

LES FILMS DE L'APRÈS-MIDI PRESENTS

tiff. toronto
international
film festival

THE WOMEN BEHIND THE LABEL

RIKITA
SHIMU

NOVERA
RAHMAN

PARVIN
PARU

DEEPANITA
MARTIN

MAYABI
MAYA

MADE IN BANGLADESH

A FILM BY RUBAIYAT HOSSAIN





S Y N O P S I S

Shimu, 23, works in a clothing factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Faced with difficult conditions at work, she decides to start a union with her co-workers. Despite threats from the management and disapproval of her husband, Shimu is determined to go on.

Together the women must fight and find a way.



I N T E R V I E W

WITH RUBAIYAT HOSSAIN

WHAT DREW YOU INTO THIS STORY?

I have always been interested in examining, on screen, women's lived experiences and social conditions. I did some research for three years, meeting lots of factory workers, because I didn't have any experience working in a factory. I finally came across this woman named Daliya, who was a union leader. I felt she was courageous, strong, and articulate. She had been treated so badly, being in an abusive marriage, but she was longing for dignity. So, I could begin to write my story, which is loosely based on real events of her life.

WHAT STRUCK YOU DURING THIS RESEARCH?

The women factory workers are very young, they're mainly between 18 to 30. It is hard to find older factory workers as they develop back and shoulders problems, as a result of sitting on hard benches, bent over the sewing machines ten hours a day, six days a week for a hundred euros a month in the best case.

But what I found fascinating is that, even with very little pay, difficult conditions at work, struggles against patriarchy at home, these women are empowered. Because one hundred years ago in Bangladesh, women could not even work, they had to live in seclusion. Today, they are working, they are making a living for themselves and their families, and they are fighting within the factory and at home for their rights.

WHAT DID YOU BORROW FROM DALIYA THAT YOU GAVE TO SHIMU?

The whole monologue Shimu gives at Nasima Apa's office is written from interviews with Daliya. Daliya ran away from home when she was 12, she came to Dhaka. It is a pretty common situation for young women in rural areas. However, it is also a brave act to run away, when you are so young, and your parents want to marry you off. Lots of girls just get married: if Daliya had stayed in her village, she would have already had three/four children and she wouldn't work. Work is an empowerment.

SHIMU'S DESTINY IS QUITE COMMON BUT SHE IS ALSO A REAL HEROIN...

I myself grew up in a privileged family, I was educated, I was able to go to school, to university. One day, Daliya came to my house, we were sitting in my study, and I was interviewing her, she said: "if I had been to school like you, by now I would have done something big." That really struck me emotionally. Society and fate have really put Daliya down, but she kept this faith that one day she would amount to something.

Now there is a movie about her, and the world will see it. Hopefully her story and her voice will be heard globally. She has reached something, she has made something big!

THE WOMEN'S STATUS IN BANGLADESH SEEMS TO BE A PARADOXICAL...

Yes, paradoxical in the sense that, empowerment, oppression and fight - all exist for the women. Our head of state is a woman, the opposition leader is a woman, the speaker of Parliament is a woman. In the garment industry, which earns the country's highest revenue, 80% of the workers are women. The backbone of Bangladesh's economy is carried by young women.

The women factory workers have this young spirit that I tried to portray in the film. They have a real sense of camaraderie working together. It is a positive thing. In gender studies, we always say that as long as a woman is resisting and fighting, she will get somewhere. Generations before us had fought for education and voting rights for women, that is why we are here today: "we stand where we stand, because we stand on the shoulders of women who came before us".

SHIMU IS ALSO FIGHTING AGAINST MISREPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN GIVEN BY POP CULTURE (LIKE THE VERY SEXIST CLIP SHOWN ON TV AT THE LANDLORD'S) OR RELIGION (THE IMAM SPEECH ABOUT HIJAB) ...

Absolutely. Shimu resists capitalism and orthodox Islamization. She creates her own synthesis of womanhood: she says her prayers, but she loves dancing, she fights for launching a union, but she does that in her own way. Today, what is proposed to women stands in

two extremes: the hyper sexualization through ads on tv, and what can be heard at the mosque, that women are basically dirty. Even if Shimu and the other girls cover their heads, they do it their own way. They wear very colorful clothes. They do not hide, they are conscious about their beauty and fashion, in their own way.

