

# **Roj Means Sun**

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## **Abstract**

My thesis project, a 22-minute dramatic film, focuses on the life of ROJIN(12), a young Kurdish-Canadian girl who has just lost her father Agir in a battle in Iraqi Kurdistan. Throughout the film, we follow Rojin as she struggles to cope with his death, eventually finding a new closeness with Beritan, her mother.

*Roj Means Sun* is the story of a young girl's struggle to dissociate herself from the protective identity of her mother in order to recreate her identity in a land other than her motherland. Through this story, I want to explore the narrative of Rojin's search for identity, which will be told in the context of the human condition of a generation of young immigrant families who have left their homeland due to the suppression of ethnic, religious and socio-political diversities by totalitarian governments.

## **Dedication**

To my mother Fakhri Rezaei, in memory of Mojtaba Razavi.

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## Introduction

### Theoretical background

The coming-of-age journey of the main character, Rojin, is inspired by the Bulgarian-French writer Julia Kristeva's thoughts in her book *Black Sun*. Kristeva describes the female subject's relationship with her mother as "a mother's engulfing embrace," which while a source of relief and security, may threaten the subject's sense of individuality so that she finds herself unable to communicate with the outside world. In this sense, according to Kristeva, "matricide is our vital necessity" (BS 13) and the infant must be weaned from the maternal body. However, at the same time, the desire to reintegrate oneself with the maternal body is a constant threat in the mind of the protagonist. In this story, the young female subject, in her psychosocial development, becomes involved in the permanent challenge of matricide through different symbolic discourses.

*Roj Means Sun*, my thesis film, is influenced by two central ideas in Kristeva's thought; first her elaboration on the idea of female experience of loss and mourning, and second the concept of "abject."

In the first pages of *Black Sun*, Kristeva describes melancholia as "an abyss of sorrow, non-communicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claim upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself" (BS 3). Thus there is a failure of symbolic activity, a state of abjection, or a state that Kristeva refers to as "asymbolia." She uses this term to mean an inability to use language to compensate for the lost object. That is, the mourner finds herself in a state of stillness and silence that is associated with grief and responds inadequately to the language and meaning. The mourner is not able to articulate her grief through words because, as Emma Wilson describes in *Cinema's Missing Children*, the loss is "annihilating, immense and nonsensical" (Wilson10).

A recurring theme in *Roj means Sun* is the failure or inadequacy of language in communicating the ebbs and flows of grief. Struggling with her father's loss in a state of denial, Rojin is not able to talk to her mother, Beritan, about her suffering; the immenseness of the experience makes it almost impossible to be expressed through words. Also, they do not speak in the same language. Beritan insists on communicating

with Rojin in Kurdish so that Rojin will learn Kurdish and speak to her mother and her grandmother in their mother tongue. Rojin resists and keeps speaking in English.

Thus, both mother and daughter struggle to find a way out of what Kristeva refers to as the abyss of “asymbolia,” which here is the “loss” or “lack” of a common language. As Richard Armstrong notes in his discussion about Alain Renais’ *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959), this “loss” of language is an inherent part of the world the mourner inhabits, and thus has implications for the representation of the grief and for the theorization of the images with which films deal with grief (Armstrong 7).

Beritan, like most Kurdish mothers, sacrifices, denies her suffering, and mourns in silence. She pretends that she has moved on so that she can save Rojin from being stricken by grief and melancholy. However, as the story is about Rojin, Beritan’s experience of loss and moments of mourning are mostly eclipsed; as Joyce Carol Oates eloquently describes it, “The widow inhabits a tale of her own telling” (Oates 81).

For Rojin the loss of her father, Agir, is a personal loss, while Beritan has learned to see it as a price that each member of the Kurdish community has to pay for their collective Kurdish cause, which is to save the Kurds from the decades-long oppression of totalitarian governments in the Middle East.

The recurring theme of the language conflict in the story also reflects the historical significance of being able to speak in the Kurdish language, which has been a crucial component of the Kurds’ ongoing historical struggle for freedom and independence against governments like that of Turkey, which have banned the Kurds from speaking in their mother tongue even in their homes and with their families for decades. As such, for Kurds, the Kurdish identity and language are inevitably politicized.

