

Film and Television Reviews

Green Book. Dir. Peter Farrelly. Screenplay by Nick Vallelonga, Brian Hayes Currie, and Peter Farrelly. Perf. Viggo Mortensen, Mahershala Ali, and Linda Cardellini. Universal Pictures, 2018.

I saw the Academy Award-winning film *Green Book* in a nearly full movie theater during a holiday season matinee. Each time Tony Lip, played by Viggo Mortensen, acted brutishly or violently, the audience laughed. Apparently, *Green Book*, a film that depicts racial segregation and the difficulties of interracial friendships, is a comedy.

Green Book takes its title from the travel guide of the same name that listed accommodations for blacks so they could maneuver through the segregated landscape, as explained in Richard A. Kennedy's thesis *Auto Mobility, Hospitality, and African American Tourism*. In the film, the two characters traverse a segregated Midwest and South in 1962. The guidebook was essential because blacks were frequently targets of violence. Few people experienced more problems than touring performers. For example, in 1956 white supremacists attacked Nat King Cole in Birmingham. In 1964, Duke Ellington was refused service in a Virginia bus station when he tried to buy a sandwich. There are mentions of Cole's attack and we hear his version of "The Christmas Song" play over the last scene in the film. Nevertheless, most of the film's key plot points involve sandwiches, hotel rooms, bars, and swimming pools. Films easily depict *Green Book*'s type of racism because hotel accommodations are perfect for the visual narrative of cinema. However, inherent in this depiction is an assumption that racism is about skin and geography. In actuality, racism is about power.

Though a primary character in the film is concert pianist Dr. Don Shirley, played by Mahershala Ali, this is not a film about music or about black musicians. *Green Book* is a film about the education of a white man, Tony Lip. Shirley hires Lip as a chauffeur/bodyguard. The film makes clear that Lip has the power to change himself and he has the power to assault those who stand in his way. Slowly, the film removes Lip from any accountability for racism by showing him in violent altercations with racists, which is a cinematic investment in the binary fallacy of the "good" white and the "bad" white (MacIntosh 129). The film's depiction of

police echoes this binary: the northern police are helpful and the southern police are bigoted cowards.

Throughout, the film depicts Lip's racist language and violent tendencies as humorous. Each time the audience laughs, they erase the brutality of the character and resist the reframing of violence as a white privilege. In the place of serious engagement with the racial system, the film focuses on Lip's transformation from someone who refuses to drink from the same glass as a black man to a person who welcomes a black man to his table for Christmas dinner. As Dawn Marie D. McIntosh recently argued in the "Monstrosity" issue of this journal, "Inferential racism is a response to these growing cultural realities and propelled by whites denying personal responsibility in racism" (122). Indeed, Lip tries to deny his role by claiming that he is blacker than Shirley because he knows more about Aretha Franklin and poverty. In doing so, Lip metaphorically pulls on the mask of minstrelsy and commodified black culture as a shield against accusations of his own racism.

Like Lip, the film evades the "correlation between whiteness, white bodies, and white racism in the everyday" (McIntosh 123). The pivotal moment for the evasion happens at a swimming pool. Never mind the fact that towns with segregated accommodations would never have integrated pools, Lip rescues Shirley from the police who caught Shirley and a white man together in the locker room. Lip bribes the police and extricates Shirley. No thought is given to the white lover they abandoned. Here is the scene most indicative of the body politics without the body or the politics. Again, it is about Lips' powerful whiteness. Moreover, there was the opportunity for the film to connect race, masculinity, and sexuality, but to do this would require a challenge to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls the "single story," which was a challenge the filmmakers did not take.

Green Book shares much in common with films such as *Driving Miss Daisy*, as *The New York Times* recently noted. I would also suggest shared commonality with *Paris Blues* (1961), *48 Hours* (1982), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Oh Brother Where Art Thou* (2000), and *Mr. Church* (2016). In this genre, the filmmakers present the black character as the teacher and the white character as the pupil. When the white character chooses to learn, then this character becomes the hero and the black character becomes the ward.

