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# The Takeaway

## Shamim Sarif's 'The World Unseen'



Shamim Sarif's "[The World Unseen](#)," screened at the Laemmle 4-plex in Santa Monica, took Zócalo guests vividly into a distant past: South Africa at the start of apartheid. But the title of the movie — and of Sarif's eponymous novel — refers to a still smaller, lesser known place: the world of two Indian women who alternately stifle and stoke the spark of their romance, threatened constantly by strictly enforced racial and sexual norms.

### 'When all the wild Summer was in her gaze'

[Sheetal Sheth](#), Zócalo's first guest to have alighted on [the pages of Maxim](#), plays Amina, a vivacious young café owner who specializes in a [South African donut](#) and whose trousers make clear her political and sexual preferences to her straight-laced and A-line-skirted community. [Lisa Ray](#) stars as gently beautiful Miriam, a mother of two and wife of a brutish husband. She doesn't know how to drive but knows her way around [Yeats](#), traits well-designed to woo Amina. Their slow-moving love leaves time for subplots — including the especially endearing relationship between Amina's "colored" business partner Jacob and a white woman — and long shots of South African countryside, open land that contrasts their tightly circumscribed worlds.

### Author, auteur

Sarif and Sheth spoke after the screening with KPCC host [Shirley Jahad](#) about what led them to make the movie. For Sarif, the story starts with her family (and so does the actual movie — collaged clips of her old photographs feature in the title sequence). They left South Africa in the early 1960s for London, where Sarif was born. Her grandmothers and aunts told her stories of their lives in the old country, in the early days of apartheid, and inspired her to use the country and the time as dramatic background "to build a story about somebody who would dare to challenge these rules," she said. The character of Amina, Sarif noted, came from an acquaintance of her family's, who "wore trousers and drove taxis." Beyond that, Sarif said, she knew little of the acquaintance, and so invented much of Amina.

The director didn't discuss the decision to make Amina explicitly gay until the final question of the night, when a guest asked what everybody else seemed reluctant to mention: why focus on a lesbian romance, and was it freeing or limiting? Sarif responded, "I didn't think of it in those terms. It was a story that came naturally to me. It was another way of exploring yet another taboo in that society." The film has traveled to a few LGBT film festivals, and won praise from sites like [AfterEllen.com](#), which compared it to that classic tale of lesbian romance sparking at a café, "Fried Green Tomatoes" (though that film was more circumspect on

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sexuality than the novel from which it was adapted).

Sarif was loathe to visit South Africa until apartheid ended, despite her family's eagerness to visit. "My parents would say, 'It's better, we have passports, we can sit wherever we like,'" Sarif said. "I thought, why should you be happy about something like that?" Sarif did return to film "The World Unseen," using many South Africans in her cast. She also cast her son in a role that required him to be snatched by the police. ("He's in therapy now," Sarif wryly assured the crowd.) But before that, she adapted her novel to the screen, a rare feat. Her method? "I just ripped out every second page," she joked.

### Acting Amina

Sheth came to the film through the book, which she said she read in one sitting while working on another film with Ray and Sarif. Sheth noted the difficulty of finding strong female characters to play, and especially of finding a movie driven by women. So the New Jersey native appreciated the character of Amina, even though she didn't see herself as quite such an iconoclast. "I think my family has made peace with all the decisions I've made," she said. "At this point they're OK with anything I do."

The film opens November 7. Two weeks later you can catch Ray and Sheth together again in Sarif's more contemporary film "I Can't Think Straight."

Watch the video [here](#).

See more photos [here](#).

*\*Photo by Aaron Salcido.*

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