



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



True Ties

Writer-director Shonali Bose’s films are innately embedded in a shell of honesty, where the imagined becomes easily real, and the real comfortably imagined. In an exclusive interview, Shonali talks about the politics of her cinema and the aesthetic of silence

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During the course of the Skype interview, filmmaker Shonali Bose tears up talking about the death of her elder son, Ishaan. She is speaking in the context of ‘not fearing her vulnerability’ while making her second film, *Margarita, with a Straw* (2016), and allowing her emotions to pass through her like mist – fleeting and ephemeral but tangible nonetheless. It struck me then, as I watched her continue to speak through the tears, not missing a beat in either the flow of words or the flow of her thoughts, that there is truth in the discovery she’s made, as a film-maker and a person, that to fear your vulnerability is to not embrace life in its entirety. And that her cinema – fearless and intensely honest – is simply an extension of her own state of mind, evolving and growing like a tree, organically changing its shape and texture, while building deep roots into the earth. ‘While directing *Margarita*, I decided, quite consciously, that I would remain true to my feelings and not censor myself at any point. It was just a year after Ishaan’s death that I was even directing this. We were shooting in Miranda House when it happened

for the first time. It was the fourth day of shoot, and it was not a sad shot or anything, but this was the very college where I had wept and wept when I lost my own mother and I just started howling, suddenly; my whole body collapsed and we just took a pause and I cried publicly like that. Right then, I made a decision that if this happens to me as I go along with the shoot (and it did happen a few more times), I would keep this public; I was not going to shut this away, because this is my process of making the script, to be honest to my emotion also. For me, what was interesting was that my creativity didn’t get depleted or affected by that and if I were to critique myself today, those were my most honest, clear moments, like my brain became crystal clear to direct,’ she says, her sentences coming in unending loops, her words making neat, articulate arcs and her thoughts jumping through it all with the precision of a trapeze artiste.

Shonali was a revelation to me as much as her cinema was self-exploratory to my understanding of the craft and

the nuances that set it apart. The real in my world collide quite seamlessly and resolutely with the real in the imagined worlds she creates, in both *Amu* (2005) and *Margarita, with a Straw*, because Shonali is functioning from a space that is indefinable in its individuality and yet all-encompassing in its ideology. Also, quite literally, Shonali really does put herself out there. ‘During the first day of nudity, the scene between Laila and Khanum (in *Margarita*) in the changing room before they go for a swim, even though we had a woman DP and it was a closed all-woman set for that scene, the actors were feeling shy and inhibited. So I took off my clothes; I stripped naked. I am directing, and I took off my clothes, and I said, come on girls, now you can, because I am also naked and now you can also be naked *na*, so they didn’t feel like here we were observing them,’ she says, laughing at the memory and at the daring recklessness of it all. And, perhaps, also revelling in the quiet triumph that the act of letting go brings with it, stripping the noise of everyday to reveal the silence of the present moment.



● Shonali Bose and Revathi on the sets of *Margarita, with a Straw*, 2014.

● Still from the film *Margarita, with a Straw*, 2014 by Shonali Bose.

Excerpts from the interview

Between Amu and then Margarita, with a Straw, I felt there was quite a shift in how silence was used. All the emotionally charged scenes in Margarita – the lovemaking scene, the father crying in the night, Kalki crying in the end – were shot in silence, whereas Amu had quite a powerful background score. How do you see this shift as a film-maker?

I think I disagree with this question, because *Amu* had huge amounts of silence in the film as well. It’s not a shift. I have always believed in silence and, in fact, Resul Pookutty was my sound designer both times, and we both creatively believe deeply in silence. In *Margarita*, for instance, the lovemaking scene between two women is a scene that makes people very uncomfortable. Even if the film had been made in the West, it would be standard to put music to ease the audience. In the father and daughter scene that you mention, it’s a very easy decision not to put music there because the scene is powerful enough to capture everyone’s heart – adding music there would have made it melodramatic. I feel the more courageous decision was in the lovemaking scene which is an absolutely silent scene and you just hear their breaths. I thought a great deal about it; that is, when there is a scene that is difficult, is it necessary to ease an audience with music, or enhance their emotional experience with music? I had faith not only in the actors and the script but in my audience as well. Also, I feel, audiences today are so inured to, you know, violence and all kinds of things, and part of inuring people is the kind of soundtracks you lay down, so even painful, difficult things

becomes almost like entertainment. Back-to-back you have musical scores, even in good Hollywood films, and I really stand against that and believe in silence. If I have progressed, then that is great because one should get better, even if it must have happened subconsciously, and I am happy that I went more in the direction of silence. But just to tell you, theoretically as a filmmaker, I was very passionately for silence, even at the time of *Amu*.