However, Rojin cannot understand this complicated historical struggle. Having grown up in Toronto and identifying herself as a Kurdish-Canadian, she is hardly able to connect to her motherland, maternal identity and maternal tongue; thus she cannot make sense of their beliefs and traditions. A case in point would be the mourning tradition in Kurdistan. As a large suppressed ethnic group in the Middle East, the Kurds have always been defending themselves against the homogenizing and pan-nationalist policies of the governments of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Having constantly been involved in this decades-long struggle for freedom and independence, the loss of young Kurdish fighters or “guerillas” becomes part of the Kurds’ everyday lives. They believe that young Kurds, both female and male fighters, have been

martyred for the freedom of the Kurdish people; thus, their historical struggle and bravery should be honored and celebrated rather than being mourned and lamented.

### **Historical Background**

At this point, I would like to briefly review the Kurdish history and struggles. In the article “The Kurds Under the Ottoman Empire,” Kendal argues that the present situation of the Kurdish people “can only be understood in its historical context, notably in the light of the events of the last hundred years.” According to Kendal, long before the creation of the modern states of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, the Kurds occupied the region, which overlaps these three countries (11).

Mehrdad Izady, a Kurd historian, also claims that “the archaeological and zoological-botanical evidence of Kurdistan’s crucial importance to the development of civilization is bountiful and well-documented; thus, before the formation of the modern states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria the Kurds occupied the region that overlaps these four countries” (23). However, Kurdistan as a region has never existed as a formal nation-state, and is now divided among four states. Several scholars argue that Kurdish national identity was intensified by the creation of the modern states of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. As the history of Kurdish ethnonationalism shows, the politicization of Kurdish ethnicity coincided with the formation of the modern nation-state system in the Middle East (Entessar 1).

As the majority of Kurds live in Turkey, and Rojin’s family are from the Kurdish city of Amed (Diarbakr, located in Turkey), I will now focus on the Kurds who live in Turkey.

According to Kendal, the majority of Kurds, about 15-20 million, live in Turkey. The Kurdish position has been deteriorating since the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, where the Republic of Turkey was established (Kendal 79).

The Allied Powers’ partitioning of the region had disastrous outcomes for the Kurds. The emergence of modern Turkey coincided with an era of extreme nationalism at the expense of suppression of other ethnic minorities in the country (Entessar 31). Kemal Mustafa Ataturk, known by the Turks as the father of the modern state of Turkey, implemented and executed a harsh policy according to which there was only one nation, one body and one people: the Turks.

Accordingly, one of the state’s first strategies was forced assimilation and denial; the Kurds were the first ethnic group forced to identify as Turks. The Turkish



government denied the Kurds history and the words “Kurds,” “Kurdistan,” or “Kurdish” were officially banned by the Turkish government. When the Kurds refused to do so, the Ataturk nationalist movement claimed that the Kurd ethnic group did not exist in Turkey and categorized Kurds as “Mountain Turks” (Bulloch and Moms 51).

Following the military coup of 1980, the Kurdish language was officially prohibited in public and private life. Many people who spoke, published, or sang in Kurdish were arrested and imprisoned. Since the lifting of the ban in 1991, the Kurdish population of Turkey has sought to have Kurdish included as a language of instruction in public schools as well as a subject (Baser 63).

The above is a brief overview of Kurdish history since the end of World War I. With the creation of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, and later the wars and conflicts in the Middle East of the last decade, the Kurds’ situation has become more complicated and beyond the scope of this thesis.

The story takes place in a historical moment in the Kurds’ history, which begins with the ISIS attack on the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Syria in August 2014. Months after the first ISIS attack on the Kurdistan Region, Kurdish female and male fighters were fighting against ISIS and defending their people and households.

It could be argued that it has only been after ISIS became a serious threat for the countries in the Middle East and later in the West that the international community began to talk about the Kurds’ historical struggle and resistance, not only against ISIS but also against the governments of Turkey and Syria. According to the Ian Bremmer report on Turkey’s war on ISIS, the Turkish and Syrian governments have tolerated ISIS attacks on the Kurds because it prevents the Kurds from gaining ground in Syria that might help them to eventually create a larger Kurdish homeland in the region (Bremmer).

Rojin’s father, Agir, is a Kurdish activist who immigrated to Toronto with his family to study political science. With the beginning of the ISIS attacks on the Kurdish regions, he travels back to Kurdistan to participate in his fellow Kurdish activist and fighters’ operations aimed at breaking the ISIS siege of the Kurdish city of Shingal to rescue Yazidi-Kurdish families. The story begins when Rojin and her mother Beritan are informed that Agir has been killed in the Shingal operation.

This brief history will show why the Kurdish identity, mother tongue and motherland are politicized. Beritan accepts Agir’s death as the price that the Kurds pay for their collective cause. However, for Rojin, a 12- year- old Kurdish-Canadian girl

who is profoundly stricken by loss and melancholy, this Kurdish identity and the history behind it took her father from her. As such, she resists believing in the cause for which her father died; she is not willing to speak in Kurdish to her mother and grandmother, she refuses to wear the Kurdish dress that came from Kurdistan, and above all she does not want to go back to her motherland to face her father's dead body and his burial.

In this way, Rojin's experience of loss and mourning becomes a turning point in her life. Regardless of her age, this immense experience separates her from her peers and forces her to enter the complicated world of adults. This loss becomes the beginning of a coming-of-age journey for her where she reflects on the question of her maternal identity, motherland and maternal tongue as a Kurdish girl.

Getting distance from her mother and maternal identity, Rojin rejects her maternal identity or as Julia Kristeva notes in the book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* on the "maternal thing." In this phenomenological study of the concept of abjection and its role in the development of a subject's identity, Kristeva defines the 'abject' as neither subject nor object, it has only one quality of the object: "that of being opposed to I" (1). According to Kristeva, the 'abject' is "something" pre-symbolic, unnameable, and unrepresentable that "draws me towards the place where meaning collapses" (2). It refers to processes demarcating the boundaries between the child and the mother's body and between the subject and objects. She proposes that the abject may take different forms in different symbolic systems; some of its variants include food, sin, crime and disease, etc. However, among all the different forms of the abject, Kristeva emphasizes the maternal body, or in a broader sense, the feminine body as the main site of abjection.

According to Kristeva, every encounter with abjection is the repetition or enactment of primary maternal abjection (22). In Kristeva's account, the mother's body is the first object to be abjected, and as such, her theory of abjection is essentially grounded on a matricidal premise. This process of separation from the maternal body or maternal thing later leads the subject to the symbolic realm of language, meaning and the constitution of ego. Kristeva writes: "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10).

Similarly, in *Black Sun*, Kristeva defines melancholia as "an impossible mourning for the maternal object" (9). Melancholia results from a loss of what

Kristeva calls the “maternal thing,” so it is a state originally derived from a denial of the separation from the mother—a denial of “matricide,” which according to Kristeva is our vital necessity. This denial leads the melancholic to an unspeakable condition of suffering and pain. In this condition, the melancholic only faces what Kristeva calls the “melancholic thing,” the maternal “thing,” “a non-object of desire and loss that escapes signification” (13). Thus, there is a failure of symbolic activity, a state of abjection, or a state Kristeva also refers to as “asymbolia.” She uses the term “asymbolia” to mean an inability to use language to compensate for the lost object.

Kristeva’s attitude toward melancholia is an optimistic one, as she maintains that this lack of meaning and existence on the verge of collapse is not tragic; rather, one can face it and express it through a kind of symbolic discourse, and this is what Kristeva is going to offer us through *Black Sun*. According to Kristeva, for the infant/subject, the mother is the first object, the melancholic “thing.” Kristeva suggests that language, as a symbolic order, through the symbolization of loss in a sort of symbolic practice, helps the melancholic to be able to come to terms with it rather than denying it (Lechte 82). She suggests that, through a symbolic practice like artistic, literary, or any form of creative practice, one can transcend melancholia and transpose it to the artwork. She elaborates her point in an analysis of the painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* by Hans Holbein, which in her account demonstrates how art is both a symptom of melancholia and a site for the elaboration of loss.

According to Kristeva, confrontation with the corpse gives way to the rise of a wave of destructive energy, while representational elements permit a recovery or denegation (Barret 79-80). In this sense, Holbein’s painting is not a work about melancholia but a work of melancholia. Kristeva argues that Holbein’s painting reveals art’s capacity to reconnect the social subject to reality via material processes and the semiotic; this is crucial to the renewal of subjectivity and to the warding off of melancholia (BS 137-8).

Kristeva suggests that on the bright side of the black sun is where the melancholic would be able to speak about his/her pain through a symbolic order. She argues that art and literature, as two symbolic practices, provide a form of symbolic sublimation, to find a symbolic object that substitutes the lost maternal object, the maternal “thing,” a non-object of desire and loss that escapes signification.

Kristeva shows how symbolic orders (e.g. language) lead melancholic characters to reconstruct or deconstruct a narrative of loss, so as to give voice to their

pain in a new symbolic discourse. Thereby, as Kristeva suggests, the pain of loss is replaced by the joy of mastering signs (BS 67). The attempt to convey the unconveyable is what Kristeva describes as an attempt to overcome mourning for the lost “maternal thing” through the symbolic function of language and the symbolic function of the maternal body.

