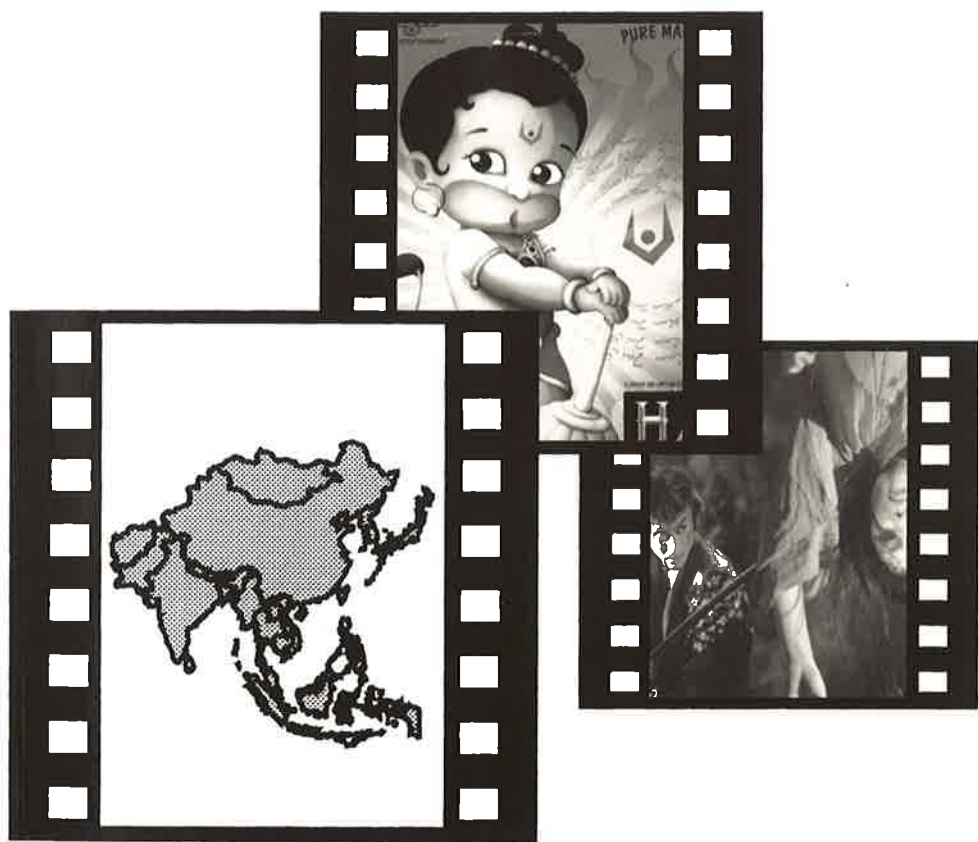


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Review: *The Clay Bird*
**(*Matir Moina*, dir. Tareque Masud, 2002, France/
 Bangladesh co-production, 98 min.)**

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Films based on a director's childhood often offer a special look — through image, story, and sound — at a world that no longer exists, or is at the point of vanishing. With Milestone Film and Video's deluxe DVD set of *The Clay Bird*, director Tareque Masud's (b. 1957) early childhood in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the late 1960s comes to life through the fictional world of a young Muslim boy, Anu (Nurul Islam Bablu), his strict orthodox Muslim father, Kazi (Jayanto Chattopadhyay), his more open-minded, but repressed mother, Ayesha (Rokeya Rachy), and his vibrant, but fragile sister, Asma (Lameesa R.Reemjheem). This family serves as a microcosm of the forces for change in the society at large in a land that gains independence and then reinvents itself. *The Clay Bird* is set at the time of the democratic movement that grew in power in East Pakistan in the late 1960s but was violently suppressed by the Pakistani military government. A civil war resulted and, against all odds, the people won independence from Pakistan in 1971, at the cost of millions of lives.



With a cast primarily of nonprofessional actors, there is a freshness to *The Clay Bird* that goes beyond the distinction of being the first Bangladeshi film to be honored at Cannes (the FIPRESCI International Critics' prize, 2002) or to compete

in the Oscars for Best Foreign Film as an official Bangladesh entry. The only two professional actors in the cast are the actors portraying Kazi and Ayesha, although the devout Muslim Kazi is actually portrayed by a Hindu from an elite Brahmin family! Before appearing in *The Clay Bird*, the young boy who plays Anu, a house servant for a friend of the Masuds, had never been to the cinema before.



