and out of breath. They embrace and everything glows gold and vivid for a second. He hands over the flowers and she inhales the fragrance. She is refined and queenly, and he is rough and bedraggled- they are visually at odds. Yet they appear ardently in love.

They talk about having seen each other for a while and that maybe they should marry. Hava says Chek will have to meet her parents. Hava says not to look directly at her mother. Chek says he will bring a gift.

Pitch black again- brightening evenly onto a room with no furniture but a mirror and a small mattress. The rest of it is covered in paintings- on the floor, on the walls. There are tools and buckets of paint. There are canvases. Chek wakes up, and he prepares a canvas. He paints- vivid green strokes.

Hava is at home in her bedroom when the lights begin to fluctuate. Hava apologizes for missing breakfast. The sugary invisible voice from before asks what's going on. Hava says there's a man she likes. The whole room goes dark.

Hava's father enters the room with a wax candle. He is simpering, geeky, and has glasses. He is also entirely blue. His skin is blue and he is wearing blue. He says not to make her mother angry, and that the boy has to be suitable. Hava asks what he means by suitable and the father says they will prepare a list after they meet him.

The next day Chek sits at an ornate dinner table set with a very odd selection of foods- it is prepared to look very fancy but on closer inspection just seems like grocery staples,

including lays and an unopened package of sandwich meat. The walls are covered with images and paintings and posters of eyeballs. Hava is next to him, and the father is to the right. A bright light is streaming in from the left which Chek does not look at. He offers his painting in its direction.

The painting immediately catches fire from mother's disapproval. Then, a rapid fire round that makes them both uncomfortable- kids? Money? Career prospects? A painter with nothing? What about glory? Chek has no answers.

Hava's father writes a prescription with an address and says he can get upgrades over here. Hava says no she likes him as he is, but Chek says he'll do it because he'll never find someone like her again. The light from the mother grows in intensity until Hava snaps "mother!" and it dims again.

As they leave, Hava is upset. She argues that he is treating her like some sort of grand prize and ignoring what she wants. He says they can return to that once her parents are satisfied. She says he will mathematically find someone like her a hundred times over and he's only doing this because he's ashamed of himself and he's greedy for high society. Chek feels like she is questioning his love.

They both arrive at a garage where a shirtless man sits atop a pile of electronic garbage. He has an old chunky computer from the 90's and is looking at pictures of tin cans. Chek hands him the prescription for personality upgrades.

Over the next few days, Chek changes and Hava gets more and more upset. His posture becomes extremely upright, his clothes being tight and business-y. His face is constantly pained and sad but his language begins to include executive jargon. He throws all paintings out his room and fills them with flowers- when Hava next visits him he says they are for her. He gets a job he doesn't understand, in an office where people around him seem extremely normal, and look at him curiously. His eyes change color. Finally, his hair turns blue.

He is invited to meet Hava's parents again. The room is brightly lit this time, and Hava's father says mother is very happy. He is very happy to. He and Chek talk in very happy voices, although Chek's eyes remain miserable. Hava glowers in a corner, eating very aggressively. Mother's disembodied voice says everything is perfect now.

Hava becomes upset and throws her plate onto the floor. She gets up and rips off her green dress- under it are sweats. She rubs every bit of makeup off her face. She steps down from her heels and is much shorter. Then she attacks Chek and pulls a computer chip out of his ear and mouth as he screams in agony. He sits there, disheveled, in his old paint splattered clothes. The lights begin fluctuating as mother is mad. Father is upset too, and asks them to stop. They begin dismantling everything- they break apart candelabras, they tear off the tablecloth, they pull paintings down the walls.

Then Chek and Hava kiss passionately. Hava's father screams and tries to pull them apart, but they turn on him with makeup wipes and start to scrub the blue color off his

face. He screams, and the lights fluctuate so wildly that they go out- just as his skin becomes visible.

Some days later, we are in the same drab café. Chek and Hava sit there- they both look so ordinary now that they are both unrecognizable until we focus on them- Chek neat and clean, Hava in gray instead of green, short and in glasses. They have an air of easy comfort about them.

The end

Information on Characters

Hava

Hava is a young woman in a place of privilege that she cannot fully acknowledge. Although she considers herself ABOVE worldly things, she partly loves Chek because it affirms to herself what a good upstanding person she is to love someone who's broke. She also really likes the romantic element of being seen as an impossibly beautiful and rare creature in Chek's life. In terms of her relationship with her parents, she toes the line between outright rebellion against them and doing things that will annoy them. At her core, she IS a good person. She wants to love and be loved. She doesn't like performative behavior and she doesn't understand or care for ritual. She has trouble seeing her own flaws but once she sees them, she will make an effort to fix them.



Hava will wear emerald greens kurtis, and the actor will be provided with gold contact lenses. She is envisioned tall and graceful.

Her bedroom is ornately set up but barely visible. It contains many eye-themed objects.