Last, but not least, Kristeva’s thoughts on one’s experience of loss and melancholic depression influenced me first in writing the story and then in making the film. *Roj Means Sun* is a semi-autobiographical story and the essence of the story, which is the father’s passing and Rojin’s struggle to face the tragic loss, was an homage to my childhood and the way I have found writing and later filmmaking to be a redemptive practice, where “the pain of loss is replaced by the joy of mastering signs” (BS 67).

In the very beginning of *Black Sun*, Kristeva writes: “For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia” (BS 3). Thus, what melancholia offers to the artist, who in a sense has a mastery in using signs and symbols, is not just a matter of expressing the pain but also making a work of art out of it. This would also provide a symbolic site of reflection and identification for its audience, readers, or viewers.

Kristeva believes that art as an adventure of body and signs turns “affect” into rhythms, signs and forms so that the semiotic and the symbolic “become the communicable imprints of an affective reality, perceptible to the reader” (22). The concept of affect is a crucial theme in Kristeva’s account of creative practice and aesthetic experience; she employs the term “affect” to mean a structuring of psychic space that through creative practice attributes value and meaning to the audience through artworks.

At the boundaries of emotion and action, writing comes into being only through the moment of the negation of the affect so that the effectiveness of signs might be born. It conveys affects and does not repress them, it suggests for them a sublimatory outcome, it transposes them for another in a threefold, imaginary, and symbolic bond. Because it is forgiveness, writing is transformation, transposition, and translation. (BS 217)

Elaborating on language as a cure, Kristeva argues, “I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother’, is what the speaking subject seems to be saying. ‘But now I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language’” (BS 43). In

doing so, in contrast to the depressed person's dependence on the unnamable and unspeakable maternal thing, the melancholy writer negates the mother in order to recover her in language.

In the final scene, missing the flight to Kurdistan, Rojin and Beritan sit on a bench in the airport, mournful, frustrated, and detached from the world around them. They have been stuck in an "in between space" where they only have each other to rely on. This again evokes Kristeva's final analysis on the subject's relationship with her mother, as she suggests the female subject, in her psycho-social development, is always involved in the process of getting connected and disconnected from the mother.

Accordingly, the moment Rojin begins to communicate with Beritan in the Kurdish language is where she tries to reconnect to her mother through her maternal language. This is also a homage to Rojin's memory of her father, as he wanted her to learn the Kurdish language. Thus, the language that was deconstructed and collapsed with the father's death now is reconstructed in the mother's soothing and protecting presence. In this sense, the film's final scene is also influenced by and reminiscent of Foucault's thought on the maternal tongue, where he says: "In the end, the only real homeland, the only ground upon which we can walk, the only house where we can stop and take shelter, is language itself, the language we learned from childhood" (Foucault 72).

## Previous Works and Influences

The historical and sociopolitical context of the story has concerned me since I was studying sociology in Iran. I first began to know about Kurds through my Kurdish classmates at the University of Tehran's Faculty of Social Science. Later, while I was teaching social science to high school students, I performed research on the historical struggle of the Kurds as a part of a lecture and film screening that I had planned for a chapter on ethnicity. However, it was all in the back of my mind since I started writing the story of Rojin, a Kurdish-Canadian girl who tries to make sense of the loss of her father and the cause for which he has fought and died.

Later in Canada, and in the first semester of my study at York University's MFA program in Film Production, I wrote and directed two short pieces for the courses Production I (Professor Phil Hoffman) and Senior Documentary Workshop (Professor Brenda Longfellow). The first piece, *Church Walk*, a long-take project for Production class (Fall 2013), shows a brief moment in a mother and daughter's life where they are walking back home from their church's Sunday School.

My second short work was a 5-minute experimental documentary about the Kurdish Genocide that reached its height on March 16, 1988, during the closing days of the Iran-Iraq war in the Kurdish city of Hallabja in Southern Kurdistan. The video was made as experimentation with the "Sound Space" in the Senior Documentary Workshop in Fall 2013.

In addition to these films, which are my first experimentation with the themes of mother-daughter and the Kurds' resistance, my thesis film – both in terms of form and content – has indeed been developed over the five years of my filmmaking experience. From my first short narrative film *My Best Friend* (2010, Iran) to *What Time is it in Iran Right Now?* (2014), my last narrative project at York (before my thesis), I have been trying to find a form of cinematic realism that is open to a more sensitive and subjective manner of cinematic realism. In doing so, I have been exploring a thread that can reflect what I believe is the dual nature of reality, that is the two parallel realities that coexist inside and outside the characters' minds. The first is the reality that is going on in a real life, and the second is being seen and perceived by the characters, which most of the time conflict.

