



April 2022

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### Recommended Citation

Nayar, Sheila J. (2022) "Nanny," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 20.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.01.042>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss1/20>

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## Nanny

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Nanny* (2022), directed by Nikyatu Jusu.

### Keywords

Africa, Immigrants, Supernatural

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### Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



***Nanny* (2022), dir. Nikyatu Jusu**

What does the spirit world want from us when it inhabits our dreams or haunts us with ghastly, incomprehensible phantasms? Or maybe that is the wrong question to ask. Certainly, that's what's suggested to Aisha (Anna Diop), the undocumented Senegalese immigrant and single mother at the center of the film *Nanny*. When it comes to West African spirits like the mermaid water spirit Mami Wata, what Aisha should perhaps be asking, she is told, is "what they want *for* you." "They," after all, are figures of ingenuity and, ultimately, survival.

Thus does this powerfully dark, yet also psychologically intimate feature film declare that its protagonist's dilemma is less a case of her not seeing what's before her than of her not knowing *how* to interpret the signs. But if *Nanny's* narrative pivots on a psychological and spiritual expedition into interpreting the uncanny, it engages no less in admirably subtle social critique.

Aisha, played with fierce elegance by Diop, navigates the duality of her world in New York City: from her aunt's vibrantly colored apartment in a borough distant from Manhattan, to the sleek, upscale, Manhattan apartment of the progressive white couple with whom she's just gotten a job as a nanny to their daughter Rose (Rose Decker). Aisha's singular goal, rarely made public to those outside her tight, immediate circle, is to raise enough funds to bring her young son, still in Senegal, to America. As for Rose's mother, Amy (Michelle Monaghan), she vacillates between cool togetherness and emotional unraveling vis-à-vis her own crises at home and work. After all, her husband Adam's (Morgan Spector) political correctness encompasses not only "causes" and artwork, but multi-ethnic philandering (including one attempt made on Aisha). As for the patriarchy that Aisha thinks she's thankfully left behind, that lingers still for (corporate) working women in the USA, so Amy lets her know.

But Aisha is no shrinking violet. She is unafraid to fend Adam off, and, even more, to let Amy know when her services have not been properly recompensed, even bargaining with calm ferocity for extra pay for the unscheduled overnight stays that have impeded her capacity to communicate with her son. But all this Aisha is willing to endure, for nothing less than her unification with that son is at stake. In this way, she, like so many undocumented women of color who serve the better off, is willing silently, unassumingly, and invisibly to repress her own identity, even as she may entice Rose with spicy jollof rice or lessons in French.

While Aisha weathers her relatively identity-less status as a warm and successful giver to another child's needs, her relationship with her own child comprises a string of video chats that too often freeze and that, with time, become painfully stunted—on the

son's end, from physical distance; on the mother's, from guilt. And in the midst of Aisha's having to wrestle with the intimacies of someone else's family and a detachment from her own, she is, of course, also enduring those obscure messages from beyond. Indeed, the film opens with an overhead shot of Aisha in bed, bathed in a cold blue light, with the sound of rushing water, bed sheets rippling like waves, and a spider crawling across her face. As the film progresses, these delusions-cum-dreams, these sinister nightmares and unintelligibly macabre visions become more frequent, more demanding—and evermore in danger of imperiling Aisha's life. In this way, the mundane becomes coiled by the mystical—or is it the other way around?

It's upon meeting Kathleen (Leslie Uggams)—the grandmother of Malik, Aisha's African-American paramour and doorman of her employer's residence (played with great likability by Sinqua Walls)—that she is told about what these supernatural messages might mean. Spirits like Mami Wata are figures of “survival and resistance for oppressed people,” explains Kathleen, who spent a decade in West Africa. (This is the only point where the film's narrative poetry is a bit too stridently overridden by political didacticism.) Yet, Aisha is not a believer in such supernatural tales. For her, spirits are something that belonged to the ancestors or serve as good fodder for children's books—like the one she reads to Rose, about that trickster figure *Anansi the Spider*.

Alas, spirits of the preternatural order don't defer to humans simply because those humans may not believe in them. So, as Aisha's increasingly haunted journey reaches its climax, the American Dream becomes both tangled *and* semantically disentangled from this decidedly West African net. In this way, *Jusu* gives us a film that defies its being labeled as either “horror” or “thriller” (as it has been in the press). *Nanny* rightly possesses

much of that “supernatural genre” associated with Nollywood, albeit here stylishly and imaginatively immigrated, like Aisha herself, into the urban American environment.

Much like those spirits that Kathleen applauds for their ingenuity, *Nanny* wants—and succeeds—in both challenging the dominant order and creatively subverting it. This it does in no small measure by giving us a protagonist who is a mother, a domestic worker, and an immigrant of color. In other words, this film’s challenge and subversion is less apropos spirits than mainstream American cinema.