In these films, it is rare to see the black character interact with other black characters. It is so rare in fact, that when these interactions happen it feels shocking, as though the veil is being briefly pulled back. *Green Book* contains two scenes like

this. The most obvious occurs after Shirley stands up to a racist and walks out on the job. Lip and Shirley go to a barrelhouse where Shirley plays Chopin for a black audience. Then, Lip saves Shirley's life one last time. However, the pinnacle scene happens about halfway through the film when Lip must pull over to fix the car. Shirley stands in the sun and gazes across the road at a black family working in a field. The family pauses and stares back. No one speaks because this is one of those muted moments that are the glory of cinema. The road that divides them is not so big that Shirley could not imagine himself in their poverty. Racism was never about geography. It was about power. Lip fixes the car. Even though as they drive away Shirley sat in the back seat and Lip in the front, Lip retained the power. In this way, the white character remains at the center of this genre that attempts to challenge white privilege.

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The Kindergarten Teacher. Dir. Sara Colangelo. Screenplay by Sara Colangelo. Perf. Maggie Gyllenhaal, Gael García Bernal, Michael Chernus, and Parker Sevak. Pie Films, 2018.

The Kindergarten Teacher, Sara Colangelo's 2018 remake of the 2014 Israeli film *Haganenet*, focuses on New York kindergarten teacher Lisa Spinelli (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Lisa, uninspired by her Staten Island home life with husband Grant (Michael Chernus) and their teen children, attends a poetry class run by the charismatic Simon (Gael García Bernal). Presenting some of the poetry spontaneously produced by her East-Asian American kindergarten student, Jimmy Roy (Parker Sevak), Lisa impresses her class and becomes inspired to do more for her student. Through a series of twists and turns the film continues to chronicle the choices Lisa makes for her student. Audience's near and far love Jimmy but soon Simon accuses Lisa of being a dilettante who recognizes talent while having none and asks her not to return to class.

The Kindergarten Teacher recalls other films that I in 2012 termed popular education films (PEF's) or popular films about the school experience. The PEF genre is critiqued for its problematic depictions of race and difference. PEF's are often narrated from a white male teacher's point of view, individuals that Adam Farhi in 1999 called superteachers, whose goal it becomes to save socially marginalized students. Films in this genre include *Dangerous Minds* (John N. Smith, 1995), *Freedom Writers* (Richard LaGravenese, 2007), and *Skirt Day* (Jean-Paul Lilienfeld, 2009).

Rather than falling lockstep into line with the archetypal superteacher narrative, *The Kindergarten Teacher* seemingly critiques this genre. When Lisa oversteps her boundaries and interferes first in Jimmy's education and then in his home life, believing she is an inspirational mentor, she is portrayed as out of touch with those whose help she tries to solicit. Jimmy's uncle Sanjay is visibly uncomfortable as Lisa hugs him after an unexpected visit to his workplace to enlist him in fostering Jimmy's talent. Babysitter Becca comments on Lisa's intensive focus on Jimmy by asking if Lisa has children and upon learning that she does, Becca comments that they are very lucky as, "You're ... very attentive." Both interactions intimate that Lisa's connection to Jimmy is out of proportion.

When PEF's feature female teachers, the genre has been critiqued for stereotypical portrayals. Patrick Ryan and Sevan Terzian in their 2009 study of

teacher Miss Brooks from the radio/TV series *Our Miss Brooks* (1948-1957) argues that the character's representation focused mostly on her lack of a personal life and maternal nature while her intelligence and teaching skill were downplayed. *The Kindergarten Teacher* appears to speak to these critiques as it is Lisa's failed aspirations and home life that compel her to form an obsessive fixation on Jimmy. The film frames Lisa locked in a pseudo-maternal role by portraying her cleaning the classroom, preparing and serving snacks, and putting children down to naps rather than as a respected professional. In this regard the film perhaps comments on society's failure to recognize and nurture women's intellectual abilities. In an interview with media critic Mary Sollosi in 2018, Gyllenhaal argues, "[Lisa] is a consequence of the broken culture that she lives in. I don't think she's naturally mentally ill. I don't think she's crazy. I just think, here's what happens when a bright, interesting woman gets stifled for too long." Speaking with Patrick Ryan in 2018 Gyllenhaal reiterates her commitment to projects featuring women as this film is written, directed, financed, produced, and headlined by women.

