

Amitabh Reza Chowdhury about RICKSHAW GIRL

“A beautiful noise all over Bangladesh”

In the most wonderful colours, Amitabh Reza Chowdhury's RICKSHAW GIRL depicts all kinds of injustice in the villages and towns of Bangladesh. Naima, a young girl who wants to help her ailing father, encounters abuse of power, discrimination and social inequality while cycling the streets of Dhaka with her rickshaw. But with all those things going wrong on a structural level, one hopeful message of RICKSHAW GIRL is that with the right, honest people in the right position, many problems can be solved on an individual level.

What is this rickshaw culture all about?

Amitabh Reza Chowdhury: Cycle rickshaws were first introduced in Calcutta around 1930. European jute exporters imported them in Bangladesh for their personal use. The new vehicle roused great curiosity among the people of Dhaka, who were used to horse carriages, palanquins and city-canal boats. These rickshaws didn't receive a very enthusiastic response, until rickshaw culture grew big in the eight-

ies. Initially rickshaws were painted with cinema posters, not as a part of a marketing campaign; it simply could be any kind of poster that painters found interesting. When for religious reasons, the depiction of the human face on rickshaws was banned, they started painting animals. Do you remember Naima got involved in a quarrel with a guy and then painted him as a rat? This is a typical motive used for such decorations.

You frame them in a wonderful way.

Chowdhury: This is the art direction of the streets in Dhaka. It didn't need framing, it was all there. Whatever you see in the streets in this film is natural; only for the interiors we did some art direction.

To pull a rickshaw, you need to be a man.

Chowdhury: In Bangladesh, there are no more than two or three female rickshaw pullers. It simply never happens. Women can do daily labour in brick factories or shipyards, but the rickshaw business still isn't ready for



it.

This is not as much a film about the unfair position of women in society as I thought it was?

Chowdhury: This is not a feminist film; this is a humanist film about any person, struggling to make a living in Dhaka city.

Still we hear a woman saying that 'there is no pride in being a man'.

Chowdhury: I wrote this character named Marium into the film. After the death of her husband she is now running a rickshaw business as an empowered woman who knows that regardless of being a man or woman,





you can achieve anything you want in this life.

Nevertheless I saw a big tragedy in the scene in which Naima turns herself into a boy. When she cuts her hair, that is falling on the floor, it's like by losing her femininity, she loses her greatest good.

Chowdhury: She is passionate about rickshaw riding, and if that is the only job she will accept, becoming a boy is the price she pays. Even if that includes cutting off her hair. For a Bengali girl, long hair is the ultimate significance of beauty. Still she cuts it because she wants to earn a living by doing the thing that she enjoys most... Like me, I graduated in eco-

nomics, I could make a living on economic development studies and many people wonder why I don't do it, as life on a film set is hard. But I want this job, and I will do whatever is required for it. In the whole narrative structure of the film, that scene is one of the emotional climax points.

What about the scene with the bird?

Chowdhury: In Bangladesh, there is a situation I strongly want to criticise. Girls and boys are coming to the city to work in housekeeping, but when being hired, their employers lock them inside the house. They turn them into prisoners. Like a bird locked in a cage. When Naima sees this bird outside and wants to help it, she can't

because she is caged. In the morning when the door opens, she runs out like a bird flying out of its cage.

Both in the city and in the village, there is a lot of shouting going on. Bangladesh seems to be a noisy country.

Chowdhury: Extremely noisy! With very different kinds of noises, like the honking, going on all day long. Most people initially come from a riverside area, from the delta. When you're on one bank of the river, and you see a family on the other bank, you will go like "hey, how are you?!" When moving to the city, people still act the same. "Hey boy!!" That is the normal amount of decibels they produce. It creates a beautiful noise all over Bangladesh that I found very enjoyable; it is the purest beauty of Bangladesh.

I thought there was often also a kind of aggression involved, based on power positions.