A case in point would be the short film *The Lost Image* (2012), which I made during my time in Sheridan College's one-year graduate program in Film and

Television. This short piece is about a young man who comes back to his childhood home a few years after his parents passed away. As he walks around the vacant house, he begins to see scenes from his past.

However, as a woman, I have mostly been interested in exploring the female characters' perception of reality. Thus, my first short film *My Best Friend* (2010, Iran) and the short piece that I made in Production class, *INT.BAR- NIGHT* (2013, York University), show a few intense moments of reality that are being seen from my female characters' perception of the outside world's ongoing reality. I have also explored this idea in a short documentary titled *In-Between* (2013- 2014, York University), which I wrote and directed as my final project for the course Senior Documentary Workshop (Professor Brenda Longfellow). This piece also explores a young immigrant woman's perception of the urban landscape of the city of Toronto accompanied by her telephone conversations and correspondence with her mother, who lives back home in Iran.

Further and during my last production class in York's MFA program, I wanted to explore other aspects of the realist filmmaking style, namely the naturalist and docudrama style that record realistic narrative with minimum intervention. In doing so, I wrote the short narrative *What Time is it Iran Right Now?* (2014), during the course Scene Writing Workshop (Professor Amnon Buchbinder, Winter 2014) and directed it during the course Directing Short Narratives (Nicolas Pereda, Winter 2014).

*What Time is it in Iran Right Now?* (2014) is about Jamshid, an elderly Iranian immigrant living in Toronto. Suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Jamshid finds himself lost and dislocated in time while his friends at a Seniors' Club in Toronto arrange a surprise birthday party for him. In this project I have experimented with the still camera, long take, minimal script and improvised acting. Personally, I like the film's manner of naturalism both in cinematography and directing and I believe this project was a good learning experience for my thesis film.

## **Production Plan**

### **Writing the Script**

The story and script of *Roj Means Sun* has been developed over the four semesters of my study in York's graduate Film program. The first draft, which was an 8-page script about a Middle Eastern mother and daughter, had been developed from a story synopsis to script in the course Screenwriting I (Professor Howard Wisemean, Fall 2013).

Since then the story has been growing and living in my mind; I have made some changes, added, omitted, and replaced storylines, scenes and characters until I wrote a revised version of it during the course Screenwriting Workshop (Prof. Amnon Buchbinder, Winter 2014).

The first draft of the story was focused on the life of a middle-eastern girl, Rojin (9), who lives with her newly immigrated family in Toronto. Starting school and exploring the new world to which she has just been introduced, Rojin begins to notice the differences between her socio-cultural background and family, and those of her classmates. Through a series of events, encounters, and arguments, Rojin tries to convince her confident and determined mother, Heeva (32), to let her live like her peers and people around them. The story begins when Rojin asks Heeva to buy and cook a turkey for Thanksgiving, similar to the way that the families of her classmates do. At first, Heeva says no; however, at Rojin's insistence, she assents. A day before Canadian Thanksgiving, Rojin invites Natalie (9), her friend from school, for lunch. Rojin notices Heeva preparing the turkey the way they cook chicken in their home country – chopping it into slices and serving it with rice. She searches the web quickly to find recipes and photos of stuffed and roasted turkeys, and shows them to Heeva. They manage to sew parts of chopped turkey together and decorate it. Rojin is pleased until Natalie mentions that they eat turkey together with all of the members of their family. Noticing Rojin's smile fading, Heeva says they will cook another turkey when Rojin's father, Aras (37), returns home. Aras is a Kurdish social activist who came to Canada as a graduate visa student and left school to work in a gold mine in northern Ontario.

Rojin's conflicts with Heeva, as well as with her background, intensify when she tries to dispose of a hand-woven jacket that she has received from her grandmother (who lives in Iran) as a birthday present. Heeva loves the jacket, telling Rojin that she



had a similar one when she was a child. However, Rojin doesn't like it. She finds the jacket old-fashioned and weird. Instead, she wishes to have a pink puffy coat similar to her classmates, but her mother cannot afford. Rojin tries different ways to dispose of the jacket without her mother knowing about it. One, she leaves it on the school bus; however, her peers find the nametag her mother sewed into it and return it to her. Then, helping her mother to bring their clothing to the local laundromat, Rojin drops it into someone else's pile of clothes. As they leave, however, the laundry worker notices and returns it. Finally, when they go to buy a turkey to celebrate her father's return, she decides to leave the jacket in a shopping cart. She peers to find a young couple pushing the cart and, as they argue, they throw the jacket away.