Lisa fixates on Jimmy's creativity because she craves intellectual stimulation but also love and human connection. Lisa hopes that Jimmy's talent will win her the love of Simon and her peers, but when that plan fails, Lisa focuses on the love that she hopes Jimmy will bestow on her as her mentee and his sole guardian. At the poetry reading Jimmy tells the crowd his poem is devoted to Anna, Lisa's teacher's aide, and Lisa is clearly upset by this revelation; Lisa clearly wants to be Jimmy's muse. Through Lisa's portrayal we see that the superteacher's efforts are not for the student who becomes secondary to the teacher's own search for fulfillment.

Often PEF's depict students of color as having absent parents or families that pose barriers to their future success. Again, *The Kindergarten Teacher* flips the script as Jimmy, despite the fact that his parents are divorced, has a hardworking father in Nikhil who is invested in his son's success. Nikhil, a nightclub owner, does not want Jimmy to attend the poetry recital because he rightly knows this is inappropriate for a kindergartener as we later see Jimmy listening to a poet who delves into sexually explicit metaphors and adult language. Nikhil tells Lisa that he wants Jimmy to play ball with his friends after school instead of going to the club. Nikhil argues to Lisa, "Don't overthink it. They need things simple at this age." In this moment, the onus shifts from the white teacher, whom PEF's often frame as the responsible adult, to the parent, here a person of color with his child's best interests at heart. Jimmy also has his uncle Sanjay who reads with him. The film

presents two strong male role models of color in contrast to a white teacher who pursues her own interests through her student.

Other PEF's have also critiqued the archetypal white superteacher narrative. In the film *Half Nelson* (Ryan Fleck, 2006) white teacher Dan Dunne (Ryan Goslin) is initially presented as wanting to keep African-American student Drey (Shareeka Epps) engaged in school so she will not become a drug messenger. Instead of Dan saving Drey, she saves herself and serves as an agent of change seeking to affect Dan's recovery (Alley-Young, 2011). The examples of Drey and Jimmy attest that students, not superteachers, are active agents in their own advancement.

That said, the racially problematic aspects of this flipped superteacher script include framing students of color and their experiences as secondary to white teacher protagonists' lives. So, while *The Kindergarten Teacher*, like *Half Nelson*, disavows Lisa of her position by having Jimmy seek help, the question remains whether Jimmy acts to save himself or works to serve and protect Lisa, his teacher. Either way, *The Kindergarten Teacher* urges viewers to consider the consequences when women and people of color are relegated to playing secondary roles in their own lives, serving others, and/or suppressing their own aspirations. Viewers are left to wonder what will happen to students like Jimmy as he sits alone in a police car saying, "I have a poem, I have a poem," with no one present to take notice.

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Shoplifters. Dir. Hirokazu Kore-eda. Screenplay by Hirokazu Kore-eda. Perf. Lily Franky, Sakura Andô, and Kirin Kiki. Aoi Pro, Inc., 2018.

Family has been a recurring theme in many of Hirokazu Kore-eda's films. In *Nobody Knows* (2004), Kore-eda showed us abandoned children in Tokyo whose lives are slowly brought to deterioration. He depicted the children's downfall through a series of episodic images, so that what happens to them begins to look as if it was a part of the metropolis' reality. His more recent *Like Father Like Son* (2013) posed a poignant question: What connects family? The time they spend together? The memories they share with each other? Or simple, biological factors like blood? Kore-eda highlighted this question, specifically by not prioritizing one over the other. Kore-eda has portrayed many families in his works so far, and the ways in which these families take shape are varied. Now, his latest film *Shoplifters*

(2018) presents one form that family may take in a contemporary urban environment, which is becoming rapidly and increasingly stratified.

