

# A deft telling of a daughter's tale



BLOWN IN THE WIND  
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

WITH I max planning to supersize the Netflix streaming service, the merger of our viewing habits is in sight. Last September, there was this David and Goliath agreement between these two opposing movie services that would allow blockbuster cinemas to be made available on small screens, while fringe films under the rubric of Netflix Originals in large cineplexes. This will change the way we watch movies. In the last few years, we have mainly grown used to two different ways of seeing things: as part of the digital gold rush, objects are either blown out of proportion or reduced to fit personal screens. The size of the TV screens in our living rooms or our personal gadgets are constantly evolving to meet the growing demands of visual pleasure. While the growth in streaming services and interactive gadgets may give us the impression that the size and type of devices do not actually matter for watching movies, a recent study states otherwise. It argues that small screens do lead to reduced immersion. I, for one, who periodically resorts to phone-screen to binge watch, withdrawing myself from mundane worries, was forced to reflect on issues of immersion while watching a movie as a group at my workplace. Last week, the docudrama on our prime minister, *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale*, was screened at ULAB. Thanks to the production company, Applebox, ULAB students had the privilege of watching the film on an unfamiliar professional theatre mode sitting in their familiar auditorium setting. The comments from the makers in the follow-up session were an added bonus. I had watched the film earlier on

a small screen. Returning to the movie a year later with an audience who are in their teens and twenties and with the director and the producer in attendance made me reflect on how politicians are projected and perceived in general. A lot has been said on the merit of the film since its first release in 2018. I don't want to go into the details of the film or the accolades it has deservedly earned. My particular interest lies in the reaction of our young audience, and I feel that there is a lot for our politicians to learn from the film—just like they would do by reading *The Unfinished Memoirs* and *Prison Diaries* of the father of the nation.

There were spontaneous applause from the young audience during two particular scenes: one in which Bangabandhu insisted on having his pipe and tobacco while being arrested, and the other in which the prime minister was seen playing badminton. In the first instance, it was the boldness of the great leader that moved the audience (not sure if it was due to their nicotine urge), while in the second instance, it was the prime minister's active love for sports that attracted the young minds. There was a moment of eerie pin-drop silence in the auditorium when the black rotary dial telephone rang incessantly in Germany in 1975. The voice-over of Sheikh Hasina found an empathetic audience: "I have never heard anything harsher in my life." It was not the ringtone, but the message of the call, that proved to be harsher. The news of the assassination of her entire family reverberated through the ringtone. When I watched the movie by myself on a small screen, I did let my eyes moisten up. In a public place, I was more conscious of the display of my emotion.

The success of the film can be measured by the way the audience engaged with the story or the characters through their collective sighs or laughter. This is a generation that is known to be apolitical. Given the fact that these students at a private university did not

come to the hall chanting party slogans, the signs of engagement at a human level show that often official narratives on political figures fail to relate to their audience. This documentary is a glorious exception. It was filmed over a span of five years. It gives us a rare access to the human side of our prime minister. We are not the frustrated bystanders waiting for the motorcade to pass; we are the ones who have been allowed an understanding of why this security matters for a person who has

Hasina is the script." One can only wonder how many hours of film footage had to be sifted to give the film its current shape. The glue that is used to lace the shots together is music. Take the case of Shyama Sangeet, for instance. The heart-rending "amar shaadh na mitilo, aasha na purilo, shokoli furaye jai ma..." tells of unrequited, unfulfilled hopes and desires against a backdrop where end is near. The song can be translated to rhyme with the longing of a loving daughter who

critical lens was alert when I watched it sitting in my own personal space: ah, gender stereotyping. But the collective endorsement of the audience brushed aside my gender sensitivity, and found no fault in seeing her as a caregiver. "Hasina" appeared to be a relatable, accessible human being—a member of a middle-class family.

The plot, sans script, if I may suborn, emerges as a tale of two sisters. I borrow the idea from the novel that Bangabandhu's second daughter Sheikh Rehana mentions in the film. After the assassination of their father, while living a life of exile, a young Rehana was brimming with thoughts of retributions. She recalled the character of Madame Defarge from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* who secretly encoded the names of the Revolution's enemies into her knitting. It was the elder sister who kept her calm. Bangabandhu, who united us all, could never believe that his own people would harm him. Yet in private, he once warned his elder daughter about the treacherous nature of "Mostaq Uncle." The elder sister ensured that proper legal procedures were followed in enacting justice once she came to power.

The best part of the film is that it offers a balanced perspective. It avoids the official rhetoric that is often used to mythify our political leaders. Often we ignore the intelligence of our young generation. They are smart enough to see through things. The movie receives collective endorsement because it is honest in its portrayal. It is human in its orientation. Screens should not be used to size up or size down reality. Screens become effective when they offer the touch and feel of skins. The purpose of any film or story is immersion and engagement. *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* is successful in doing just that!

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'Hasina: A Daughter's Tale' revolves around its central character, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

lost everything. We find the PM in her kitchen, in her library, in her garden, or in her ancestral village in Tungipara. The tale, as the title suggests, is of the daughter of an iconic man who was larger than life. The director and the producer made it clear: they did not want a film that would simply document the daily life of Sheikh Hasina. They did not want the camera to be a fly on the wall, witnessing the daily activities of the central character from a distance.

There was no script—the producer Radawan Mujib quipped, "Sheikh

hardly had time to spend with her father who was mostly in jail or away for political causes. The song echoes the pang of a sister who saw the end of her entire family. The song helps the central character emerge as a mother, grandmother or aunt as well as a sister who learns to protect her remaining family with motherly affection. It is the human side of the story that appealed to our young audience.