Although the director works hard to present multifaceted characters who push against stereotypes, there is a tendency to show the Hindu world, especially the vibrant, colorful festivities, as enticing, with the Muslim world shown as highly disciplined, even austere. But this film should not be seen as an indictment of Islam by a man who was himself, from age 7-15, a student at a *madrasa* (an Islamic school). (Masud recalls that, in the *madrasa*, they were forbidden to see films or draw, and that it was rare for a middle-class child, like himself, to attend such a school.) In fact, one of the seemingly least flexible characters, Kazi, actually undergoes the most radical change. As a young man, he had been fascinated by British manners, but later spends all of his time immersed in the study of the Koran and the distribution of homeopathic medicine to the villagers. The revolution in East Pakistan finds Muslims attacking other Muslims, a fact that shocks Kazi. Changes in this character mirror changes the director saw in his own father after the revolution. And one must keep in mind that there is Milon (Soaeb Islam), Kazi's younger brother, and Ibrahim (Main Ahmed), one of the *madrasa* teachers, who represent the liberal, intellectual Muslim connected to the outside world. (In an interview, Md. Moslemuddin, the actor playing the strict head teacher of the *madrasa*, asserted: "Those who are true Muslims, they will like this film.")

The women in *The Clay Bird* in general, are shown as initially lonely and isolated, but also open to change. The small daughter Asma has no one to play with, and the young wife Ayesha sings sensual songs as she embroiders behind closed shutters. While Kazi forces Ayesha into a traditional kind of *pardah* (confinement) in the home, political forces inspire her rebellion against that kind of enforced silencing. The woman singer in the rural performance exemplifies the egalitarianism of gender and religion advocated by the fascinating (if marginal) group of performers called the Baul.

Another isolated character, Rakon (Russell Farazi), is a *madrasa* student who is ostracized for being different, and who compensates for this by creating imaginary friends and secret hiding places. In one delightful sequence in the *madrasa*, Anu and Rokon, the two “outcastes,” mime an elaborate ballgame. (Uncanny parallels to real life abound in this kind of cinematic project; for example, the young boy playing Rokon [a transport worker in real life] actually does suffer from a ringing in his ears like the character he portrays.)



The long takes of singing/philosophical debates between Baul singers, performing on one- or two-stringed instruments (*ektara*, *dotara*), stand out as short ethnographic documents of a vibrant oral tradition, while close-ups of individual audience members add a personality to the village. (Because of inclement weather, the village concert scenes took three days to shoot and the villagers had to resume their exact positions each time the sudden torrential rain relented.) The bird theme of the title is introduced with the itinerant singers’ poetic lines “The bird is trapped in the body’s cage. . . . It yearns to spread its wings.” The bird theme then appears in the blue painted clay bird Anu surreptitiously brings home for his

sister, a “luxury” they must hide from their father. It also ties into the overall theme of a desire to fly away from the escalating chaos of war.

In general, the camerawork in this film by Sudheer Palsane is evocative and does not draw attention to itself. In the same way, there is a non-sensational manner of depicting death. Despite the folkloric nature of the story and images, the ending of the film avoids any simple effect of “wrapping up.” Ty Burr of the *Boston Globe* writes of *The Clay Bird*: “Its sumptuous landscapes and moving performances by a cast of nonprofessionals evokes the classic art-house cinema of Satyajit Ray.” Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* notes its nuanced approach, so distinct from “religious dogmatism and Western Islamophobia.”

Additional drama surrounds the actual film itself, centering on its ban by the Dhaka government on the claim that it could “hurt the religious sentiment of one section of society.” Fortunately this ban was reversed, following an appeal campaign by the Bangladesh press and over the Internet, including a letter signed by 529 signatures. The film had its Bangladesh premiere in October 2002, but it had been released earlier in France by the French distributor MK2, the distribution house which brought the films of Abbas Kiarostami to a global audience. (The filmmakers were assisted by a Fonds Sud grant from the French government based on the quality of their script.) This was obviously not an easy film to make. Not only was it pioneering on a philosophical level, it also required adjusting actual physical locations to hide modern trends. For example, it took over a year to find the older style of wooden ferry that would have been used at that time.

Director Masud received an M.A. in history from Dhaka University and began his filmmaking career with documentary and animated films. His wife, Catherine Masud, a graduate of Brown University and the Art Institute of Chicago, serves as an editor and documentarist in their production company Audiovision, based in Dhaka. Their documentaries include films about working children, women survivors of war, human rights abuses in Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshi painter S.M. Sultan. In the charming dialogue between the Masuds in the *Making Of* documentary that is one of the special features of the Milestone DVD, and in the extensive press kit, the director points out that *The Clay Bird* is a film about a community seen from the inside, and a film about “relationships...between child and adult, between different belief systems...between people who continue to grow and people who don’t.” In a postscript he adds that, in retrospect, the selfless contributions of so many ordinary villagers made all the struggles of producing *The Clay Bird* worthwhile. It is certainly a film that helps convey to the world the complexity, diversity, and cultural richness of Bangladesh, and South Asia in general. Without a doubt, this is a brave film, an inspired one, and a film that makes a difference.

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