Shoplifters begins with a somewhat comical scene in which a middle-aged man and a young boy cooperate to shoplift at a supermarket. We are thus introduced to two main characters, Osamu and Shōta, of the Shibata Family. The Shibatas—Osamu, the father (Lily Franky), Nobuyo, the mother (Sakura Andō), Shōta, their son (Kairi Jō), Aki, Nobuyo's younger sister (Mayu Matsuoka), and Hatsue, Osamu's mother (Kirin Kiki)—appear to be a family, simply struggling to make ends meet. Yet the story soon unfolds in an unexpected direction, when Osamu and Shōta encounter Juri/Yuri/Lin (Miyu Sasaki), a little girl who has been abused by her parents, and Nobuyo decides to “keep” her. What is initially presented as an ordinary family thereafter reveals its extraordinariness little by little.

One of the striking visual tropes that *Shoplifters* uses is the shared space that the family members occupy: namely, their home, their residence. They live in a small, old house in suburban Tokyo, caught in shadow, in obscurity, between high-rise buildings. Inside the house are found a jumble of objects: a rice cooker next to piles of plastic bags, clothes side by side with cardboard boxes, musty bedding adjoining instant foods, and the like. There is no rational order between these objects. Quickly exposed in the beginning of the film to an untidy heap of things in the house, each of which is not so easily identifiable, the viewer has no choice but to leave them as they are. We are not ready to reason, nor make sense of the connections between the things displayed in front of our eyes.

Throughout the film, Osamu and Shōta frequent a grocery store to steal their daily necessities. The brightly-lit, neatly organized aisles of the store make a stark contrast to the dark, messy interior of their home. Shop clerks tidying up commodities behind the two shoplifters becomes a crucial part of the film's mise-en-scène. There is nothing unusual about clerks arranging goods if it takes place in a regular context. Yet in this film their constant, punctual action of structuring counter-illuminates the disorderliness that chronically permeates every alcove of the Shibata household.

A series of images of the random objects inside the house present the family members as if they were the extension of these objects: one thing after another, and another, and another. A hodgepodge of things and people prevail the same space, as if the former assimilated the latter. They exist in such a chaotic manner that they would topple down if thrown off balance. The family's falling apart becomes foreseeable most strongly when Shōta spoils the order of goods to draw a clerk's

attention in the store. This moment is elucidative on multiple levels; Shōta's action introduces confusion into lines of organized items on the one hand, while forcing each family member to be subsumed back into traditional, socially accepted order. No matter how mainstream this order operates in a given society, however, it only functions to disturb the peculiar space that the Shibatas, perhaps out of necessity but still inadvertently, have developed.

The Shibata Family stands on the edge of equilibrium. Nevertheless, specifically because of such fragility, they do not allow us to keep our eyes off them. These objects and people, nonsensically arranged next to each other, invite us to think of a possibility of a family that is connected through spatial contiguity, rather than through symbolic lineage, such as blood. They simply exist in the same space, and that is what ties this family together. Such a relationship may not make sense, considering the conventional meaning of family. Yet, precisely because of the absence of meaning, the relationship that the Shibatas fostered with each other becomes more compelling.

In *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda literally shows a family that lives in an abyss, between objects, between buildings, between social problems. With *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda created an abyss that allows us to glimpse such a family. When confronted by that abyss, we should surrender ourselves to it.

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Udaari. Dir. Mohammed Ehteshamuddin. Teleplay by Farhat Ishtiaq. Perf. Samiya Mumtaz, Bushra Ansari, and Ahsan Khan. Momina Duraid Productions, 2016.

Although violence against women and girls is a global issue, the problem is exacerbated in Pakistan because of tribalism, patriarchal values, and a corrupt criminal justice system (Khan, 2005). Several volunteer organizations provide support and legal aid to the victims, but only 30% of the reported cases are prosecuted in court (War Against Rape). The survivors and their families are often pressured into silence because rape is seen as a woman or a girl's irreparable "loss of virtue," and brings shame to the entire family (Rasheed, 2004).

The Pakistani TV serial, *Udaari*, which aired on the television network Hum TV from April 10 to September 4, 2016, is a commendable attempt to raise awareness of sexual abuse of children in Pakistan. The TV serial depicts a rapist/child molester wreaking havoc in the lives of his victims who struggle to rebuild after their traumatic experiences. Although the serial does the community immense service by raising the taboo subject of sexual abuse and providing role models of courageous mothers, it also promulgates harmful stereotypes of stepfathers as child molesters and normalizes the high level of proof that must be met before a child molester can be convicted in Pakistan.

