



FILMS



Jeff Roy, Director, *Mohammed to Maya*

Bangkok, Jeff Roy Productions, 2012. 74 minutes. Color. No price. <http://mohammedtomaya.com/>

THE 2012 FILM *Mohammed to Maya* documents the experience of the actress, dancer, and homeopathic medical practitioner Maya Jafer as she undergoes sexual reassignment surgery in Thailand and returns to her life in Los Angeles. An earlier short film version, *Rites of Passage* (19 minutes), premiered at the Los Angeles Transgender Film Festival in 2011, where it earned the Audience Choice Award for Best Film. *Rites of Passage* and *Mohammed to Maya* have since been screened at over fifty film festivals, universities, and community centers and have garnered another five awards on the film festival circuit. The title of the shorter film invites the viewer to interpret Maya's journey through Van Gennep's well-known framework whereby "all rites of passage or 'transition' are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying 'threshold' in Latin), and aggregation" (TURNER 1969, 94). The title of the longer version similarly suggests Maya's journey to be as much spiritual as it is physical.

With good humor and frequent use of crude language, Maya is an articulate and affecting protagonist. Born Mohammed Gulam Hussain in the South Indian city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, Maya was raised in a conservative Muslim family within the Memoni community, a group that traces its roots to Sindh and Gujarat on both sides of the present-day border of Pakistan and India. Punctuated with video montages of street scenes in Thailand, the film begins with Maya in transit three days before her surgery. Some of the most revealing moments in the documentary are in large part possible due to her comfort in front of the camera, especially when Maya seems to be evaluating herself as she is being observed. Early in the film, for example, during a discussion in a taxi, Maya appears interested in learning from a new acquaintance whether he knew that she was a preoperative transgender woman. Not satisfied with his answer ("Not by the look, but by the manners, yes"), she reinterprets his response so that it is more in keeping with her own self-perception ("I think my

mannerisms are also feminine, it's my voice mainly, probably. But ... thank you for the honesty").

Early in the film, we observe as Roy teaches Maya how to operate a handheld video recorder so as to keep a video journal. Roy's interest in incorporating participatory and reflexive camerawork is part of his broader efforts (see for example Roy's *Dancing Queens: It's All About Family* [2016]) to apply queer theory through documentary filmmaking. By deftly joining footage of Maya framed by Roy's camera in long shot with Maya's own close-up footage of herself, sharp divisions between observer and observed or viewer and participant become confused—indeed, I would suggest, felicitously so. Roy's role, too, seems to shift throughout the film from filmmaker to friend and supporter. Maya's self-consciousness is accentuated by the ironic—that is to say, distanced—commentary on her appearance and plans for life after the operation. Her use of English gives the viewer the sense that her medium of self-expression is often, as BARTHES famously argued in his analysis of the phrase “I love you” (1977, 147–49), highly intertextual and stylized. This “camp talk” draws upon “a stock of language features that are invested with cultural (and stereotypical) values in order to achieve the *effect* of a specific communal identity” (HARVEY 1998, 298), and perhaps even takes on a special urgency in these moments of transformation:

Maya: After I get my vagina, I am going to have men all over me, wanting me, desiring me. Okay, maybe I should stop now. That's enough of diva-ishness. It's a little too much. It's kind of disgusting...

Jeff Roy: Put the camera straight.

Maya: Put the camera straight. Jeff says “put the camera straight.”

This dissociative quality is most acute when Maya goes through an album of photographs taken before emigrating to the United States in 2000. When examining photos from India in which she appears with a mustache and in male-gendered clothing, she remarks:

I was just doing what I had to do, during my days when I was trying to make it in [the] entertainment industry in India.... This is the total opposite of who I am, especially this one. This is the total opposite of who I am. The complete opposite. It's just insane.

Despite her self-consciously performative affect, Maya's honesty is raw and, at times, even unsettling. In obvious pain while convalescing after the operation, she is curt with the hospital staff. In teaching this film as part of a course on gender in South Asia, my students observed that Maya's tone, while perhaps not out of place in some South Asian contexts, would nevertheless be unfamiliar and even shocking to middle- and working-class American students who had not grown up in households with domestic employees. In other scenes, however, she appears very concerned with how they perceive her and even flirtatiously inquires after a handsome male member of the staff.

Maya's participation as both object and agent in the creation of this documentary has the effect of attenuating the voyeurism that would otherwise be inherent in capturing Maya at such a vulnerable time and in so intimate a manner. Maya clearly struggles with the immense social cost of her transition, particularly the strain it has placed on the relationship with her family. It is apparent, especially upon her return to Los Angeles in the last third of the film, that it has also taken a toll on her health

and financial stability. Whether in scenes in which she undergoes hair removal through electrolysis or reads aloud emails from family members, one is quickly disabused of any lingering suspicions of Maya having entered lightly into this process.

Maya's extended soliloquies on her faith and depictions of devotional practices make this film a useful component of courses on religion and contemporary Islam. While this documentary could be paired with some recent memoirs in English translation by members of the South Asian *hijra* community (for example, RĒVATHI [2010] and VIDYA [2007]), Maya is very clear (in personal communication, April 2016) that she does not wish to claim a *hijra* identity (on the problem of employing Western gender and sexuality terminology within South Asian contexts see DUTTA and ROY [2014]). In this regard, the film is more appropriately categorized within Asian American studies. The production quality is generally excellent, and Roy is to be commended for including subtitles for the few scenes in which the audio is not fully clear. A version of the film that is entirely subtitled in English is also available for international audiences.

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