In the final episode, Heeva receives a letter from Canada's immigration office, asking her to meet with an immigration officer. At first, Heeva thinks it is about their application for permanent residency. However, as she meets the officer, she discovers that Aras has been arrested along with some other undocumented workers at a mine in northern Ontario—charged with working under expired permits and income tax evasion. Heeva and Rojin are asked to choose either to leave the country with Aras, or to stay in Canada and make a claim for refugee protection. Being offended by the immigration officer's statement about the unofficial and illegal immigration status of her family, Heeva takes Rojin's hand and storms out of the office. As they leave the office to take a bus home, they leave the jacket behind on the empty chairs of a waiting room in the immigration office. Preoccupied with her new situation, Heeva forgets the jacket; however, Rojin runs back to the office, finds the jacket and puts it on to get warm, as the wind is hitting her face.

Since the summer of 2014 and during the research stage, I have written a more personal draft of the script by replacing the immigration theme with the theme of loss and death. In the first version of the script, the Thanksgiving turkey and hand-woven jacket have key roles; they are two objects that each tell a story about Rojin's relationship with her mother as well as her background. Revising the script in the Spring of 2014, I decided to omit the turkey's storyline because I thought it undermined the story of jacket, which was the main plot at the time. Later in the second semester of the production class, I wrote a thesis proposal based on the last draft of the script and submitted it to the York Film Faculty.

Since February 2014, when I started working with my thesis supervisor Professor John Grayson, I began to think about and question my story and characters

with fresh eyes, from a directorial perspective. As such, the story has developed along with the production planning, casting, visual strategies, etc. This helps me to think about different variations and possibilities of developing the story, to flesh out my main characters, to build up Rojin's story arc, and structure the scenes as well as the opening and ending.

Building the character of Rojin and developing the scenes, I have drawn more on my personal experiences and childhood memories. In doing so, I have added the themes of loss and mourning to tell the story of a young Kurdish-Canadian girl who struggles to cope with the death of her father. Later, I have done more research on Kurdish culture and history, added the language learning game and replaced the jacket with a Kurdish dress, which I thought is more representative of Rojin's maternal identity and Kurdish background.

In terms of the work plan, according to the plan that Professor Greyson suggested, we discussed the story and production plan during our monthly Skype meetings and email correspondence. I believe these meetings were very productive both in terms of script development and production planning; they helped me to work in an organized framework and get constant feedbacks on my updated script, casting and production management.

Re-writing the script, I have also started doing more detailed research on the social and historical background of the story as well as the form and style of my film. During research, I have read and watched a list of films, stories and studies about the mother-daughter relationship and also the traumatic experiences of war, loss and death of parents in childhood. The results of this research helped me both in casting for my lead actors and writing the script.

### **Casting**

The script revisions started with re-working the characters of Rojin and Beritan. I have provided a list of films about troubled or traumatized childhood as well as influential films with the coming-of-age theme. Among the films I have been most influenced by are the films *Where is My Friend's House?* (1987), *Mouchette* (1967), *Au Hazard Baltazar* (1966), *Cria Cuervos* (1975), *Cousin Angelica* (1974), *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), *Rosetta* (1999), *Loren's Silence* (2008), *The Son* (2002), *The Promise* (1996), *The Kid with a Bike* (2011), *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), *The Silence* (1963), *400*

*Blows* (1959), *Germany Year Zero* (1948), *Gasman* (1998), *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Naked Childhood* (1968), *Spirit of The Beehive* (1973), *Goodbye Children* (1987).

I believe that all the child, teenage and young female characters of the aforementioned films share a certain degree of sensitivity that makes them vulnerable yet resistant to patriarchal-based power relationships and the brutal reality of the material contemporary society. They all strive to stand up for themselves and create a space of their own within a chaotic, dog-eat-dog world in which they have to endure and survive the loss of parents, wars, troubled families and different forms of social injustice, ignorance and inequalities.

For the character of Beritan, I have explored stories and films about widows' or young women's experience of loss, melancholy, and mourning. In doing so, I have been influenced by the films *Three Colors: Blue* (1993), *Decalogue* (1989), *The Mirror* (1975), *The Travelers* (1992), *What Time is it there?* (2001), *Persona* (1966), *Silence of Lorena* (2008) as well as the books *The Bell Jar* (Sylvia Plath), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Marguerite Duras), *The Lover* (Marguerite Duras), *The God of Little Things* (Arundhati Roy), and *Nine Short Stories* (J.D. Salinger).