How do you keep the temptation of silence in check while writing your film, and how do you, then, bring the charm of it into the shot while filming, considering that silence is a many-layered word and can overwhelm with the choices it gives?

When I am writing the script, I am not thinking of sound design. Many people think of shots also, but I am just a different film-maker. When I am writing, I am writing very passionately about the characters. When I am directing, I am completely in the moment and with my actors. One of the things that happen on set is that most directors are at the monitor, but I am never at the monitor unless I will be seen in the shot. I am right behind my actor because to get an honest, authentic performance, my actor needs to be anchored to me. So the whole purpose of a rehearsal is to build an umbilical cord between me and my actor, to establish that faith and trust so they can literally be naked, like they were in *Margarita*, but also naked with their emotions. When I am editing the film, then I throw away everything I have written, everything I have directed, and look at the material with fresh eyes. Only then, for the first time,

I start thinking of silence as a film-maker. It doesn’t come to me either at the script state or on set.

In both your films, it is the unsaid that somehow takes centre stage as against the said – as if you weren’t afraid of the shots that weren’t ‘speaking’ in words. That shot in Amu, for instance, when Konkana visits her village and just walks with her handycam till she spots a man bathing in the fields and turns away. Where do you get that strength of conviction from, to retain the essence of silence while allowing it to breathe?

Honestly, I don’t know where I get it from. All I can do is endorse this beautiful question and statement by saying that I truly believe in it. I think it starts in my writing – again, I don’t visualise it – but when I am writing, I look at what is the emotional essence of the scene. And, when I am taking the shot, I just follow my gut on how to capture that feeling, and stay with that, whether it is a really still shot or a long shot, or whatever the decision might be for the shot, but I remain true to the emotion in the scene and why I wrote it. Also, I have never given in to commercial pressure. Interestingly, *Amu* was my debut film for which I found the money through independent investors and made it, so there was nobody dictating to me. With *Margarita*, there was Viacom 18, a big studio backing the film, but I made it very clear that I will have full creative control and I asked for a director’s cut. For me, I can’t do something if I don’t get the director’s cut; so, yes, there is no direct pressure from the studio, but neither do I feel pressured by the audience. Let me give you another example. The original script of *Margarita* that we sent to the Sundance Film Festival,

where it won in the competition section, did not have the lesbian angle at all. But when I attended the Sundance Writer’s Lab, they made an interesting observation. They said that unlike *Amu*, I had written this a bit externally, like there was a certain barrier in my writing and as soon as they said it, I knew that they were right. I had put a barrier in my writing because I was writing about Malini – my first cousin – and this was based on her life, and I realised, god, I don’t believe in that kind of writing. So I went into a deep rewrite and the character of Khanum, Laila’s lover, came up. And, immediately I lost half the funding. So right then and there I lost the commerce, and I was told that I can make a huge superhit film if I kept with the original script. But once I created Khanum, I just couldn’t do it. I think that’s just my conviction and how I am; I am an activist film-maker like that.

Amu and Margarita deal with subjects that are seldom spoken about and yet, I was intrigued by how you ended both films. If, in Amu, with Amu embracing her identity and her past and the news anchor reporting about Godhra there was a menacing sense of a cycle repeating, then Margarita was about new beginnings. Do you think this reflects your own evolution as a film-maker?

I disagree with the question, too. You are again making a parallel between *Amu* and *Margarita* in a wrong way as if I have evolved; I hope I have evolved, but not in the example you are giving here. I think *Amu* is an extremely open ending and so is *Margarita*. In *Amu*, you kind of feel these people may stay together or may not stay together, it is unknown, and the film ends with a vast shot and the



hope is the red kite that is flying and the train that is moving forward. So, yes, while we put the piece of Godhra in, we put it in so you go forward and understand the cycle of violence, but that is not a closed thing, that is opening up and going further into the future just as the two young people walking along the railway track. And, in *Margarita*, she goes on a date with herself, because she has claimed her own identity just as Kaju embraced her Sikh identity in *Amu*. Laila embraces herself for the first time as a disabled, bisexual being by going on a date with herself. So I think the two endings are similar. Both are open-ended and in both the young girls embrace their identities. Maybe in terms of the politics they are different, but at the level of the protagonist you don’t feel defeated.

