

FILM

Kolkata Film Festival

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The 16th Kolkata Film Festival (Nov-2010) explored the legacy of films by Akira Kurosawa (Japan), Alain Resnais (France), Olivier Assayas (France), Costa Gatafas (France), Jon Jost (USA), Liv Ullman (Sweden) and Debaki Bose (India). New spotlights captured the beauty of remote landscapes.

Adapted from a story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "Of love and other Demons" (Costa Rica/Colombia, 90 mins, colour), and directed and scripted by Hilda Hidalgo, keeps an exaggerated visual style of reality and apparitions in bright colours. African folk songs on dark screen and a drifting boat with thirteen-year-old white girl Siervral Maria (Eliza Triana) and a coloured nanny along creeks and forests, create a foreground to Maria's subconscious questions on life and the taste of a kiss. It is late 19th century in colonial Cartagena de Indias, where exorcism and the fears of the Spanish Inquisition still hover. All doubts find solace over the prayer candle : 'May the light guide you'. Maria lives in a large mansion by the sea, and spends time on a hammock watching large, coloured lizards. Her father is a marquis with vast property and coloured servants; and her ill mother is opposed to exorcism. One bright day, at a busy market place, Maria walks along with a coloured nanny. Where a priest is giving a sermon on redemption, a mad dog carrying rabies runs along, and bites Maria on the ankles. The dog had bitten three people earlier, and is shot down immediately. There is chaos in the market. Maria falls into a trance, and continues with her sub-conscious queries.

Cajetano (Pablo Derqui), a young priest, has brought books from Paris and has studied Leibnitz philosophy. He discusses with the abbot whether evil is from the presence or absence of god. After the dog bite, Maria suffers from burning fever. She has learnt certain African dialects and now wears Santeria necklaces like other African women. Father Enselmo, the abbot sends priest Cayetano to the mansion of Marquis of Casalduera to examine Maria. Though there are no symptoms of rabies, the Church is convinced that Maria is possessed by the devil, for being different. Maria's parents discuss with friar Cayetano, and Maria's mother is against exorcism. The Marquis wants to take Maria to Seville. One day Maria has trance of a candle falling into a pond with flowers. The candle remains lit underwater, and illuminates the pond bed. The people in the mansion are asleep. Maria has convulsions from fever, and the priest examines Maria. The Marquis visits the local hospital where rabies infected patients are kept under chains. The elder priests are convinced that Maria is infected with rabies. The Marquis and daughter Maria travel in a horse-drawn coach to the convent of Santa Clara. A senior prioress at the entrance to the convent, takes Maria inside. Maria's suitcase of clothes is left with the Marquis. The abbot wants young priest Cayetano take charge of Maria, who is locked up in a cell. A young nun, sister Agnes looks after Maria. She caresses Maria's long hair in locks and administers medicines to Maria, who is suffering from boiling fever. When Maria vomits, sister Agnes prays. The abbot attributes Maria's abnormal symptoms to the devil, without ever thinking that they could be caused by God. Maria is chained to her bed. The priests affirm that they were not against Maria, but were opposed to the demon who might inhabit and torment her. Friar Cayetano sprinkles holy water, and reads from St. Augustine.

Maria tells sister Agnes that the devil was within herself, and sister Agnes retorts that neither the devil nor God exists. There are tales of a white witch stealing children. When

Maria is freed from chains, she tries to flee, but friar Cayetano overpowers her. She is again chained to her bed. An intern nun confides that she too was bitten by a rabies dog. With another nun, Maria watches a lunar eclipse from the iron grills of her cell window. There are fears and apparitions that after death, one is reborn as animals, or just ceases to exist. Friar Cayetano, who reads Voltaire, tells the abbot that Maria is not possessed by the devil. The poor coloured people worship demons. Maria's fever subsides, and the bite on her legs has healed. The apparition of a candle on the bed of a lake, burning below the waters, reappears. Maria places her legs on friar Cayetano's thighs, while friar Cayetano applies balms on the wounds caused by iron fetters. Friar Cayetano's right eye has a bandage, after being harmed by the eclipse. The Marquis is not permitted to see his daughter. Maria's ill mother lies on stone floors, in grief. Abbess Josef Miranda displays convent records, indicating that Maria is possessed by the devil.

The religious order denounces blacks, heretics and rebels. Friar Cayetano wants to be freed of responsibilities over Maria. A vision emerges of a candle accidentally dropped in a pool illuminating the waters. Maria shares her visions with Friar Cayetano. The king and queen commission a painter for a painting of Maria. The clergy link Maria's satanic attributes to the African languages spoken by Maria. It becomes a test of the Holy Spirit. Friar Cayetano visits Maria at night, holds a rosary and mumbles prayers. Maria struggles with the rosaries, and Friar Cayetano touches Maria's face. Later Friar Cayetano is on the stone floor with flagellations, and the abbot watches. Soon Friar Cayetano is transferred to a leper colony. But he enters the convent from an underground tunnel, and reaches Maria's cell. Maria tells him to go away, but the thirty-six-year-old priest Caresses Maria's locks. He confides his affections to Maria, and Maria puts a necklace on his neck. The next day Friar Cayetano finds the tunnel sealed, and soldiers arrest him. Soldiers poke Maria's body with sticks.

Maria and Friar Cayetano are imprisoned in separate cells. Friar Cayetano dreams of touching Maria. The apparition of a poolside with a candle submerged in the waters, flashed by, as the Friar whispers in a dream. Hidalgo's film has a sociopolitical undertone, and Maria's agonized questions are self-tormenting. The script handles the personal and the social with sharp details and subtlety. In spite of the gorgeous costumes and sumptuous outdoors, the drama is flat and repetitive. The acting lacks rhythm and the voices are monotonous. Marcelo Camorino's camera makes spectacular use of the landscapes, but remains static in theatrical fixed frame situations. □□□