Chek

Chek is fresh out of college, trying to find his footing in the art world. He is down on his luck, bordering on the starving artist, but he finds a romanticism in where he is. He has a streak of cunning, a subdued yearning for the good life, a stamp-collector's desire to collect things like beauty. He realizes Hava is a way he can stick to making art and finding a life of better financial footing. In the



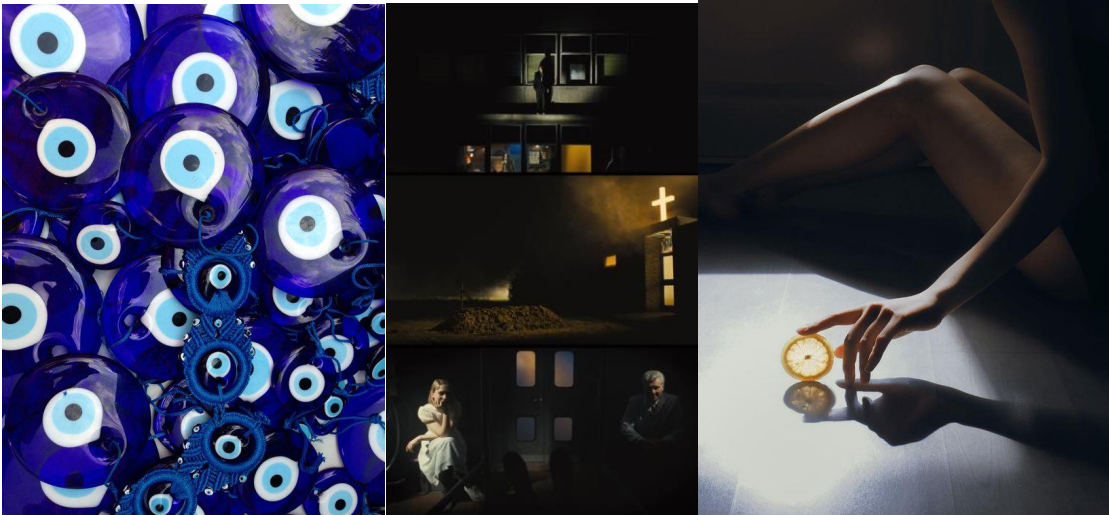
meantime, he cuts corners, sometimes for the thrill of it- like robbing a grave of flowers. At the same time, he loves Hava. He loves her partly as a muse, partly because he can't believe his luck that this creature is his. For the most part, his love is honest- when all is stripped away from Hava, he still feels a magnetic pull to her- only for who she is. He gets carried away in impressing her parents because he loses sight of Hava, and instead is hungry for a glamorous world of money that he doesn't really want, just because other people want it.

Appearance-wise, Chek is disheveled and has ardent eyes that make you feel like you have to help him. He is often paint-stained. Although he is genuinely broke, he does consider the shabby artist persona a sort of costume.

His bedroom is cluttered with paintings. He sees it as representing the madness of an artist, but really he's kind of a slob.



Visual tone moodboard



Themes and rationale:

The film is based around my attempts at deconstructing social norms, especially around things that should be easy. People who love each other should be able to love each other- and yet we put so many obstacles in our own way. Examples of these artificial obstructions include opposition to homosexuality, gold-digging, and of course seeking the approval of our parents.

This film explores how parental approval affects relationships where everyone is conscious of economic class. In this story, Hava's parents want Chek to be a certain way. But Chek himself sees aspirational value in being like her parents, and attempts it. This is a comment on how part of the reason we keep the illusion of obstacles going is our own participation in it as aspirational. Only Hava sees through both ends of the things, but she can only do so because she is in a sheltered and privileged position- nothing changes until she gives up that position.

I would like to tell this story because I find a lot of comedy in our belief systems, and the comedy comes out the more abstraction we apply to the concepts we accept as truth. I have also personally had two boyfriends chased off by my parents for superficial reasons you wouldn't expect in the 21st century- that they were broke/ugly/not the same religion etc.

Vision

Tone and style:

Because of the juxtaposition of the absurd appearance and ordinary theme and dialogues, the tone veers on deadpan absurdist comedy even as its focus is on romance. It draws from the atmosphere of films like *The Lobster*, *About Time*, *Mr. Nobody*, *The Color of Pomegranates* and *American Beauty*.

The story's overarching narrative around parental approval is punctuated by quick-paced vignettes of everyday life for the two, including action elements- putting on makeup, stealing roses, painting, fighting. It is bordering on a closed-world feeling, like the odd claustrophobia of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and it does not sufficiently acknowledge its own absurdity the way we take for granted many social norms.

The visuals will lean heavily on South Asian motif because the story is from that perspective- Hava may wear lehengas, kameez shalwar, and nose rings.

Visuals:

As a visual artist, I am interested in creating an elaborate and interesting set design with a lot of details. I would like to push myself to create something of a painted feeling to the world, permeated with art objects and handmade details.

The visuals of the film play on the ludicrousness of social norms, and the values we place on beauty and money. This is why Hava's mother is an abstract ray of light (partly echoing the divine role of motherhood in Abrahamic and South Asian religious practice), why a lot of décor is eyeball-themed (the evil-eye in Muslim culture, popularly depicted in Irani jewelry, and also a symbol of being watched constantly).

The dinner and décor are largely cheap and trashy when examined up close, but look regal from faraway- things are painted gold, foil and glitter and bubble wrap shine. The separation between her and Chek are paper thin- both have worlds full of paint and paper.

Rough Shooting Budget: \$2050

Details	\$
Art- including thrift store buys, paint materials and costumes	500
Craft services- over 5 days of shooting	150
Airbnb	600
Transport	100
Payment to actors	300
Payment to crew- 10 crewpeople @ 40	400
Equipment	In kind
Total	2050

All costs to be self-financed through employment. Shoot location will most likely be Rochester, utilizing 5 shooting days. Hava's house will be an Airbnb, while Chek's will be shot in my house and garage.