

Interview with RUBAIYAT HOSSAIN: "I BELIEVE IN A FEMINIST INTERVENTION IN CINEMA"



© Director Rubaiyat Hossain with Director of photography Sabine Lancelin on the set of "Made in Bangladesh"

By Sarah Hurtes
April 2018

Ms Hossain, you are the director, writer and producer of the upcoming feature film "Made in Bangladesh". What is the story about?

Rubaiyat Hossain: It is about the struggle of a woman in her work and home. I think that is a very universal struggle women face everywhere. It follows a young woman who is working in a ready-made garment factory in Bangladesh. She is in the process of trying to unionise her factory. She is also trying to work out her relationship with her husband who has been unemployed for quite some time. And this relationship is becoming a burden to her. Her character is very inspiring for me because she is 23 years old and taking on this huge struggle, which is the world itself. She is fighting against patriarchy, capitalistic forces and big corporations. She is creating her own life and making her own choices.

Is this character based on someone you know?

R.H.: In my previous 2015 film "Under Construction" there was a character who was a female factory worker. When I was screening that film in different festivals, many people asked what would happen to her. I felt that this could be my next film. I started researching the topic and I wanted to meet some actual workers. I always like to work and hang out with real characters for a few years and then write the script. Three years ago, I went to interview ready-made garment factory workers through contacts. I met a whole bunch of women. And then this woman – I thought she was very special. You know that feeling that she knows she is special, even though society has put her in this dump time after time. I kept on working with her as I wrote my script and she has become part of the crew unit. She trained the actors on how to work the sewing machines. She helped us make some of the dialogues more authentic. She is very much part of the film-making process.



Still from "Under Construction" by Rubaiyat Hossain

What made her so special?

R.H.: I was really inspired by her strength and her personality. She ran away from her home when she was 12 because her parents were marrying her off to a 40-year-old. If a girl can run away to the city at the age of 12 and survive there, she's quite something! So I wanted to tell her story. I think it's important to represent moments of strength and victory for women, to highlight those moments and freeze them in time.

Is the topic of women's rights in the garment industry raised as a public concern in Bangladesh?

R.H.: Did you know that more than 80% of workers in this sector are women? And yet women are paid less than men for doing the same job. Employers think women are easy to manage, that they won't speak up, and it is easy to make them work ten hours a day for six days a week. Only recently, things have changed. Especially after Rana Plaza in 2013 [collapse of a large commercial building containing several garment factories, with a death toll of more than 1,000], there is more awareness about workers' rights on the part of the buyers, governments, owners. Everybody now is trying to take notice and make things better. As a result the factory conditions have largely improved. One of the reasons why these changes are happening is because of the fact that workers' unions have started forming. These women feel like they are not treated very well and that they lack a sort of human dignity. When they go to the union they feel treated differently. There are more and more women who are becoming aware that they have legal rights. And they have learned how to access the law. They learn to speak a different language.

You don't condemn the ready-made garment industry?

R.H.: Of course not! As much as there is talk of some negative elements about the garment sector it is also a matter of empowerment for Bangladeshi women. Because of this sector, so many women in Bangladesh have come out into the workforce and received a salary. This never happened before. When they go to work they don't say they are going to the factory, they say "office". That's the term they use. They find a dignity as working women. They want the job at the factories, but they want the conditions to be improved, they want better pay. Because what are their other options? Either they would have to be domestic slaves, where their lives would really be much worse, being confined within homes and often beaten. And that's very much what I am trying to show in my film: how this simple woman, who lives in a slum, becomes empowered through this job. It's a story about how women can actually change things if they make a collaborative effort.

Each and every project of yours has strong female leads. Where does this passion for female empowerment come from?

R.H.: I went to a women's college in the US, and before that in Bangladesh I went to a girls' school. I was always surrounded by a lot of women. Growing up in Bangladesh, I was always told that these are the things you can and cannot do. I don't have a brother – that would raise a lot of questions. As a girl you are seen as irrelevant, it's all about the boy. So I was very angry from a young age. I knew that it was unfair, and I wanted to do something about it. I started reading feminist writers as a young girl. When I went to the US, I studied at Smith College, which is a college that has a strong history of feminist politics. Women like Gloria Steinem, Sylvia Plath and Betty Friedan all went there. I majored in women's studies. I would wear a button on my backpack that was given to me by my department chair Susan Van Dyne; it said, "I study women in a major way!" So that's been my life, trying to study women in a major way. In Bangladesh when I visited in the summer as a student, I was working with women's rights organisations. I have also taught gender studies for undergraduate students. This has been the core of who I am and what I really do.

Would you say your experience as a social worker has made you a better filmmaker?

R.H.: I don't know if it made me a better filmmaker, but I think I understand the social and cultural positioning of women because this is something that I have worked with. I believe there is a gap between women's lived experiences and what is represented in literature and cinema. I am really

interested in telling women's stories because I think that, historically, there have been way too many male directors telling women's stories. I believe in feminist intervention in cinema.

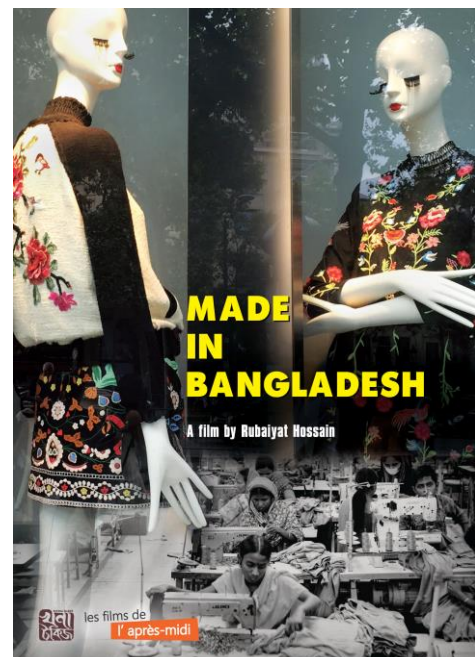
Do you not work with men?

