

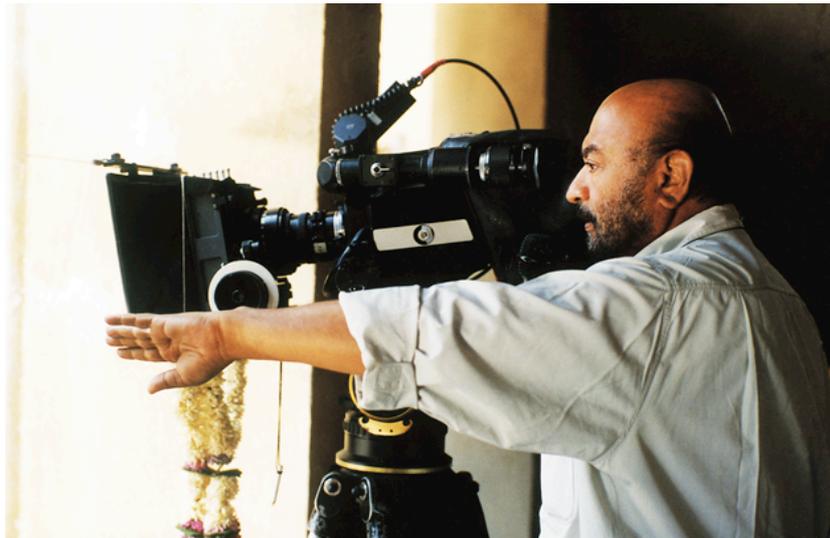
INTERVIEW WITH GOVIND NIHALANI

RUKMAVATI KI HAVELI: CREATING EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPES

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25 years after filming *Rukmavati Ki Haveli* (1991), the Hindi movie adaptation of Lorca's play *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (Federico García Lorca, 1936), Mumbai-based Indian filmmaker and former cameraman Govind Nihalani (Karachi, 1940) vividly remembers the effect it had on him and relates how he adapted the play from Lorca's Spanish Andalusia to a film with an Indian background.



1

-Why did you choose Lorca and, among all his works, what attracted you to *La casa de Bernarda Alba*?

I always liked theater and I was very close to a well-known Hindi theatre director. His name was Satyadev Dubey. He used to do English plays and he spoke to me a lot about some plays from Europe. Among them, he spoke about Lorca and this particular play. I had not read it but he described it as a strong play, so I became curious. I bought an English translation and I read it. I liked

the play very much because of its theme: authoritarianism and the rebellion against authoritarianism. I read it, I liked it and, then, I forgot about it.

One day, I went to Jaisalmer, in Rajasthan. As I was going up the fort, I saw a group of Rajasthani women walking down. All of them -they must have been a particular tribe- were dressed in brown petticoats, brown skirts and black *duppatas*¹ and *chadars*², and wearing old silver jewelery. It was a very stark combination of colors, coming against the stone walls of the fort. That vision was very striking. They walked down and they passed me. I couldn't forget the visual of these women.

Then I started making films and I thought that somewhere this visual needed to come up. I made a huge TV serial called *Tamas* (1988). It was a big theme. After that I felt exhausted and I wanted to do something intimate, something smaller, so I put up a proposal to attempt one of three European plays. I gave them *The Father* (1887), by August Strindberg (Sweden, (1849-1912); *Little Eyolf* (1894), by Henrik Ibsen (Norway, 1828-1906), and then I chose Lorca's play *The House of Bernarda Alba* (La casa de Bernarda Alba) as my third project. Three European plays adapted in Indian surroundings. The proposal was given to Indian television and they said I could go ahead.



When I read *The House of Bernarda Alba* again, the same image of those women coming down that fort kept haunting me, so I decided to take that forward and I decided to place it in Rajasthan because Rajasthan is very close to the original play, since it is a very feudal culture, particularly in olden times. I thought that these 7 women -one mother, one maid and the five girls- in an old

1 Women garment which resembles a long stole worn in two folds over the chest and thrown back around the shoulders.

2 Large piece of cloth that women use to cover head and upper body, leaving only the face exposed.

*haveli*³ would be wonderful. So I decided to go for this play and make it into a film. I was very thrilled.

I recreated the entire environment of a Rajasthani *haveli* and I gave these women the same color, the same kind of dress which I had seen. In my film you see the women also dressed in deep red, maroon and black and, of course, there is no jewelery because the ladies are widows.

Apart from that I liked the theme as well. I was able to combine my aesthetic sensibility, my cinematic sensibility and my social and political concerns. And I was lucky to get very good actresses at that time. That is how you make a film.

2

-How do you translate the fear, the oppression and the claustrophobia portrayed in the original into your film?