Portraying Rojin's character and sketching her appearance based on my own childhood and the aforementioned reference characters, I started looking for a 11-to-13-year-old Kurdish-Iranian girl through friends, relatives, and colleagues. I also posted casting calls to Mandy.com, Casting Workbook, Toronto Farsi School, and the Toronto Kurdish House, and invited the candidates to our first audition session.

Among the eight candidates, I selected two 12- and 13- year-old girls to attend the final audition. Between them, I found Menemsa Ates, 13 year-old Kurmanji Kurd, close to the character of Rojin. We started the practice sessions a week after the final audition.

Since December 2014, except for three weeks in February and the New Year's holidays, we met every Sunday at the Kurdish Community center to discuss the story and rehearse the scenes. Looking back, I believe the sessions at the Kurdish Community were indeed a great help in re-writing the dialogue and examining the scenes. At the beginning of each session we agreed on an engaging plan for the rehearsal that consisted of watching reference film clips, discussing the scenes and practicing the scenes.

As for the actor who acts as Rojin's mother, Beritan, she joined us about two months before the shoot. As she had been working as a professional Kurdish language

translator and social activist, she was able to catch up with the story and the rehearsals in a short period. Thus, since April 2015 we had three full rehearsals with Beritan and Rojin and one rehearsal session with all the actors, including Agir, the father and Renas, the friend.

## Script

*Roj Means Sun* is about a young girl's struggle to come to terms with the loss of her father. Stricken by grief, she begins a coming of age journey through which she questions her maternal identity, maternal tongue, and motherland. It could be argued that this mother-daughter story explores the feminine experience of loss and mourning, with the main themes of dislocation, alienation, identity, and finally self-recognition.

Rojin's experience of mourning is associated with a sense of dislocation; she finds herself caught in a space between her parents' motherland, Kurdistan – which she cannot locate on the map in geography class because it is not officially recognized as a country—and Canada, the country in which she was born and grew up. This sense of dislocation becomes even more intense when Rojin tries to locate her father in her memory, to trace him in time and resurrect him in the present time.

Thus, like most of her counterparts in the films about children's experiences of loss and trauma, she lives in two worlds: her interior world, where her father is alive and the loss never happened, and the exterior world, where he is no longer there. Rojin's condition resonates in Duncan's description of the mourner's world in the book *Grief and Grieving*, as she describes “when I slip back into the quotidian routine, I also slip into this liminal land where, although I don't expect him to turn up, he hasn't gone either... until something provides a rude awakening” (Duncan qtd. Armstrong 28). Thus, one of my main challenges in writing the script was to connect these two worlds or two layers of reality that Rojin inhabits.

One of the main challenges in writing a script about mourning and grief is that you have to reveal an intense human condition that is inexpressible. I think the cinema of mourning, both in terms of writing the script and visualizing it, is similar to the mourning process itself. Like grief, which consists of ebbs and flows rather than an explainable experience, it is difficult to tell a linear narrative about mourning with a certain beginning, middle, and ending point within a specified timeframe. As Song Hwee Lim argues in her elaboration on the young grief-stricken protagonist of *What Time is it There?* (2001), “if death is stillness embodied and can be marked with an exact date and time, mourning is an ongoing process that seemingly never ends... Death, linear, lucid, graspable and absolute, is here replaced by the slow and painful process of mourning, the behavior of the mourner is becoming more erratic and

inexplicable by the day the everydayness of lives drifting into a never-ending continuum of moving time” (Song 105).

## **Style**

In terms of filmmaking style, I wanted to employ a realist filmmaking style influenced by the contemporary European and Iranian realist filmmaking tradition, namely the Italian neorealist, Spanish, and Iranian realist traditions. However, the story is visualized through a broader sense of realism, which is open to a surrealist texture with a poetic interpretation of reality.

Meeting my DOP, Maya Bancovic, we discussed the tone and mood of the film and the possible visual strategies, camera placement, angles, lighting, and compositions that could imply a melancholic fixation and nostalgic longing for a lost loved one in the post-mourning everyday life of a young mother and her daughter. In doing so, we agreed on a style of cinematography that could best depict a manner of stillness, slowness, and silence that is reminiscent of death itself.

## **Cinematic Realism**

Cinematic realism is the way in which the human subject challenges the outside world's pre-existing reality, and the way the camera challenges the depiction of this reality. I have chosen the realist filmmaking style because I believe through the dynamics of this cinematic form of storytelling I can tell the story of my marginalized characters' resistance, struggle and self-actualization in the face of the opposed, dominant reality.

Researching the cinematic style, my point of departure was European neorealist cinema and André Bazin's thoughts on cinematic realism in particular, his thoughts on a manner of corporeal and spatial cinematic realism created by the interactions of actor, space, and camera. Bazin, in his discussion on the interrelations between camera, bodies, and space in the Italian Neorealist film tradition, appreciates Roberto Rossellini's cinematic realism because he believes that

Rossellini directs facts; it is as if his characters were haunted by some demon of movement.... Gesture, change, physical movement constitutes for Rossellini the essence of human reality...The world of Rossellini is a world of pure acts, unimportant in themselves but preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning. (Bazin, GYZ, qtd. in Cummings 61)

I have been influenced by Bazin's elaboration on cinematic realism throughout the different pre-production and production stages, namely rehearsal, production

design, camera placement and movements and framing. As Bazin shows, in this manner of realism, all of the actors' bodies, objects, and set props find their places within carefully designed spaces: upon and within tables, walls, floors, doors, and corridors that in themselves and at the same time exist in relation to other elements of *mise-en-scène*, the composed film reality and every detail of its narrative.

Being influenced by this Bazinian discussion of framing, in an interview about their films' realist style, Luc Dardenne also refers to Bazin's elaboration on Renoir's style of framing, which does not enclose an object as does the frame of a painting – but which excludes other parts of space, suggesting continuity beyond what it encloses. Thus for Bazin the frame engulfs a spatial continuity, which is visible but is always continuous and developed beyond the frame, in and into our own experiences (qtd. in Mai 62).

As Dudley Andrew shows in his book *What Cinema Is! : Bazin's Quest and Its Charges*, Bazin's aesthetic heritage is “first the pursuit of ‘the real’ beyond representation and mere images; second, a taste for the interaction of reality and imagination in all sorts of genres; and third, a concern for the social consequences of ‘projection,’ both in the circumstances of exhibition and in the discourse provoked by films” (Andrew 1). Thus, it could be argued that for Bazin, cinematic realism is the way the human subject challenges the outside world's pre-existing reality, and the way the camera challenges the depiction of this reality.

Accordingly, *Roj Means Sun* tells the story of the marginalized characters' resistance, struggle and self-actualization in the face of the opposed, dominant reality. In doing so and in terms of form and stylistic choices, the film explores possible ways through which the camera shows a reality that exists outside of the characters that they don't have control over. In this sense, realism is a cinematic discourse of resistance that visualizes the main character's encounter with reality, as well as her/his commitment to changing it, or making a flight beyond its limitations and pre-determined structures.

Starting with the European neorealist tradition, I have explored variations of cinematic realism, namely the explorative naturalistic method of the Dardenne brothers, the poetic (and also documentary-style) realism of Abbas Kiarostami and the psychological realism of Saura. Among these masters of cinematic realism, I found Saura's vision closer to my thematic concerns and intended visual style.



What I like about Carlos Saura's realist aesthetic, in particular in the films *Cria Cuervos* (1975) and *Cousin Angelica* (1973), is the way he uses multiple layers of time and reality to create surrealist-like situations directly connected to the ongoing realities of the time which, as Sandra Dopico Ardao argues was influenced by both the Surrealist movement and the Spanish realist tradition (Ardao 3). Further, in an interview about his film *Peppermint Frappe* (1967), Saura defines reality as "what one can perceive directly, immediately; reality is also what one dreams, what one wants to happen and does not, the past and the future... everything is intermingled." (Saura qtd. in Ardao 4)

Being influenced by Saura's cinematic realism, in *Roj Means Sun*, I have tried to visualize Rojin's story through a manner of realism that is open to a surrealist texture with a poetic interpretation of reality. In doing so, I used two main narrative devices, namely the breaking of the narrative logic with a nonlinear story and the parallel narratives of dream/reality to show how the grief-stricken Rojin struggles to come to terms with her loss.

Similarly, the editing style of open sequences, still long takes and continuous ellipses are stylistic choices that break the flow of the narration. As for the cinematographic style and mise-en-scene, Rojin's story is depicted through a realistic style that infuses objects and spaces with meaning beyond their function or purpose, the way a traumatized mind works.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I would say that *Roj Means Sun* was a point of departure in my personal and professional life. Thanks to my supervisor, mentors, colleagues, cast, and crew, throughout the three years of pre-production, production, and postproduction, I have learned and achieved invaluable lessons and experiences in screenwriting, directing and producing. Visualizing Rojin's story, I retrieved my childhood's profound, life-long experience of loss, which I have never been able to articulate, neither in words nor in images. In this sense, *Roj Means Sun* was indeed a redemptive endeavor, a liberating experience with its moments of suffering and blessing.

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