R.H.: Of course I do! I have all these amazing producers who are male and they have supported and nurtured this current project. They made it possible for this film to happen. There are a lot of great guys in my team and they are feminist men. Regardless of our gender we all share this common view that there's something wrong with the world when you look at how women are treated. We want to do something about it. Because if someone says there is nothing wrong with how women are treated then I am a little sceptical of them. Sometimes I get asked, "You are making art, why are you engaging in feminism?" But for example, for a black filmmaker like Spike Lee it's important to talk about black identity. It's also crucial for me to explore and resolve my identity as a woman through film.

Film is a medium through which I express my creative instincts and my politics. It is also a tool for my empowerment as a woman in Bangladesh: empowering myself by becoming a director in a patriarchal society, making people accept me, being able to raise my voice and tell my stories. Film is not only film, it's so many other things that have to do with my identity, my existence as a woman – and the kind of world I want to have for my daughter.

Has there ever been a time when people have actively tried to stop you from doing just that?

R.H.: When I started off, I would be in a room where a man wouldn't make eye contact with me. Even today, after making two films (this is my third one), when I ask actors to come for an audition, a lot of my male actors look at my assistant director's eyes and speak. It takes them a while to accept me as the director. Because it's seen as a very authoritative masculine position. And I feel there is always a lack of trust. "She's a woman, can she do it? Where did she learn how to make films?" In my academic or activist life, I am always in a room full of women. But making my films, I am always the only woman in a room full of men. I mixed my latest film in Mumbai, and in the mixing studio there are all these south Asian patriarchal middle-aged men. Being lonely is the hard part here. And then you feel inferior and you're scared to be free and say what you want. I think creating separate spaces for ourselves in Bangladesh is very important. I create that for myself. I request a female director of photography, a female production designer. I want that space, where I am not surrounded by somebody who would even *subconsciously* make me feel inferior. It's a general idea that women are not capable of critical thinking, not capable of creating art. Should women only be men's muses? I don't think so.



© Narrative Feature Film - Pre-production stage:
"Made in Bangladesh" by Rubaiyat Hossain

How do you deal with people not making eye contact with you or making you feel inferior?

R.H.: Of course it drains my energy. I get really pissed off. But I have to be persistent. Most of the time I ignore it. I continue to direct, say what I have to say and at some point they submit to me. At some point they realise they don't have a choice – and I know what I am talking about. And sometimes I can't manage to work with people. Sometimes I have to say "OK, I cannot actually work with this person". I try to be patient. At one point in my life I would get so angry. I would shout on the streets. But I don't do that anymore, it's a waste of time. Thankfully, for the past ten years there have been a lot of independent filmmakers emerging. In the independent film scene, things are more

fluid. People make up their own rules as they go on. The spaces are opening up now. Like the #MeToo movement. The tide is turning.

Are these movements having an impact in Bangladesh's film industry?

R.H.: I am referring to the #MeToo movement because I divide my time between the US and Bangladesh. The #MeToo movement is all about Hollywood and women in the US. However, if changes happen in Hollywood it will have a trickle-down effect globally. In Bangladesh, we are a long way from that. Most female directors have been actors who turned directors, made one movie and then disappeared. For a woman to create a long-term film-making career in Bangladesh is very new. I think I am one of only two women who release films in theatres. Our main industry is also producing Bollywood copies. There's nothing original: the same kind of objectifying of women, and melodramatic stories.

Your first feature film in 2011 "Meherjaan" was pulled from Bengali cinemas just a week after its release. And yet it also won international awards. Why was that?

R.H.: The reason the movie got into trouble is because I was talking about a love affair between a Pakistani soldier and a Bengali woman. I was trying to make a film that was against war. And because it was talking about our independence war, it was looked upon as treason, as unpatriotic. The other day the film was screened at the Norwegian Embassy in Dhaka. And there was a very heated exchange with the audience members. I told them: "This is exactly why this film exists – to make you feel." After the film's release, people said so many negative things about me. What hurt me the most were a lot of articles saying I had objectified women. That was painful. I have now gone into a space where I don't care what people say about me. So much rubbish was said, I have learned that it doesn't matter; you have to do what you want to do. There are always people who will misunderstand you. If anything, it taught me not to take the reaction of the press or the public to heart. And then, some people did love it, and it did win awards.

That is inspiring to hear. What a beginning!

R.H.: At that point it was traumatising. I was on anti-depressants for two years after that. Things changed when I was able to make my next movie "Under Construction". It was released at a French festival and it was also well appreciated in Bangladesh. Now I can finally talk about it. My films do better globally than they do in my local market. "Under Construction" was in 20 theatres in France and in three theatres in Bangladesh. If I want to continue working as a director, I have to be connected to the global market, festivals, funds and producers. Opening yourself up to the world has its own advantage. I have a really great female director of photography who is here from France to make "Made in Bangladesh". I am going to be making a film with better technical quality than ever before. I even get to do my sound editing, mixing and colour grading in Europe. Another reason I went for European co-production is the type of film that I want to make. It's impossible for me to find funds in Bangladesh. I'd have to use my own money and that would be impossible. In the future I want to make a film in the US; I want to make a film about race.