When you are adapting a play you cannot be literal. You cannot adapt word by word. You have to identify the theme and look for similar expressions in your own culture and your own language. The language I have used in my play is the feudal Rajasthani language. The way they would refer to their father or the way the daughters would address their mother is not a contemporary reference. It is a particular kind of dialect from Rajasthan. Even though the film is in Hindi language, we used some words as highlights to suggest a dialect being used. You cannot make it 100% in dialect. Nobody would understand it today. It was all a combination of finding the right linguistic expression, taking some words that would give me a suggestion of feudal society. It is like the way you address your elders, your boss or your servants. It reflects what kind of class you belong to, what kind of society this is.

Then, the architecture and the dimensions of the *haveli* also play a role in it because they are made of old stone. Normally, these *havelis* will have a combination of big stones covered with plaster, in grey, white or yellow colors. I used stones, covered them with very thin paint and allowed them to show the texture of the stone underneath. And there is a particular kind of murals, paintings, of military-like figures, like elephants or horses. They are very popular and you will find them outside the doors, or sometimes inside also. Normally murals are very big because walls in feudal houses are big, showing

3 Old-style mansion typical from the north of India with thick stone walls and a central courtyard.

power. So these people are trapped within high walls made of stone. It looks like a prison. And besides, in these *havelis*, in these mansions in Rajasthan, with their high walls, the sunlight does not come in easily. Only when the sun is on the top, does the sunlight come in. So, most of the time, the interiors where women live are in shadow, allowing only soft light but not direct sunlight. Direct sunlight comes but for a very short time during the day. Even in terms of lighting, in terms of photography, I did not use direct sunlight. I used reflected light. There is a general light but there is no sunlight. Only when grilled windows appear, I show some sunlight coming in, just that much, not more.



3

-I guess being a cameraman also helped.

It was conceived much before. That is how the scene was built. We decided on the size of the walls and from where the lighting would come. All these were well thought of before we erected them.

4

-What is the visual personality of the film that determines the particular kind of lighting?

Everything was designed to create the impression of their voices having been silenced. There is no light in their lives. So everything had to create the impression that they are trapped inside, that they cannot escape. The whole thing is about breaking the walls and going out. That is what the rebellion is about: the youngest wanting to go out and escape from the entrapment. They should feel that they are trapped inside and that they cannot break through. The walls are too strong. Literally, philosophically, the authority is too strong. You cannot defy the authority and go even out of the door of your house.

I played on the mood, which was a state of total helplessness, so they can only feel angry. They cannot do anything. And the youngest going out and having a

rendez-vous becomes a great defiance of the rules laid down by society. The last line of the play I think is a great line, when the mother says that her daughter died a virgin. She thinks that it would be a great stigma on the honor of the house that the youngest person went out and had an affair with somebody out of marriage. She is not prepared to accept it. These are the codes of conduct, which are accepted in civil society and this is very true, even today in some parts.

5

-Bernarda is the most powerful character in the story. How did you approach her, from a technical point of view, to give her the authority that she has?

Bernarda is played by one of the best theater actresses at that time. There was hardly any make-up on her. I did not try to beautify her but, in fact, I tried to come out with the rawness of her face. And that was done with the lighting. It is about very simple tricks of lighting. As cameramen we know how to do it. And it worked well.

Also the way, the kind of body language she created, the strains and the fact that she is a widow and she has to dominate even though she does not have the support of her husband. The way she did it was amazing. I did not have to do anything else. She understood the character very well.



6

-How was the filming process?

Before we came on the set, at the same studio where we were going to shoot, since they were a family, I said they should get to know each other very well. They had to sit against each other, they had to play with each other... I wanted to create a sense of togetherness. I wanted them to be good friends with each other. Then, during 7 or 10 days, we rehearsed the dialogues but we did not

rehearse the movements. I did not tell them “you have to move from A to point B or point C”. They just had to sit down on chairs and read and read again and, if they had any problem with any sentence or word, we clarified them.

When they came on the set, that is when I gave them the costumes and information about their movements. Beforehand nobody knew where the camera was going to be. Nobody knew from which point to which point they were going to walk or sit or sleep or jump. They only knew the lines. I also asked them not to show emotions while reading the lines, but to read them neutral, just trying to get the meaning of the line, the unspoken meaning, which is not so obvious in the written word. I asked them to understand before speaking.

They were all theater actresses, so they were used to learn lines and to perform on stage. I wanted theater actresses because, having worked in cinema here, I know there are few actresses who can remember long lines like these without a break. “Come on the set. Move around and discover your own space” -I told them.

So once we all came on the set and I gave them the movements. They were ready with the lines. The only thing I had to concentrate on was the finer points of acting. It went off very well. I really enjoyed working on this. We shot the movie in about two weeks, all of it on the same stage and without any music.