Intertwining the story of three families led by strong women—Sheeda (Bushra Ansari), Sajjo (Samiya Mumtaz), and Muneera (Laila Zuberi)—*Udari* provides a vision of motherhood in which women put the needs of their children above their fear of societal judgments. The fear of “*log kya kahengey*” (what will people say?) typically keeps women in Pakistan quiet even under extreme circumstances such as rape and abuse. However, *Udaari* depicts women making courageous decisions for the sake of their children and spreads a much-needed message of hope and agency.

Sheeda performs the role of a mother who protects her daughter from sexual predators before her daughter becomes a victim. For the young girls and mothers watching this show, Sheeda’s courage seems extra ordinary as Pakistani culture expects women to suffer in silence. When Sheeda’s neighbor tries to rape her daughter, Sheeda chooses to believe her daughter. Cultural norms dictate that such incidents be immediately suppressed in case the neighbors find out. The fear of “*log kya kahenge*” (what will people say?) is very real as *log* (people) almost always blame the victim for inviting an assault. However, Sheeda defies cultural norms and marches into her neighbor’s house to confront the perpetrator. With such bold moves, Sheeda acts as a role model for Pakistani women throughout the serial.

Sheeda’s urban counterpart, Muneera, is a wealthy, progressive mother who empowers her daughter by allowing her to make her own choices and empowers others by taking a leadership position in a volunteer organization. Muneera is an example to the wealthy women of Pakistan who have the resources to help others but instead choose not to see the suffering around them. Like Sheeda, Muneera operates not on the debilitating logic of “*log kya kahengey*,” (what will people say?) but her own sensibilities.

On the other hand, Sajjo performs the role of a mother that Pakistani women are quite familiar with. She seems blind to the fact that she has married a sexual predator who is more interested in her young daughter, Zebu, than her. Even when

she eventually realizes that her husband has molested Zebu, Sajjo is unable to confront him. She pretends like nothing has happened and instructs Zebu to never talk speak of this incident to anyone. Sajjo's desperate silence strikes a chord in the audience. Women in Pakistan often feel helpless in such situations as the law does not protect them. They cannot even turn to their families or neighbors because *log* (people) are more likely to ostracize them than offer support. However, when her husband molests Zebu again, Sajjo stabs him in a fit of rage and flees the village with Zebu. The contrast between Sajjo and Sheeda is quite stark. Sheeda makes bold moves to protect her daughter while Sajjo takes the path of silence and inaction. The TV serial poignantly depicts that failing to act will only empower the perpetrator.

Udaari does a marvelous job of showing three mothers who dare to put the well-being of their children above the common fear of judgment of relatives and neighbors. However, the serial promotes a harmful stereotype of stepfathers as child molesters. Many Pakistani mothers of young children are afraid to remarry for fear that their new husbands will molest their daughters, which means that single mothers and their children cannot reap the economic benefits of having a two-parent household. Since the TV serial challenges cultural taboos and fears, it could have gone a step further and depicted a step father who was a positive influence in a child's life.

Udaari normalizes the availability of an eye witness and a confession in child abuse cases instead of depicting the reality of Pakistan's laws, which makes it almost impossible to get a rape conviction. In the serial, the court believes Zebu's testimony only when an eye witness comes forward, which makes the perpetrator so angry that he confesses to molesting Zebu twice. *Udaari* tells mothers that the law can protect them, and at the same time, demonstrates that the burden of proof is so high that most rape and molestation cases will get dismissed. It would have been far more realistic if the TV serial had cast the molester as a biological father and engineered the plot to show that Zebu's testimony was dismissed by the court and Sajjo was given the maximum sentence for attempted murder. The ending would not have been pleasant but would have done much to raise awareness of Pakistan's rape laws that place an impossible burden of proof on the victims.

Overall, in spite of these missteps, *Udaari* raises a critical issue which has been neglected by the Pakistani entertainment media. Not only does it bring the taboo subject of rape into the living rooms of Pakistanis but also provides role models who tackle the problem head-on rather than bury their heads in the sand.

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