



A group dedicated to the ongoing needs of documentary filmmakers.

April 2016.

This month's screening is a work-in-progress by award-winning filmmaker Ambarien Alqadar. Ambarien grew up in India, where she got degrees in English literature, modern European languages and film. Her work has won national and international awards and has been screened at film festivals, art galleries, museums, academic and interdisciplinary research. She is now teaching at RIT Film Program. Before coming to RIT, she was a Fulbright Scholar at The Temple University Film and Media Arts Program.

Tell us about what you'll be screening on Thursday.

AA: I'll be screening an excerpt from a work in progress: "My American Dream", which is a documentary about Virender Rana, an Indian Taxi Driver in the US, as he chases his dream of becoming a filmmaker. The film was commissioned by The Public Service Broadcasting Trust, India. I discovered the story in 2012, when I was in Philadelphia. As someone from Delhi who was living in America, I was looking at immigrant culture, the culture of the diaspora as a way to find a sense of rootedness for myself. New immigrants are often cab drivers, and I had had many interesting discussions with cab drivers. In India, Pakistanis and Indians are opposites, but here, they stand together. I talked to the Cab Board and they said that there was a cab driver from India who wanted to be a filmmaker, so I called him. Here is someone who is chasing his dream. The film looks at the whole concept of the American dream and what really happens here.

What kind of feedback are you looking for on the film?

AA: There have been changes in the lives of the subjects, and that leads to changes in the story they want to share and to the story arc. Also, there has been a gap in filming. So I am exploring how best to proceed.

What brought you to America?

AA: I taught in India and made films there till 2009 when I came to Temple University as a Fulbright Scholar looking at film and media practices in an expansive context. I had had to return to Delhi in 2012 due to visa restrictions, and was living there in a neighborhood known as "Mini Pakistan". This was a place I had been homesick for for three years. But returning to it, I did not feel that I wholly belonged. I had changed in many ways and so had the place. I began to view my personal life and my career as a woman filmmaker through a lens of impossibilities and restrictions. For instance I was filming once outside a mosque and people were shouting at me that women should not be there. There was a subconscious feeling that you can't question things. And as a single woman I felt

I could have more independence in the US. I had people pity me because I was single but no one really appreciated my courage in going so far on my own. I felt that coming back to America would provide a more expansive framework.

In what ways do you find the film community different here?

AA: It is hard to say. I still don't have a car, so I am restricted by that. I am very politically involved; my work is very politically motivated. In New Delhi I am a visible part of the civil community. I am yet to discover those networks here. My films are experimental, poetic – they are different from the usual rhetoric. I ask a lot of questions about stereotypes, how they are made, and how they are broken. For instance, if someone makes a film about a Muslim woman breaking stereotypes,, then that itself can be creating a new stereotype. I have a lot of questions around those issues.

You have a background in literature and have made narrative films. Where do you see the intersections and differences between documentary and narrative? Where does one draw the line?

AA: There is realism of form vs. realism of content. A documentary has to be real, but it does not have to be realistic. I like to use experimental techniques. My students, for instance, think that a documentary has to be interviews + B-roll. But as I engage with content I seek a more freeing space to do work. I have done short fiction that is more like documentary, and I have an observational perspective when I shoot narrative. For me, forms are hybrid and distinctions are fluid.

What single thing do you most want your students to take from your classes?

AA: I want them to think out of the box. I want them to think about possibility, about choices. Storytelling does not have to be restricted by form. A documentary does not have to be interviews. So many people are making films now, and I want them to ask themselves –“What are you doing that is important? What is the contribution that your film makes in this sea of films?” The college dorm is related to the world outside of the dorm. I want them to push outside of their comfort zones. Take risks, make a change and share your vision. Storytelling has the power to shift people's consciousness. You have to very powerful tool in your hand.

What makes you say about a story “This needs to be a film. And I need to make it.”?

AA: I am interested in the differences and connections between the world here and back in India. I want people to understand and experience the differences. There are stark differences in how we think of ourselves, how we see life. Story has a role in sharing experience, in making it collective. I want to humanize stories: Who are Muslims? Who are Muslim women? I want to situate my work in a global context where intercultural sharing of stories lends to greater human understanding.

What are some favorite documentaries?

AA: “History and Memory” by Rea Tajiri, about her family's experience of the American internment of the Japanese during World War II. “Sunless” (Sans Soleil) a 1983 experimental documentary by Chris Marker. “Night and Fog” on the Holocaust by Alain Resnais (available on YouTube).