● Still from the film **Margarita**, with a **Straw**, 2014.

● Still from the film **Amu**, 2005.

Tell me a little bit about your tryst with the censors – you met with resistance for both your films. Does the reality of screening and distribution in India bother you at all when making the film?

With *Amu* it didn’t, because I didn’t know and after I went through that experience, I still didn’t care when I was writing or making *Margarita*. And, Viacom 18 totally backed me. It does not enter my consciousness to edit myself; obviously I am aware I am going to face trouble with the censors, but will I change something as I am writing or directing it, no. One thing I want to say about silence where *Amu* is concerned is that the censor had asked for cuts all to do with the government. So I just asked them

if they wanted the visual cut or if only what they are saying is bothering them, and they said only what was being said. So I came up with this clever thing, and that's why I believe silence is so powerful. There's a scene between the widows of the 1984 riots and Kabir, when Kabir asks them who was responsible for the riots, and one of the widows says, everyone – the police, the bureaucrats, the politicians, everybody is involved in this. Now that sentence could not be used, so all I did was mute the audio out for that one sentence. When the film released, I was there in the theatre in Delhi on the first day, and when that scene came up, a whisper went through the audience saying “censor, censor, censor”. And every single newspaper report talked about it – the actual statement that was muted out. So it was fantastic, where silence was used as a weapon and *Amu* won on that.

There is something about both your films that seems intensely personal and it seems as much a process of self-discovery for you as it is for the viewer, even though this feeling is unseen, like an undercurrent driving the film. How conscious are you of this process as a film-maker and how much of your own life is intertwined with this persona of yours?

This is a beautiful question, because, you know, I do believe that the best and most honest writing happens when you have the courage to go to the deepest part of yourself and draw from there. My cousin, who was doing the making of the film *Amu*, had an interesting observation. She said that Shonali is processing two things that happened while she was at Miranda House (at the University of Delhi) – one is a

hugely public event of the 1984 riots when she went and worked in the refugee camps and the second is her own mother's death. Both have merged and this is the film that came out. Until she said it, I didn't realise that was subconsciously what I was doing. I was not aware that I was writing about my own pain of maternal loss. *Margarita* was identical. Four months after my elder son's Ishaan's death, on his birthday, I celebrated by writing the complete first draft of *Margarita*. There it was very conscious that I was writing from a place of pain, not just about loss, but also sexuality, which happened later, after I attended the Sundance Writer's Lab. I am fully bisexual and openly so, and, again at Miranda House, when I was 19, my very first love affair was with a woman. So, you are absolutely right that they are extremely personal from the huge trauma of the death of my mother, to the death of my son, to my own sexuality... it's all embedded in the films.

What do you think is more grounded in the aesthetics of cinema – the literal and obvious silence in the visual or a performance, or the more subtle silences of a shot or a dialogue?

Both, I feel. I will say sound design is the literal silence, where you make a decision and deliberately use silence and I really feel that's an important aesthetic to keep pushing forward. But I love your question, because you are also talking about the subtle silences. So, when I am working with my actors or with my DP, that aspect of silence is a very conscious process for me. Let's take an example. When we shot that

lovemaking scene between Laila and Khanum, we had an extremely slow moving camera and it's all a single shot. Even in *Amu*, I have done that several times; it could be an important scene but it will be a single shot, even though it may not make it snappy but it just allows for those spaces and silences.

I also think there is a political component to silence that we should address, which is that how do you silence yourself and censor yourself. Because you are being silenced as a film-maker today, so are you aware of that and are you going to give in to that silencing? I don't just mean the government if it is a political thing, but it's also of commerce, of your expectations narratively, of what will get you the audience, of what will get you the crores. It's not a terrible compromise because you make a conscious decision saying I will silence that aesthetic part of myself in the goal of getting my story out to that many more people, but I feel this is something we have to be conscious of, which is silencing your true soul and aesthetic in how you present your cinema.



Shonali Bose.



● Shonali Bose, on the sets of *Amu* with Resul Pookutty.

● Still from the film *Amu*, 2005.

● Still from the film *Margarita*, with a Straw, 2014.

All images courtesy of Shonali Bose.

