



Rachel Silvey from the Munk School of Global Affairs in conversation with filmmaker Rubaiyat Hossain, moderated by TIFF's Acting Director of Learning, Keith Bennie.

PHOTO: SARAH NAFISA SHAHID

TIFF 2019: Made in Bangladesh, a melodramatic social-realism film relevant to its times

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Disclaimer: It is of the author's belief that true criticism cannot take place without giving away the essence of the film. As such, please be cautious when you read the following and do not get upset if you come across a "spoiler."

Made in Bangladesh left an impression at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) where it was selected as part of the Contemporary World Cinema programming. This is Bangladesh's first selection in four years, the last being *Meghmallar* in 2015. To provide some context, TIFF ranks prime on the list of festivals and is widely considered a kick-starter for an Oscar campaign. I attended the screening of the film where filmmaker Rubaiyat Hossain was present to speak with Rachel Silvey from the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto for an extended question and answer session to provide a deeper understanding of the film.

A contemporary social drama, *Made in Bangladesh* zooms into the lives of garment workers at the fictional Modern Apparels in Dhaka. The film flaunts Hossain's signature feminist stamp that is frank and fresh in the context of Bangladeshi cinema. With its working-class setting, politics of class and labour are invariably weaved into the politics of gender.

In *Made in Bangladesh*, Hossain brings together a globally acclaimed crew majorly comprised of women who recreate a visually muted yet aurally loud image of an informal settlement in Dhaka. Jonaki Bhattacharya who did the production design for Kolkata film *Jonaki* headed the set design for Hossain's latest. The marvellous Sabine Lanceline, who has previously worked with the likes of Chantal Ackerman, joined as director of photography (DP). Lanceline's soft, matted colour-grading heightened the documentary-like sombre tone of the film. She purposefully maintains a distance away from orientalising the poverty-stricken neighbourhood.

The film opens with the workers

screaming amidst a factory fire. "Moyna! Moyna!" we hear. Immediately we learn that Moyna, a factory worker, did not survive the accident. Her memory haunts her co-workers for the rest of the film, proving to be a catalyst for most of the characters' motivations.

Upon Moyna's death, sewing machine operator Shimu, played by actress Rikita Nandini Shimu, is shaken into the morbid realisation that her life is as disposable as the clothes she makes. Existentially desperate and financially stressed, Shimu runs into activist Nasima, from a renowned non-governmental organisation (NGO), played by Shahana Goswami. Nasima is trying to build a report on the atrocities committed by Modern Apparel and invites Shimu and her colleagues to an NGO meeting on labour rights.

The walls of the NGO are plastered with revolutionary slogans and posters remembering the Rana Plaza collapse and the Tazreen Factory fire. The costume designer does a tongue-in-cheek job on the short-haired NGO worker adorned in a sleeveless blouse and a *tip* on her forehead. One of Shimu's friends exclaim, "Nasima apa's hair is too short—she looks like a man," reiterating a common dismissal of working upper-class women in urban Dhaka. But through Nasima's NGO, Shimu and her friends from Modern Apparel are inspired to unionise.

The focus of *Made in Bangladesh* is on the need for unions for women factory workers. The film succeeds in depicting the physical, emotional, and social hurdles created by society when a woman tries to ask for rights.

The feminist coding of this film is easy and straightforward. And due to a scarcity of Bangladeshi feminist cinema,

this uncomplicated film is undoubtedly a significant one. *Made in Bangladesh*'s politics may be reductive and too simple for some, but it is the first of its kind. Keeping in mind that there are rarely any Bangladeshi films championing women's rights, I can see the merit of keeping the politics simple. It is the only way that the message will get through. Masculinity and femininity work as a dichotomy within the story. All the men are evil, and rightly so. And the women are heroes for pushing back against these men with maximum capacity.

The narrative, however, treats Shimu's jobless husband with particular sensitivity. Soheil, the husband, exhibits a soft affection towards the hard-working protagonist. He supports and appreciates her calibre only up until he finds a job for himself and no longer needs to depend on his wife's earnings. He undergoes an aggressive transformation from the kind and loving husband to a jealous, egotistical, and domineering one that is all too familiar in Bangladeshi society.

The story also makes a remarkable comment through the imperfect friendship between Nasima and Shimu. The relationship is based on favours in exchange for monetary gains. The presence of a financial power structure between a wealthy, liberal ally and the working class adds to the story's social-realist voice. It brings out a harsh truth that regardless of the well-meaning solidarity, there remains obvious friction between the classes in modern Bangladesh.

This friendship between Nasima and Shimu almost mirrors that of Hossain and Daliya Akhter who is the real-life garment worker and the source for the character of Shimu.

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