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Review of *White Sun (Seto Surya)* by Deepak Rauniyar

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White Sun (Seto Surya).

Deepak Rauniyar. Nepal. 2016. 89 minutes. Nepali.

Production Company: Aadi Production and Louverture Film.

Reviewed by Darshan Karki and Sarah Speck.

The frustrations of the Nepali polity are many. A major source of deep-

seated dissatisfaction are unmet aspirations fueled by political uprisings and their dissonance with societal realities. Deepak Rauniyar's *White Sun*, a movie set in the aftermath of the Maoist War that was fought from 1996 to 2006, is an attempt to capture those socio-political discontents in a society at the juncture of a demographic transition.

The movie is set in a remote mountainous village where residents find themselves embroiled in several difficulties after the death of an ex-village head named Chitra. Problems start with the removal of Chitra's dead body out of the house without going—as tradition dictates—through the main front door. Durga, Chitra's daughter-in-law, who nursed the dead man all his life, touches the body to help Suraj, Chitra's younger son, to take it outside. Village elders and the priest, who witness this incident, reprimand her for violating tradition. The return of Chitra's elder son Chandra, a former Maoist soldier, only adds to the chaos. Badri, a 10-year old porter and an orphan, tags along with Chandra to the village, claiming to be his son. This angers Durga's daughter Pooja, who assumes Chandra to be her father, and Durga, who was previously married to Chandra, wants him to certify his fatherhood of her daughter to be able to send the girl to school.

The plot revolves around the brothers' effort to carry their father's dead body down to the river for cremation. No sooner do they begin

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Sarah Speck and Darshan Karki on *White Sun*

their descent downhill before they get into a scuffle over intractable personal and political differences. The two brothers, Suraj, an ex-Army man, and Chandra, fought for opposing sides during the Maoist War. Soon the younger brother walks off seething in anger, forcing Chandra to go looking for able-bodied men in a nearby village. Elderly men keep wait beside the unceremoniously abandoned body lamenting how their own fates would presumably be no different to that of the dead man's. Help eventually arrives but not without consequences. While adults continue to fight amongst themselves, the children, untainted by socio-cultural taboos and political prejudices, take matter into their own hands.

The performance of the cast makes *White Sun* engaging to watch. Dayahang Rai (Chandra), Asha Magrati (Durga), and Rabindra Singh Baniya (Suraj) all convincingly portray their characters. Deepak Chhetri as an adamant priest and Deshbhakta Khanal as the dead man's brother slip into their roles with seemingly effortless ease. The child actors, Sumi Malla (Pooja) and Amar Pariyar (Badri), also contribute as valuable sources of information for viewers by asking appropriate questions once in a while with a carefree mind and curiosity.

As the director, Rauniyar's strength lies in his ability to interweave burning issues facing Nepal in a fairly uncomplicated storyline through the alternating lens of three different generations. The

film shows the problems villagers face due to constant outmigration of young men who leave the elderly, children, and women behind in rural Nepal in search for better job opportunities and education, both within and outside the country (see, for example, Sarah Speck. 2017. "They Moved to City Areas, Abroad": Views of the Elderly on the Implications of Outmigration for the Middle Hills of Western Nepal. *Mountain Research and Development* 37 (4): 425–435, and Ephraim Poertner, Mathias Junginger, and Ulrike Müller-Böker. 2011. Migration in Far West Nepal. *Critical Asian Studies* 43(1): 661–665); the difficulties of living in a remote mountain village; vanishing traditions (the elderly resist change and keep arguing, "customs exist for a reason"); and prevalent gender discrimination.

The act of depicting problematic religious and cultural practices onscreen, however, is not a novelty in Nepali cinema. As Ajeet (Ajeet, Anubhav. 2007. *Nepali Chalachitrako Aarambha* [The Beginnings of Nepali Films]. *Media Adhyayan* 5: 35–73) points out, Nepali movies generally imitate two tendencies widespread in Bollywood films: namely, one, promoting Hinduistic religious, cultural and traditional structures and beliefs and, two, advocating for minimalistic changes without completely dismantling such structures. But *White Sun* disentangles cultural norms and shows the need for change without overtly advocating for it. Scenes where

Chandra is forced to go looking for young men in villages devoid of them because tradition only permits males to carry dead bodies, or Durga's protest against the use of female labor to suit the conveniences of a patriarchal society are telling.

Villages as sites of conflict are also a long-running theme in Nepali cinema. Here again, *White Sun* stands out through its realistic representation of that tension. In most Nepali films, entrenched caste and class hierarchies are easily resolved through a melodramatic union between a heterosexual couple—also called the 'hero' and the 'heroine'—one of who is rich and the other poor despite obstacles from a villain (Ajeet 2007). Rauniyar's characters, on the contrary, complicate the dichotomies between the 'hero' and the 'villain.' The protagonists and antagonists of the movie are situational. For the most part, Chandra seems to be the protagonist fighting an exasperating battle with the monarchists in his family and the elderly who cannot let go of discriminatory ways. Yet, he is no 'hero' for Badri, whose parents were killed by the Maoists during the war. Initially, the elderly men and the priest, who are unyielding in their ways and extremely critical of the young, seem to represent nothing but obstacles for change. Once their fears and insecurities are revealed, they look equally helpless. The lines between the past and the present and the good and bad are blurred as the movie imitates life with its complexities.

Rauniyar contextualizes and furthers the plot by using the radio—an inescapable part of village life in Nepal—as a storytelling tool. For instance, the news on the radio informs the audience that a new constitution is being promulgated and people are already protesting against it. This information seeps into the conversations among the old men and situates the far-flung village in connection to everything else happening in the country. The fictional setting becomes a microcosm of Nepal itself: villagers of opposing political views have to make concessions to coexist whether they like it or not, similar to politicians at the national level who wrote the constitution.

We recommend *White Sun* to all those interested in Nepal or post-conflict societies in general. Through the carefully-scripted characters the movie can help viewers better understand Nepal's ongoing struggles as a nation. Those tired of romanticized depictions of Nepal as 'Shangri-La' in literature and cinema might also relish the shattering of that image. While the Maoist War might be long over, the film is a stark reminder that the dreams it sowed continue to fuel discontents even in the most exotic of landscapes.

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