7

-What is the role of the music or, should I say, the absence of it?

The entire film has not a single note of background music. There is no music in the film. There is only one song which they hear being sung from outside, which is there in the play as well. They just hear that. And it is not a song with lots of instruments. It is mostly voices. There is no music. I told my actors: “Whatever you say, it has to be so well spoken that you should not feel the need for music”. I said: “I am not going to use music to underline either sadness or happiness or excitement”.

8

-How do the composition and colors chosen complement one another?

The colors are very limited. There are just three shades. There is nothing you have to look at in the frame. You are forced to look at their faces. And their faces

were my landscapes. The expressions of their faces became the emotional landscapes. Characters come out very strongly when you have stark colors like grey, maroon and black. In most of my compositions, since they are built in medium shots and close-ups, black dominates because they highlight their faces, their clothes.

All compositions are used to emphasize the dominance of the color black. Black becomes synonymous with authority. Therefore, you just see the shapes of blacks moving everywhere and their faces. That becomes the most important element of the composition of the frames.

I composed it in such a way that only the important faces will be seen and, wherever there is a longer shot, it will be dominated by these black shapes. All that you see are the black forms of the women and their faces as they look at each other revealing their emotions. Nothing else.

And the architecture of the mansion is the typical Rajasthani one, with the alcoves and grey stones on the walls at the back. There are no accessories lying anywhere. It is stark. Even the lighting, it is dim. There is no sunlight filtering anywhere. It is all grey.

9

-It seems reduced to a kind of simplicity, with very few elements.

Yes, very few. The more things you put in, the less stark it becomes. When there are not many things, then you feel the lack of them, so the use of lighting becomes even more difficult. If you see many things, then you feel comfortable, because things are there, you can focus on this or that... Nothing like that happens here.

10

-Lorca's play has a religious component, with a church service and a mourning situation as context. How was the cultural adaptation?

The mourning and everything around it is more or less there in all cultures. It was a question of finding a parallel. But you cannot find an exact equivalent. There has to be some kind of adjustment. You have to find the nearest similarity. And that I found because in our case there is also a period of

mourning. There is only one thing that we do not have, a church. But we have temples. So that is the only adjustment that I had to make.

11

-How was the movie received in India?

For the Indian audience -unless they were told that this was an adaptation of a Spanish play- it was an Indian play which narrated an Indian story because it looked very real to them. Surprisingly, nobody enquired about Lorca because they thought it was an Indian story.

I have shown this film in a college in Spain and they were amazed. They said: "We cannot recognize it as our play". For them it looked like an Indian play. So I would consider it to be a successful adaptation because it makes you forget that you have seen a similar work which has been written in another culture or in another language in another country. It became like your own. That should be seen as a very positive response.

12

-And it is about two adaptations, i.e. a cultural adaptation from Andalusian Spain into Rajasthani India, and a genre adaptation from a theater play into a movie script.

And you must remember one thing. I have not edited the play at all. The play is exactly the same as written in Spanish. But I took the English translation. So whatever editing has been done, if at all, is in the English translation. Sometimes we did not use the words and expressions from the original but we did not throw them out. We found a parallel in our language.

13

-Do you have any future similar adaptations in mind?

I am a great fan of Lorca and one of my ambitions is to do a trilogy. *Yerma* (Federico García Lorca, 1934) is a very popular play here in India, particularly in drama schools. I want to adapt *Yerma* and also *Blood Wedding* (Bodas de sangre, Federico García Lorca, 1931) into cinema, with Indian characters and Indian dresses. If I get some funding, that is what I would like to do.

Filmography

[Aakrosh](#) (Hindi, 1980)
[Vijeta](#) (Hindi, 1982)
[Ardh Satya](#) (Hindi, 1983)
[Party](#) (Hindi, 1984)
[Aghaat](#) (Hindi, 1985)
[Tamas](#) (Hindi, TV serial, 1987)
[Drishti](#) (Hindi, 1990)
[Pita](#) (Hindi, 1991)
[Rukmavati Ki Haveli](#) (Hindi, 1991)
Jazeere (Hindi, TV series, 1991)
[Drohkaal](#) (Hindi, 1994)
[Sanshodhan](#) (Hindi, 1996)
[Kuruthipunal](#) (Tamil, Remake of [Drohkaal](#), 1996)
[Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa](#) (Hindi, 1997)
[Thakshak](#) (Hindi, 2000)
[Deham](#) (English, 2001)
[Dev](#) (Hindi, 2004)
Kamlu Happy Happy (English, Animated Feature Film, 2012)
Fly Kamlu Fly (English, Animated Feature Film, Under Production).