Chowdhury: Shouting is considered a power indeed. In the village this powerful guy – the second man of the city commissioner – holds a dominant position, which allows him to shout, beat others and use bad language. The disrespect from rich people towards the poor, or from the authorities towards citizens is highly prevalent in our so-

ciety. I wanted this film to launch a dialogue with society and ask: "Do you see what is happening? If you don't like what is going on, do something about it."

By telling about the struggle of one girl, you open the spectrum for telling about the struggle of women in general and the struggle of the poor...

Chowdhury: In Dhaka, you have to fight for every basic right; there is nothing like the right to food or health or education. So everyone claims their own rights. Bengalese people are strugglers; we are fighters by default. We fought for 9 months to get our freedom in 1971, we fought against the British, against Pakistan... and still we are living the post-colonial era in a typical capitalist country where everyone fights for his own class. The middle class is very limited; 70% of the people belong to the poor class. Most slums and houses are illegal; people made them their home and now that they live there, they claim their rights. The film actually had two endings. I shot another ending with the police tearing down the entire slum. But after seeing the film, I felt it was lacking hope, it was too negative. So I reshot the scene and added the animation.

What about the animation in that closing scene?

Chowdhury: The rickshaw paintings are one of the film's vibrant main characters that we could bring to life through movement. I asked the SICO animation team from Bangladesh to create the concept. Starting from a live action shot with Naima on a roof, we aimed for a smooth transition to animation. The roof that she stands on was painted, which took us 10 days. Then we created some very subtle movement when the moon starts rising; that is the first animated element. I didn't want to go beyond reality, which is why only in the last part the full animation happens.

Naima's paintings are so elegant and beautiful!

Chowdhury: All the rickshaw paintings were made by a young, underestimated artist named Sulehman. He makes these brilliant paintings as if they were in 3D. Our production designer explained to him the concept and the stages, and he painted them brilliantly. When Sulehman was working on the peacock, I told him this was a wide shot "so we don't need the eyes in detail". He looked at me and sighed "You don't understand about art!"

I've seldom seen a film in which col-

ours had the same intensity.

Chowdhury: I wanted this film to look like rickshaw paintings, that are full of specific colours. The paintings always have balance and symmetry and often use the same motives. The peacock is a commonly used motif, because peacocks have colour.

Even the industrial scenes are of splendid beauty.

Chowdhury: They were shot at a sugar cane factory in Pabna. Because of the rhythm of sugar cultivation, the factory is operational for six months, and the next six months it is closed. That is when we did the shooting.

"For those who found their purpose, even the ugly is beautiful," one says in the film.

Chowdhury: That is my personal belief. Bangladesh is going through troubled times, but if you would offer me citizenship in a well-developed country, why would I accept? In Bangladesh I have a purpose; I was born there, together with many other struggling people and I want to tell their story. How would you define ugliness? In his book ON UGLINESS Umberto Eco explains how ugliness is defined from a western cultural perspective. It is my understanding of reality that ugliness has a beauty in it, you just need to find



it. Art is not to be found in museums. In North Bangladesh women paint the doors and walls of their houses in the most beautiful ways. I don't consider art only to be manifested on an institutional basis. Art can come from real people with no background in art history. Art grows inside you and it will find a way to manifest itself, and people will notice you.

The magic of cinema is a recurring theme in films from the Indian sub-continent.

Chowdhury: The song-and-dance scene in my film refers to the dreams that these films offer. It is not the kind of cinema that I am making but these lovely films make us happy and bring a smile to people's faces. I celebrate the magic of song-and-dance-cinema!

How does the film industry in Bang-

ladesh relate to the big brother in India?

Chowdhury: The same way European cinema relates to Hollywood. Every day a new generation of filmmakers fights against the Bollywood hegemony. In some parts of India, like in Calcutta, Bengali films already gained a certain dominance through several box office hits. But we haven't had children's films over the last 20 years. Even the big films don't sell, so why would a children's film sell? My film did well in the festivals - I got an award in Schlingel! - but still it doesn't sell anywhere.

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Gert Hermans