WHAT WERE YOUR SOURCES OF INSPIRATION?

I was inspired by films, as Rosetta, for example, and even Norma Rae, which I showed to Shimu. I was also inspired by the paintings on rickshaws, which are very colorful. It's very proper to Dhaka, which is at the same time a very dark city, without many lights because of the shortage of electricity. But there are bursts of colors. So, with my production designers, I wanted to use colors in a strong way. And also use darkness and colors side by side. The purpose is to make you feel the space through color and sound.

IS NASIMA APA CHARACTER BASED ON A REAL WOMAN?

In my country, there is a long history of women's rights organizations, trying to improve the conditions of women. When I met Daliya, she told me she had gone to these meetings. Women are getting the knowledge of the unions through these human rights organizations. They are taught about the law. The relation between Nasima Apa and Shimu is similar to the kind of relationship I had with Daliya: we are friends, but there is a social difference we can't ignore. In Bangladesh, class structures are so strong! But women are helping each other across classes.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE WAY SHIMU'S HUSBAND BEHAVE?

The masculinity in Bangladesh is really struggling right now. Men are losing some of their power. I've seen a lot of garment workers whose husbands didn't work. These men were living off their wife's salary, as a result, they become insecure, they start trying to control their wives' lives. I wanted to show that, in this relationship, the job in the beginning is a trap, but it becomes a place of empowerment later. When Shimu leaves home after being locked by her husband, she knows that he might not take her back, but she goes for the job anyways.

THE LAST SHOT OF SHIMU SHOWS HER WITH HER HAIR LOOSE: SHE IS A DIFFERENT WOMAN, NOW...

Her hair progressively got loose through her empowerment process. She was wearing a hijab and during the fight with her husband, she takes it off. At the end of the movie, her hair is free as we never saw it before. Her body language expresses her feminine power. But the fight is not over: she just got the right to begin negotiating with her bosses.

IN JANUARY, WE HEARD A LOT ABOUT THE BIG STRIKE OF THE GARMENT WORKERS. WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW?

They gained some rights such as higher pay, and the negotiation still goes on. I think the factory conditions and security rules have improved. The workers and the factory owners are working towards improving the conditions further.

IN FRANCE THE FILM WILL BE RELEASED A FEW DAYS AFTER THE BLACK FRIDAY, WHICH PROBABLY AFFECTS THE WORKERS LIFE IN BANGLADESH...

There is a huge impact on the factories, for sure. The entire world should listen to stories like Shimu's. As a consumer, you have to take your responsibilities: if you buy a pair of jeans for 20\$, you must know someone had to work underpaid for these. But if you say I won't buy any more clothes of this brand because I know they underpay their workers, that is exactly what the workers do NOT want. It is not a solution.

ONE OF SHIMU'S LINE IS STRIKING: "WE ARE WOMEN. SCREWED IF YOU ARE MARRIED, SCREWED IF WE'RE NOT..."

I wanted to put that line on a tee-shirt!

T H E G A R M E N T I N D U S T R Y I N B A N G L A D E S H

The readymade (RMG) industry is the strongest element of Bangladeshi development. In the fiscal year 2018-19 the sector exported in the volume of 34133.27 million US\$ which is 84.21% of the total export of the country.

The apparel industry of Bangladesh started its journey in the 1980s. According to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), one of the largest trade associations in the country representing the readymade garment industry, although it started in 1983 with only 12 members, currently it has 4,621 member factories. A total of 3,856 factories have been identified as operational-only 3.8% out of 3,856 factories are unionized. About 3.6 million workers are reported to be employed there. 53% of them are female and 47% are male. But when it comes to the sewing machine operator, a whopping number of 80% are women.

The average age of workers is 25.





C A S T

RIKITA NANDINI SHIMU

NOVERA RAHMAN

DEEPANWITA MARTIN

PARVIN PARU

MAYABE

MOSTAFA MONWAR

C R E W

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