The Dramas of

KAJALIE SHEHREEN ISLAM

Mid-1980s Romania, during the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceauescu. Two friends, Gabita and Otilia, spend the day preparing for Gabita's abortion, illegal in the country at the time. When the hour finally draws near, they are forced to give in to the sexual demands of the black market doctor in exchange for his carrying out the operation. It is a day in both the women's lives they promise never to talk about, but it is also not one they will ever forget.

This is the storyline of Cristian Mungiu's 4 months, 3 weeks & 2 days, which won the Palme d'Or and FIBRESCI awards at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, among a host of other international prizes. Long, unbroken takes, the jerking of a hand-held camera, silence when there is nothing more to be said than what the faces express, all make the film tension-ridden and realistic, immersing the viewer in that one day in the lives of the two women.

It is difficult to come up with such reality-based or thought-provoking films and dramas in our own country. The alternative stream of cinema has made some progress, but mainstream cinema is far from thought-provoking or even realistic. It may be argued that films are for entertainment, but not exclusively so. They should have objectives, messages they want to give, and while a genre of film may be fantasy, every film being melodramatic to the point of unreal cannot attract audiences for long. For, though we may look for avenues of escape from our own everyday problems, the solution is not always and only fantasy. Sometimes, we expect something more real, even on screen, something we can actually relate to, something to which we can say, "God, what if this happened to me?"

Never mind mainstream cinema (which is no longer a very popular or even respected mode of entertainment for most middle-class Bangladeshis anyway) or alternative films, which do not reach the majority of local audiences, but look at the hundreds of dramas, daily soaps and mega-serials aired on every television channel, every half hour, every day of the week. How much of boy-meets-pursues-convinces-marries-girl followed by their domestic problems can people take in a day? Why should they either, when there are so many other problems in a society as poverty-stricken and conflict-ridden as ours?

Many of these dramas are targeted at middle-class urban youth, but finding the perfect mate is not the only problem of this group. Few dramas talk about the frustrations of unemployment or corruption in society, the escalating drug problem or even campus life beyond, again, the boy-meets-girl syndrome. As for women, their only problems are not with their boyfriends and mothers- and sisters-in-law. They also go out on the street, to school, work, use public transport, and do not always consider the pursuit of the neighbourhood thugs or even classmates, to the point of sexual harassment, to be romantic. As far as older people are concerned, their problems also range beyond the home and children to the work environment, making ends meet and struggling daily with social problems and moral dilemmas.



The ups and downs of young love are a common theme in our drama serials.

Once in a while a drama serial like "Doll's House" (currently being aired on ATN Bangla) with its high-profile cast will make one sit up at the mention of real-life issues. Illegal migrant workers being sent back from Malaysia, a young man being framed for murder by a influential family in his village, or a teenager getting pregnant before marriage are issues in the news or happening