



HAL
open science

RESPECTFUL GAZE OF KUMAR SHAHANI CINEMA

Fabienne Le Houerou

► **To cite this version:**

Fabienne Le Houerou. RESPECTFUL GAZE OF KUMAR SHAHANI CINEMA. 2024. hal-04910284

HAL Id: hal-04910284

<https://hal.science/hal-04910284v1>

Submitted on 24 Jan 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

RESPECTFUL GAZE OF KUMAR SHAHANI CINEMA

By Fabienne Le Houérou

Filmmaker and scholar

Retired from French CNRS

Associated to IREMAM-MMSH-AMU

This article is a tribute to Kumar Shahani a pioneer of India's arthouse parallel cinema who passed away in February 2024 at the age of 83.

I am attached to express a tribute to this gifted and talented artist in *Talking Films Online* (TFO) an originally Indian group bringing together international Filmmakers, cinephiles, students and scholars on regular collective analytical exercises related to worldwide cinema.¹

I will offer a personal view of one of Kumar Shahani's first film "Maya Darpan" (1972). Kumar Shahani was aged of 32 years old, showing maturity and delicacy in the film "Maya Darpan" (1972) stressing the respectful ways Kumar Shahani was filming his main actress, revealing his austerity, modesty and immense sense of tolerance as universal merits and moral principles. In that perspective I evoke the existence of a "respectful gaze" in Kumar Shahani parallel cinema.

I will explore an original angle of the movie *Maya Darpan* a film released in 1972 by Kumar Shahani. The artist shows in this film a very singular and original empathy for women specially when we think about the historical context of the seventies in India and in other part of the world concerning women rights and social conditions.

This original gaze of Kumar Shahani is questioning the possibility of male directors to manifest a **respectful gaze**. A particular way of looking at women and representing them in cinema. According to Laura Mulvey (1975) in her famous article on the "male gaze", filmmakers have historically depicted women in the visual arts and in literature from a masculine perspective that presents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer; in visual and aesthetic presentations of narrative cinema, the male gaze analyses the representation of women as passive objects to be seen in advertising nude subjects in European arts.

Insisting on women nudity and sexualizing the body is emblematic to this Western male gaze. Kumar Shahani in his way to frame the body of the young actress in *Maya Darpan*, reveals absolute respect on women and does not insist on framing what Hollywood industry, for example, is fond of. Exposing to the camera sexy young passive blond women like in Howard Hawks comedy *Gentlemen prefers blond* (1953), with Marilyn Monroe, as passive objects. Kumar Shahani is also offering a gaze opposed to Bollywood classical ways of showing dancing women in subjective choreographies. As an independent filmmaker he has his own

¹ The 30 th of March 2024 seminar is available on the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEj3UQQNvAw>

sight and own view in depicting patriarchy, female solitude with sensible and thoughtful scenario, with a great economy of useless ornaments. He could be considered a real heir of the French New Wave in the sixties who defended the idea of making films with little means, non-expensive films looking at the industry with bold ideas of economy. Maya Darpan takes place in one house and the scenario is an example of sobriety showing that needless to have a thousand of cinema sets to create a masterpiece. Shahani was conscious of defending austerity in cinema like the French New wave. He definitively was a 'sixty-eighter', a person resident in Europe and participating in the Left upsurge that shook that continent in the late Sixties and reached its climax in May '68 in Paris. He was collaborating in Paris with the well-known French film director, Robert Bresson. After graduating from the Pune Film Institute, he won a scholarship from the French government. He moved to France to further his studies at the Institut des Hautes Etudes cinématographiques (IDHEC) and assisted Robert Bresson on Une Femme Douce (1969).

Robert Bresson was major influence on his work and I consider myself Shahani as the most French of Indian film directors because as a young student he was influenced by the sobriety and the style of one the best French cinematographer of all time. Shahani himself he mentioned:

“There is austerity in Bresson. But there is a possibility in cinema to have both: austerity and ornamentation.”

Kumar Shahani filming style of Maya Darpan (1972) approach with uniqueness solitude, patriarchal order, gender roles and aesthetic.

His genuine sobriety and special human modesty could be qualified as a *respectful gaze*. A way of filming the subject with entire dignity as a full human.

SOLITUDE

The first images of Maya Darpan are shown in a musical bath of a soft and sad melody driving us in an elegant white house. The first images of that house are the line of the floor an original introduction which is quite unexpected in a film as *entrée en matière* (introduction). But the first 10 minutes are exploring a beautiful white house. Sober and classical with simple but wooden expensive furniture. Everything is white and the first woman character appears, as a figure, at her back side. During the 5 first minutes the camera is searching for the inner space of the house insisting on a set of speaking details. He sets his scene and aesthetic with no mannerism, not too many colors, no glitters, no glamorous points. No shining, gloomy details. No golden mirrors or armchairs but simple bamboo chairs on the veranda. Straight lines of corridors. No convoluted frills but pure harmony of a huge palace. The owner is a Sahib, a DiwanSahib. Traditionally Sahib are leaders of the Muslim community and honorable notables. Later, we will be informed in the film that the owner is the only Hindu man in a Muslim community.

The female central character Taran appears after 5 minutes lying in bed during the day on a red saree. The central action is set. Taran is a young woman lost in solitude and the poems cited in the movie gets up in a bath of bird's songs. Pigeon, crows, sparrow but also baits will be heard during the film to express emotions. Harmony of sound is extremely well dispatched and controlled to create an emotional atmosphere where the birds are speaking about the human emotions of loneliness. The very few dialogues are insisting on the young woman

solitude living in a big house with her father, her aunt, and a servant. The empty space is also highlighting the solitude. Humans are silent and this is why the bird's noise is emphasized by the director. The sound mixing is intelligent as it reveals an atmosphere which does not need words to manifest the tensions inside the house.

Taran is sleeping during the day in many scenes underlying her depressive state. She is bored and the image shows how useless she feels. The void is expressed through poems recited when walking along the railway.

"I walk I listen across the dust, I knock at doors, there is no one".

Solitude is clearly indicated with poetry and the actress unsmiling serious face communicates the immensity of her solitude. She is suffering from loneliness and cries on her bed after 23 minutes of the film.

There is a growing intensity of solitariness, and the film starts from a natural boredom to grow with a sense of isolation and seclusion.



Maya Darpan (1972)

The film is showing this progress by filming Taran repeating the same useless gesture. She takes away the dust of the bamboo armchairs of the veranda during three times in the film. With no means because all material duties are fulfilled by her aunt.

The railway is also an image which translates, with images, the desire of escaping a situation. Many exterior scenes are taken by the railway and the noise of the train whistling is an invitation of voyage. A call from the outside that Taran is expecting. Because Taran expects to go away and visit her brother in Assam, but she is reluctant to leave her father who show signs of disease. She is showing her concern in the film toward her father and the idea of sacrifice comes very quickly in the narrative strategy. Which let us reach the second point embracing the theme of patriarchal fear and respect of a young woman toward her father.

Patriarchal fear

It could be called “fear of the father figure” or “respect” of the father figure the social order of the family is very clearly expressed with no ambiguity.

Women are here to serve. The sister of the owner is filmed squatting in a small kitchen completely devoted to her housework. Dressed in white saree and Taran is preparing the tea for the guests and is appointed to bring her father’s hookah. The image insists on the object hookah as a man’s object excluded to women sociability. It seems central and linked to the father figure. An important man of the community dressed in white and showing authority in every scene.

The way he is walking outside or inside the house is manifesting his authority along with a voice that seems to scare the young girl. The relationship between father and daughter is stripped of any kind of tenderness and softness. The relationship is structured by duty and social order, but any other form of love is absent except in one scene where Taran put her hand on her father’s front to check the level of fever. It’s the only moment of proximity. The rest of the film is always manifesting a distant relation.

She stands in front of her father to ask the permission to travel to see her brother in Assam, a brother who already escaped the father ‘s command. An authority condemned by her aunt who accuse him of pride. The father is not arranging a wedding for his daughter and keeps the daughter with him like a bird jailed in a cage. Patriarchal relationships are filmed like an imprisonment of a beautiful bird in a comfortable cage.

It’s the main cause of the girl’s loneliness and sadness. The aunt tries to convince her brother to marry her, but the father does not agree. The action of the film is based on the father’s unwillingness to get his daughter married and the daughter’s apparent submission to her father will. As aesthetic and staging is concern Kumar Shahani shows with brilliant scenes how the girl fears her father. With no words but filming the body of Taran.

Especially her feet who are filmed retracting under her saree. Fearing patriarchal order is translated into images of feet or hands. The delicacy of the filmmaker is vibrant in these scenes because he shows complete respect of the body of the actress and does not need to overshoot, oversee, over say. In detailed retraction of her toes, we understand how this girl is fearing her father. Kumar also uses the movement of nervous hands to show the girl embarrassment.



Maya Darpan (1972)



Maya Darpan (1972)

Gender frontiers

The gender injustice and non-equality by men and women is a clear topic of the film approached with the movement. Very few dialogues are significant. The men and women position are given by the position of the bodies.

Like when the father is discussing with his colleagues about business in the bamboo armchairs. Taran is coming serving the tea.

Men are gathered, and women are outside men sociability. The gender frontier is clear. It is never crossed in the film. The man is distant and giving orders and the sister of the Sahib has a servant attitude but still criticizing the Sahib's who creates family tensions.



Maya Darpan (1972)

Taran is also progressively filmed with a young man of her age with whom she is interacting with natural sense of equality. They walk aside in the sand by the railway discussing in terms of gender fairness. He is filmed as a friend with no domination scheme. He is not a *fiancé* chosen by her family but a selected ally in her solitude. She will not speak to him with shyness but directly with no embarrassment.

Taran will eventually join him in his construction site. A rough place opposed to her aristocratic house. The way the desire is filmed between the young couple is also very respectful. The freeze-frame of the sandals of the two young lovers on the floor personifies this notion of gender equity. We understand that they are making love together with the sandals on the floor. The shoes are arranged together.... both positioned on the same line. In cinema positions are key expression of your status or situation.



Maya Darpan (1972)

Their sandals are the symbol of their union and Taran for the first time in the film, shows a shy smile on her face. It's a beautiful scene that I would define as a manifestation of **respectful gaze**. A way of filming the girl with total absence of vulgarity and with the softness of gender equality. It reverses completely the situation, and the love scene is a scene of liberation. Love is here a door or a window to freedom. The emotions of self-respect and tenderness are translated with the camera with humility and modesty in the Shahani style of austerity.

Aesthetic of elegant sobriety

The whole film is a perfect calculation of ornament and sobriety. Almost calculated with mathematical caution. The game using colors is beautifully mastered. Everything is red and white in the film and the dance at the end of the movie is also a white and red performance. Taran wears alternatively red and white sarees.

The red color in India is the color of wedding and the color of desire. Kumar Shahani dresses the seduction side of Taran in red. She walks inside the house in a red saree, and she appears at the 5th minute of the of the film.

In most of the scenes she is walking and filmed from behind ...In her back side strolling in a white corridor. Her figure in red is wandering around in a slow path manifesting expectation. In other scenes she wears a white saree, orange, and purple (at the railway station) according to the subjectivity of the scene related to her emotions.



At the Railway

Tints, shades, tone, tinge are not only colors. More than colors they offer the visual dimension of emotions. The red saree personifies the sadness and Taran tearful situation of an idle unmarried young woman. The white saree is worn while strolling outside; it encompasses the desire to go away, to escape her father's house/ jail.

Colors here are not used in a superficial way but are meant to give us messages replacing dialogues. As a painter Shahani uses colors as a central purpose. The style is the heart of the film. As Victor Hugo uses to stress "*The substance is a form rising to the surface*". The shape of the film is meeting its substance in a way that Shahani style is the subject. Interiority of the characters drills through, framing, light, and distance. He shares emotions with an esthetic language. He is a colorist inspired by Indian traditions of associating colors in a subjective and spiritual gaze and reveals a unique sensitivity. Today his ethical message is more precious than ever.