The film begins abruptly in a kitchen where the PM is seen cooking, while attending one of her grandchildren. My

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Violence against women is blocking development



TALANG MOFOKENG

THE single highest barrier to development globally is neither hunger nor disease. It is gender-based discrimination and violence. That is why achieving

the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5—gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls—is a prerequisite for progress on the other 16 SDGs. And yet, with only a decade left to complete the SDG agenda, governments continually fail to uphold girls and women's most basic rights, let alone empower them to reach their full potential.

Consider the plight of women in South Africa, where the femicide rate is almost five times the global average and sexual assault is rampant: in 2018-2019, the police recorded an average of 114 rapes per day—an increase of nearly 5 percent from the previous year. To add insult to injury, women and girls, including victims of such assaults, often lack access to sexual and reproductive health services, including safe, affordable abortion.

The problem is not legal. South Africa's constitution guarantees access to reproductive health care, and the 1996 Choice on Termination of Pregnancy (CTOP) act allows abortion on demand up to the twelfth week of pregnancy. And yet unsafe abortions still outnumber safe abortions 2:1.

Based on South Africa's high rate

of sexual assault—and my firsthand experience as a doctor working in the country—it is fair to assume that a non-negligible share of these unwanted and unsupported pregnancies began in violence. In this sense, many of South Africa's women are victimised twice: first, by the perpetrators of the assault and, second, by the health system that forces them either to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term or turn to sellers of illegal abortion pills.

In the latter scenario, the women risk side effects like sepsis and haemorrhaging, and often endure the dangerous and undignified process in public bathrooms. They may then suffer yet more violence, as their community blames them for the consequences of actions taken in desperation. For example, I was recently contacted by a young woman who was being hunted by a mob that suspected her of abandoning a foetus in a public toilet.

It didn't matter that the woman had been raped and subsequently obstructed by the local clinic staff from receiving an abortion—care guaranteed by the CTOP act. It didn't matter that her constitutional rights had been systematically violated. She would now suffer yet more violence, unless she managed to secure safe passage away from her home. Meanwhile, no health-care professional or support staff has ever been punished for denying abortion services in violation of the CTOP act.

These problems are systemic. A 2016 report by South Africa's Commission on Gender Equality found that the Department of Justice was not coordinating the departments involved

in implementing the Service Charter for Victims of Crime in South Africa. The Department of Health, for its part, had not established a standardised system for funding, monitoring, and evaluating the delivery of health-care services to victims. The consequences of these failures included shortages of DNA evidence kits at police stations, inadequate transport resources, and a lack of safe houses for victims. Perhaps



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

not surprisingly, perpetrators of sexual violence are rarely punished.

These problems are hardly unique to South Africa. The World Health Organization estimates that, globally, more than one in three (35 percent) women will experience physical or sexual intimate-partner violence in their lifetime. Few see their attackers

punished, and many cannot access sexual and reproductive health care, even in countries that have ratified international instruments guaranteeing the right to such care.

In 2015, the WHO and other United Nations agencies attempted to help address these lapses with the Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence. The package serves as a tool to identify what countries'

for Sustainable Development (which encompasses the SDGs). This would also support national-level efforts, such as proper enforcement of South Africa's CTOP act.

Failure to take such steps is exacting a devastating physical, psychological, social, and economic toll on countries. As a 2013 WHO report notes, violence against women leads to death, injury, and unwanted pregnancy, with higher rates of infant and child mortality. Moreover, victims often face depression, social isolation, and excessive alcohol use, all of which impairs their ability to work, leading to lost income. In the European Union, gender-based violence is estimated to cost nearly 256 billion euros (USD 280 billion) per year. In South Africa, that figure stands at 28.4 billion rand (USD 1.9 billion).

Modern development strategies often recognise the pivotal importance of enabling women to fulfil their potential and contribute effectively to their economies. Yet they fail to recognise the need for concerted action to protect women from violence, and uphold the rights of victims. They are thus grossly inadequate.

Women deserve to be safe in their homes, at school or work, in hospitals, and on the streets. Only when they are not struggling to survive can they—and their communities—truly thrive.

Tlaleng Mofokeng, a member of the Commission for Gender Equality in South Africa, is an expert in sexual and reproductive health and rights.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**MAHATMA GANDHI**  
(1869-1948)  
Indian lawyer, politician, social activist, and writer who became the leader of the nationalist movement against the British rule of India.

*Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Head, to Henri
- 5 Chain unit
- 9 Hearts
- 10 Cheering loudly
- 12 Left on a liner
- 13 Caesar's land
- 14 Snorer's victim
- 16 Funny fellow
- 17 Mamie's husband
- 18 Filing concern
- 20 Fez feature
- 22 Peepers
- 23 Do a butler's job
- 25 Eins und zwei
- 28 Dark looks
- 32 Was behind
- 34 Seine water

**DOWN**

- 1 Midwest state capital
- 2 Undermines
- 3 Time in office
- 4 Manor settings
- 5 Paint base
- 6 Hot blood
- 7 Sweden neighbor
- 8 Dojo doings
- 9 Go by taxi
- 11 Storms
- 15 Addresses
- 19 Gambling city
- 21 Enter the regatta
- 24 Cube holder
- 25 Aspiration
- 26 Loose overcoat
- 27 Car part
- 29 Derringer or dagger
- 30 Spanish speakers
- 31 Shoe material
- 33 In the lead
- 37 Secluded spot
- 39 Compete

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P | O | P | S | H | E | R | B |   |   |
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| S | T | A | G | E | D | I | G | U | P |
| T | E | N | S | T | A | T | U | T | E |
| S | T | U | N | T | E | D | E | E | L |
| S | T | Y | L | E | P | S | S | T |   |
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**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott