

The Clay Bird

A film directed by Tareque Masud



Released by Milestone Films

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The Clay Bird

(Matir Moina)

2002. France/Bangladesh. Running time: 98 minutes. Aspect ratio: 1:1.66. Color. Mono.
Winner: FIPRESCI (International Critics') Prize, Directors' Fortnight, Cannes 2002

Cast

Anu..... Nurul Islam Bablu
Rokon..... Russell Farazi
Kazi..... Jayanto Chattopadhyay
Ayesha..... Rokeya Prachy
Milon..... Soaeb Islam
Asma..... Lameesa R. Reemjheem
Ibrahim..... Moin Ahmed
Bakiullah..... Md. Moslemuddin
Halim Mia..... Abdul Karim
Karim Majhi (Boyati)..... Shah Alam Dewan
Shaheen..... Golam Mahmud
Uttam..... Pradip Mittra Mithun

Crew

Director..... Tareque Masud
Producer..... Catherine Masud
Screenplay..... Tareque and Catherine Masud
Main Cinematography..... Sudheer Palsane
Additional Cinematography..... Ranjan Palit, Maksudul Bari
First Camera Assistant..... Gaetane Rousseau
Sound Recording..... Indrajit Neogi
Additional Sound..... Abdus Sattar Ripon, Keramot Ali
Editing..... Catherine Masud
Art Direction and Set Design..... Kazi Rakib, Sylvain Nahmias
Costume Design..... Masuda Kazi, Kazi Rakib
Music Director..... Moushumi Bhowmik
Sound Mix..... Ratan Paul
Executive Producer..... Nathalie Kreuther
A Franco-Bangladeshi co-production MK 2 sa/Audiovision
With the support of..... The South Fund (Fonds Sud Cinema)
French Ministry of Culture and Communication
CNC (French National Film Center)
French Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Festivals and Awards

2002 Cannes Film Festival, FIPRESCI International Critics' Prize for Best Film
2002 Edinburgh International Film Festival
2002 Montreal International Film Festival
2002 Marrakesh Film Festival (Morocco), Best Screen Play Award
2002 Cairo International Film Festival
2003 Palm Springs International Film Festival
2003 New Directors/New Films Festival, New York

Synopsis

Set against the backdrop of the turbulent period in the late 1960s leading up to Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan, *The Clay Bird* tells the story of a family torn apart by religion and war. Anu, a shy young boy from rural East Pakistan (Bangladesh, as it is now known) is sent away by his father Kazi, an orthodox Muslim, to a *madrasa* or Islamic school. Far from his family and the colorful pagan festivities of his village, Anu struggles to adapt to the school's harsh monastic life.

As the political divisions in the country mount, an increasing split develops between moderate and extremist forces within the *madrasa*, mirroring a growing divide between the stubborn but confused Kazi and his increasingly independent wife, Ayesha.

These conflicts intensify as the country is wracked by political upheavals, culminating in the outbreak of civil war. Amidst the devastation, Ayesha makes her own life choice and the once passive Anu finds a new path into adulthood.

Touching upon themes of religious tolerance, cultural diversity, and the complexity of Islam, *The Clay Bird* has universal relevance in a crisis-ridden world.

Main Characters



Anu (Nurul Islam Bablu)

Anu is the only son in a lower-middle-class village family. Viewing his world with suppressed wonder, he is sent off to a *madrasa* by his father. There he struggles to adjust to the rigid pattern of monastic education, while dreaming of his village home.



Kazi (Jayanto Chattopadhyay)

Anu's father, an obsessive, religious man who sends his son to *madrasa* and enforces Islamic *purdah* (confinement) on his young wife. Internally, he is a weak and confused man who is afraid of change and takes refuge in religion. His pastimes are reading the Koran and the homeopathic medicines with which he treats the poor villagers.



Ayesha (Rokeya Prachy)

Anu's mother married young. Intimidated by her husband, she takes up the veil against her will and watches the outside world through her shuttered windows. Lonely and isolated, she is close to her husband's younger brother, Milon, who was her childhood friend.



Asma (Lameesa R. Reemjheem)

Lively and curious, Asma is Anu's younger sister. She boosts her mother's spirits after Anu is sent off to *madrasa*. When she becomes ill, will her father's insistence on using only homeopathic remedies threaten Asma's recovery?



Milon (Soaeb Islam)

Kazi's younger brother, Milon stays in a part of the house that is separate from the rooms where Ayesha lives. He gets involved in local politics through his student activities and brings glimpses of the outside world into the household. Milon introduces Anu to Hindu folk festivals and mysticism, much to Kazi's disapproval.



Rokon (Russell Farazi)

A student in the *madrasa*, Rokon is something of an outcast because of his strange behavior and imaginary friends. Since Anu is also an outcast (though for very different reasons), the two young boys become friends. Rokon eventually becomes a victim of the institutional rigidity of the *madrasa*.



Karim Boyati (Shah Alam Dewan)

An old Sufi bard of the village, he has witnessed the transitions in Anu's family over the years. Karim Boyati sings poetic, mysterious songs that fascinate the young Anu.



Bakiullah (Md. Moslemuddin)

The strict principal of the *madrasa*, Bakiullah is an intimidating man who is feared by all. As the polarization of the outside society grows, Bakiullah advocates the need for a *jihad* to defend Islam.



Ibrahim (Moin Ahmed)

One of the *madrasa's* teachers, Ibrahim is a more sympathetic character. A liberal and scholarly man, he befriends the students, especially Anu and Rokon. He is apolitical and disagrees with the principal's hardline interpretation of Islam.

Historical Background

The Clay Bird is set in the late 1960s when a democratic movement agitating for general elections was building against the Pakistani junta. Until 1971, Bangladesh formed the eastern wing of the Great Islamic State of Pakistan. For more than two decades the region had been in revolt against the western wing's military rule and domination. This democratic movement for autonomy reached its peak in 1969 when it brought down the military government in power. The new military ruler, Yahya Khan, promised to hold free and fair elections. In 1970,

the elections were held and the leader of the pro-democracy movement, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a resounding victory. But the Pakistani military canceled the elections and in March 1971, organized a violent crackdown — targeting Bengali students, political leaders and the Hindu minority. The civil war that followed pitted a poorly armed population against US-backed forces. After nine months of fighting, on December 16, 1971, the people achieved victory and the independent state of Bangladesh was founded. An estimated three million Bengalis were killed during the conflict and almost ten million were made refugees. After 1971, the international community's interest in the cause of Bangladesh declined sharply. Today, this major genocide of the late twentieth century is largely forgotten.



Tareque Masud

Tareque Masud was born in 1957 in Faridpur, Bangladesh and spent most of his childhood in a *madrassa* (Islamic seminary school). The Bangladesh war of independence from Pakistan in 1971 put an abrupt end to his religious studies. After the war he entered general education, eventually completing his masters in history from Dhaka University.

Masud was actively involved in the film society movement from his university days, and participated in numerous short courses and workshops on film in Bangladesh and abroad. He started his first film, a documentary on the Bangladeshi painter S.M. Sultan, in late 1982. Since then he has directed a number of short, documentary, and animation films. In 1989, he married American Catherine Masud (an American), and moved to New York to work with her on a 35mm documentary, *Muktir Gaan (Song of Freedom)*. In 1995, he returned to Dhaka to continue his filmmaking career.

In 2002 his first feature film, *The Clay Bird* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. He is a founding member of the Short Film Forum, the primary forum for alternative filmmakers in Bangladesh, and in 1988 served as Coordinator of the First International Short Film Festival held in Dhaka. He has also attended international film festivals and seminars in Europe, the US, and Asia and writes occasionally on film-related themes for periodicals and journals. He and Catherine Masud run a film production firm, Audiovision, based in Dhaka and the couple has produced numerous documentaries and shorts. *The Clay Bird* is their first feature film.

Catherine Masud

Catherine Masud was born in Chicago in 1963. She is a graduate in economics from Brown University, and did post-graduate studies in fine arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, and film production in New York. Since 1995, she has been living in Dhaka, Bangladesh with her husband, Tareque Masud.

Under the banner of their production house Audiovision, she has produced and directed numerous films. She recently produced and co-wrote her first feature *The Clay Bird*, directed by Tareque, which won the International Critics' Prize at Cannes. In addition, Catherine has worked extensively with street children in Bangladesh, and recently completed a documentary based on their life stories, *A Kind of Childhood*.

Catherine Masud is an experienced editor specializing in computer-based non-linear editing and has set up computerized multi-media and audio-visual facilities as a freelance advisor. She also writes essays and fiction, which have been published in various journals. Besides her professional life, she pursues her interest in drawing and painting.

Filmography

A Kind of Childhood (Betacam SP, 50 mins, 2002)

Directors: Tareque & Catherine Masud; Production: Xingu Films/Audiovision

A documentary on the lives and struggles of working children in Dhaka, followed over the course of six years.

The Clay Bird (Matir Moina) (35mm, 98 mins, 2002)

Director: Tareque Masud; Producer: Catherine Masud

Production: Audiovision/MK2

A feature film based on the director's childhood experience in a *madrassa* in rural East Pakistan during the turbulent 1960s.

Narir Kotha (Women & War) (Betacam SP, 25 mins, 2000)

Directors: Tareque & Catherine Masud

Documentary on the experiences of women survivors of war.

Muktir Kotha (Words of Freedom) (Betacam SP, 82 mins, 1999)

Directors: Tareque & Catherine Masud

Oral history documentary about experience of ordinary villagers during 1971 Liberation War.

In the Name of Safety (DVCam, 25 mins, 1998)

Directors: Tareque & Catherine Masud; Production: TVE London/Audiovision

Documentary on human rights abuses in Bangladesh.

Voices of Children (Betacam SP, 30 mins, 1997)

Directors: Tareque & Catherine Masud; Production: Unicef/Audiovision

Documentary on working children in Bangladesh.

Muktir Gaan (Song of Freedom) (35mm, 78 mins, 1996)

Directors: Tareque & Catherine Masud. Mainly based on original footage shot by an American, Lear Levin.

Feature length documentary film about a troupe of traveling musicians during the Bangladesh Liberation War 1971.

Unison (Umatic video, 4 mins, 1994)
Animated film about the unity of humankind.

Se (The Conversation) (35mm, 10 mins, 1993)
Directors: Tareque Masud, Shameem Akhter
Short fiction about a strained reunion between a man and a woman.

Adam Surat (The Inner Strength) (16mm, 54 mins, 1989)
Director: Tareque Masud
Documentary on the life and art of the Bangladeshi painter S.M. Sultan.



Interview with Tareque and Catherine Masud

Excerpts from an interview in Paris, January, 2002 (Transcribed by Corinne Réti)

Question: To what extent did your personal life influence the story of the film?

Tareque Masud: The film is based on my childhood experience. Although it is not an autobiography — the responsibility would be too great — the film is inspired by my childhood. I was a *madrasa* student myself. It was quite unusual for someone with my lower middle class background to be sent to *madrasa*. The middle class, not to mention the elite, is completely unaware of the subculture of *madrasas*. These schools are filled with poor children separated from the mainstream. As a filmmaker, I feel it is my responsibility to share my experience to bring a wider scope of understanding. The closer my art is to my own experience, the more I know and the better I can convey. Childhood is very important to me. It is a treasure of inspiration. If you are loyal and truthful to it, it can open up many opportunities in your art.

But *Matir Moina (The Clay Bird)* is not just a film about childhood or Islam — it's about relationships. Relationships between child and adult, between different belief systems... In particular, I was interested in exploring relationships between people who continue to grow, and people who don't — people who are stuck in some sort of belief system. The film is about those people who are ever-evolving, usually children but sometimes also adults, ordinary people who are still "children" in the greater sense of the word, because they've retained that essential childlike innocence and curiosity and have the capacity to grow with the day-to-day experience of life. In contrast to them are people who cling to their beliefs, whether religious, political or whatever, and cannot grow or adapt with the changing world. I'll give you the

example of the young people in my crew. Many had never met *madrassa* children before they met the actual *madrassa* students who acted in the film. They discovered in the process of making the film that *madrassa* children are loveable like all children, and also extremely intelligent, and so “real!” Likewise the *madrassa* children were able to get a new and diverse exposure through the interaction with our crew. If all *madrassa* kids had more exposure to the world, it would be good for them.

Question: In your film, what is real and what is fiction?

TM: Almost all of the characters and events in the film are from my childhood. I really had a sister who died. And, as in the film, my mother can neither forget nor forgive that my father prohibited the use of general medicine. As for Rokon, he is a combination of three friends I used to have in *madrassa*. Concerning the outbreak of war, everything is true to my own experience, except that, unlike the film, we managed to convince our father to leave the house with us.

Question: How did you go about casting your film?

Catherine Masud: There are no casting studios in Bangladesh. To find the main child characters, we went to different schools for working class children. We made a documentary film on these special schools run by NGOs [non-governmental organizations, a UN designation]. The children, who have singing and play-acting workshops, are quite good at acting; they are already “oriented” in that field, so to speak. Some of the students are real *madrassa* students too, and we mixed them together with the street children in the film. But we didn’t find Anu through this channel. We had met many children, including kids oriented by their parents to become actors. They’d come with pictures and videos but were totally inappropriate. So we searched through friends...

We needed a child with a reflexive cast of mind who was extremely open to the world, curious without expressing much. By a fluke we found a boy who worked as a house servant for friends of ours. He had come to the city from his village to work and go to school.

TM: In the teachers’ case, some are professional actors and others are actual *madrassa* teachers. Some, like Halim and Bakiullah, had occasionally worked as extras, but had never been given a dialogue scene before. We gave them major parts because they look like real people, not sophisticated and urban like most professional actors. It’s not that we have anything against professional actors, but our background is in documentary filmmaking, where people “play” their own character. They are more flexible and often less self-conscious. Our goal was to find people whose personal life would have some kind of connection with what the character goes through. For example, in the case of Ayesha, we were looking for someone who was a mother in real life, and also had been through some difficult life experience or tragedy. The actress who plays Ayesha had this background. And her daughter plays Anu’s sister!

CM: The actors who played Kazi and Ayesha are the only professionals in our cast. But they are not big stars! Kazi’s case is very interesting too. He plays an orthodox Muslim and he’s actually a Hindu! But he has such a talent for picking up accents, expressions ... Kazi becomes a victim of the whole system he’s trapped himself in. We needed someone who had a natural expression of sadness in the eyes, on his face. And they actor has actually been through a difficult time, a sad history too.

Question: Are the *madrassa* teachers really as strict as the ones in the film?

TM: I tried to rely on my own memories. Some teachers were very strict, but they just strongly believed, like many parents, that getting a strict education is good for children. I don't want to make caricatures. I never considered the head teacher, Bakiullah as a bad guy. He's part of a belief system, which encourages discipline and hard-line beliefs. The other teacher, Ibrahim, is more of a Kafkaesque character. He's very sweet but also weak. Although he may disagree, he never confronts Bakiullah. I based this character on a real teacher of mine. Like Ibrahim, he came from a remote part of the country, Noakhali district. He spoke the dialect of that region, which in Bangladesh is considered to be the most backward place. Traditionally in Bengali the stupid and ludicrous character always speaks like this dialect. But because of my own memory of my teacher, I wanted to give the most positive character in the film this accent and break the stereotype. I made him speak Noakhali dialect in such a soft and musical way that won't sound ridiculous at all to a Bangladeshi audience.

Question: What is the main message of your film?

TM: If there is any message in the film at all, it's a message against having any strong message or opinion. As you know, there are many references to homeopathy, communism, and Islam in the film. There's nothing wrong with any of them per se. The problem begins when we try to claim that any belief system is the only solution to every issue and aspect of life. In all religions, there is a danger of extremism, and Islam is no exception. But, like other religions, Islam also has its own diverse schools and interpretations. There has always been a great tradition within Islam of "bahas" (religions debate). That's why there are 74 sects in Islam, possibly more than any other religion. Unfortunately this culture of questioning and quest has declined dramatically in recent times. It's important to bring back this dialogue between different interpretations of Islam. Islam respects the capability of individual reasoning over the dictates of any priesthood. That's why "Ilm" (Islamic knowledge) is so much emphasized in Islam, so that individual Muslims can interpret scriptures without going to a *mullah*. A Muslim does not need to go to a *mullah* or *Mufti* for confession to relieve their guilt for committing a sin. Also, unlike other faiths Islam believes in prophetic pluralism, decreeing that loyalty to all other prophets including Abraham, Moses and Jesus and others is a must. But at the same time, Islamic creed strongly condemns "Sherek," the claim that anything or anyone, even a prophet, should be equal to Allah. In Islam, the prophet Mohammed is known as "Habib," or friend, of Allah, not his son, or a lord in his own right. Even within the orthodox, or "Shariah" school, there are many debates and divergences. The character of Ibrahim in the film is an example of a more orthodox interpretation, which is at the same time moderate and questioning of extremist views.

Q: How do you see your role as a filmmaker and as a Muslim?

TM: Film can be an extension of life. I consider my film not only a journey into the heart of my community and my childhood but also a search inside my own self. *Matir Moina (The Clay Bird)* is not a film about a community seen from outside, but rather from inside — trying to understand myself, my own community, and my own religion as a fellow Muslim. But at the same time I feel fortunate having known other religions thanks to my inter-religious marriage. That possibly gave me an additional perspective.

I deliberately used the name of Ibrahim in the film because it is in itself a unifying principle between the Judeo-Christian tradition (Abraham) and Islam. Understanding differences between cultures helps you to appreciate their basic commonalities, such as what I can now observe between East and West. We must develop our knowledge about others. Knowledge

is like a bridge between differences. If America understood more about Islam and if Muslims understood more about America, it would be better for both.

Exposure to other religions and other societies does not only make you more tolerant to others; it makes you feel closer to your own identity. I lived in New York for five years, and that experience made me appreciate my own society more than ever. But I never felt an outsider there. New York is so multi-cultural that it is hard not to feel a sense of belonging. On the other hand, when I live in Bangladesh sometimes I feel I'm an outsider in my own country. A good friend of ours was killed on Sept. 11th in the Twin Towers tragedy. He worked on the 102nd floor. I felt extremely emotional when I heard about it. But when I visited New York again, strangely enough I began to feel an outsider there for the first time. Sometimes I feel like the character of Anu in the film, as Anu always feels like an outsider, both at *madrassa* and at home.

Interview with Tareque Masud from *Le Monde's* weekly supplement *Aden* May 15, 2002
"My Islam Believes in Dialogue. My film raises questions only.
It's then up to each person to make their own judgment."
The director of *Matir Moina* wants to show the beauty and diversity of his country.

Le Monde: This is your first feature film. It also tells your own personal story?

Tareque Masud: My childhood was the most intense period of my life. Like Anu, the little boy in the film, I underwent religious schooling in *madrassa*. These schools are very strict. At the same time, they help the most disadvantaged children. I myself had come from a relatively privileged background, and in the *madrassa* I found myself surrounded by children who, for the most part, had no family.

Le Monde: This was a period of growing political tension between Islamic extremists and secularists. At the end of the film, civil war breaks out. Despite all this, you have adopted a very contemplative stance on these dramatic events.

TM: Being a child, I saw these events from a distance. It was this sense of distance — which I believe is essential — that I tried to recreate in the film. Anu is a passive observer of the world around him. He does not try to intervene. This puts him in a privileged position. Adults already have preconceived opinions and judgments. But through Anu's eyes, without discrimination, the diverse aspects of my society are revealed: religious pluralism, the moderate Sufi sects, the secular traditions, nationalism... In this context, political upheaval is just one aspect among many. It's then up to each person, following Anu's lead, to make their own judgment. If my film raises questions, it does so from the innocent perspective of a child.

Le Monde: Through all its contrasting impressions, an image emerges of a country that is culturally very rich.

TM: Bangladesh is a complex country. This reality has nothing to do with its image abroad, of a poor country of famine, flood and fundamentalism. I wanted to convey my own image of my country, that of a moderate Muslim Bangladesh, and to bring out its social, cultural, and political diversity... I wanted to show the diversity of my country in all its contradictions — for me this is the best approach, not only because it is more credible, but also because it is more beautiful.

Le Monde: A beauty which also takes much inspiration from Islam.

TM: For us, Islam is rooted in our own soil, it has evolved and adapted to our own traditions, including Hinduism. It has thus become our own form of Islam, a popular Islam. This is expressed through the “bahas” songs that we hear in the film. These mystical songs are still very popular, and serve to transmit much of our knowledge and heritage. They are a means of meditation and prayer.

Le Monde: However, as we see with Anu’s father, many Muslims condemn these practices...

TM: In the strict sense of the Shariah, songs are considered profane. But this is only from an oversimplified reading of the Koran and Hadith. It doesn’t take account of the different interpretations and debates that have always been an essential part of our religion. Unfortunately, this aspect is often overlooked. For the rest of the world, the image of Islam tends to be dominated by its extremist and intolerant currents. However, our religion is founded on principles of dialogue. This is what I wanted to show in my film. I have a deep respect for the Islamic faith, and I hope this film will help my fellow Muslims. It evokes the core of our religion, a religion of reflection and personal interpretation. This is what is known in Sufism as “individual reasoning.”

INTERVIEW WITH TAREQUE & CATHERINE MASUD

April 6, 2004

Interview by Naeem Mohaiemen, Shobak.org

Mohaiemen: Tell us a little bit about the reception to the film in BD? Especially in mufassil, outside-Dhaka areas?

Masud: We were really quite overwhelmed with the response we got to the film from our audiences. Particularly in light of the initial censorship controversy, we weren't quite sure about the audience reaction. We were concerned that many people would come into the theatre with a preconceived or prejudiced view, but as in our past experience with our audiences, we found this time also that the audience is always much more intelligent and discriminating than we assume.

We always felt this was a film that would be particularly relevant for mufassil audiences, because of the story's setting and characterizations. When our film was running in Dhaka, the audiences came from all over the country, from Sylhet and Jessore, Rangpur and Noakhali. We originally planned to release the film in cinema halls nationwide, but after seeing the dilapidated condition of many of the mufassil halls, we later decided against it. We are now running the film in alternative venues outside Dhaka, including a recent run at Shilpakala Academy in Chittagong.

Mohaiemen: Initially the film was banned, and then it was released after a long break. What impact did the controversy have on the film? Did it increase interest? Were people puzzled by the ban?

Masud: Initially when the film was banned we tried to downplay the news, which was difficult considering that we were surrounded by the world media in the middle of Cannes. Some people in our situation might have preferred to highlight the ban, thus gaining international notoriety and fame. However, we felt that the positive news of the film being the first from Bangladesh to premiere at Cannes was far more important in the long run, and we also wanted to continue working in Bangladesh in future. Back in Bangladesh, after the ban was lifted there was a great deal of interest in the film and curiosity about the reasons behind the ban. But overwhelmingly, audiences we interviewed after the film's release said they did not

find anything in it that could justify banning, and that rather it gave an extremely authentic and realistic picture of Muslim culture and madrasa life. Some madrasa students were interviewed by a television channel, and they said that they loved the film and that it was very true to their own experience.

Mohaiemen: This is your fourth film which focuses on 1971 (Mukthir Gaan, Mukthir Kotha, Narir Kotha/Women & War). Does 1971 continue to inspire you artistically, or are you moving on to other topics?

Masud: Although '71 is definitely a major source of inspiration for Bangladeshi filmmakers and artists in general, it was partly incidental in our case, beginning with our chance meeting with Lear Levin in New York, that led us to make 'Mukthir Gaan' and its follow up films 'Mukthir Kotha' and 'Narir Kotha'. In the case of 'Matir Moina', it is a film we had been dreaming of making for many years. Since it was based on Tareque's own childhood experience, and it wasn't possible to make a documentary on his childhood, we moved into the fictional realm. But we have many plans for other films that do not have any reference to '71, such as our latest project, which is set in contemporary times.

Mohaiemen: What is the relevance and message of this film in an era of "war on terror" and stereotyping of Islam?

Masud: If the film has a message at all, it is against all kinds of messages, particularly those that pose themselves as the answer to all questions. In the "war on terror" there are many fundamentalisms, each one posing itself as the ultimate truth and source of salvation. This more than anything, is the true "clash of civilizations": the rigid attachment to one set of values and interests. The trap of blind belief and its messages is what the film calls into question.

Mohaiemen: Did devout Muslims, and especially madrasa students, appreciate this film?

Masud: Many religious people, including madrasa students and many women in wearing burqas, came to see the film and appreciated it. We had a very interesting experience in Chittagong, where a Sufi group held a discussion program on the film. The discussion centered around the different representations of religious belief and Islamic thought in the film. It was one of the most profound and serious dialogues that have taken place around the film, and it came not from the secular intelligentsia, but from a group of deeply religious people.

Mohaiemen: You are currently shooting Bangladesh's first high-definition video production, with a very young crew. Tell us more about this new project.

Masud: Our new film, 'Ontorjatra', is in many ways an experimental production. It grows out of our interest in the complexity of cross-cultural exchange in a globalized world, particularly as it affects the younger generation. It is experimental at the technical level in that it is the first digital-for-film production to be made in Bangladesh. We are shooting in wide format digital video intended for 35mm blowup. In the Bangladesh context, where it is extremely difficult to produce quality films in 16mm and 35mm due to the lack of proper facilities, digital video is a much more viable option. Many of the younger filmmakers are very interested in this new technology, and have joined our team out of their interest to learn more.

Mohaiemen: Bangladesh seems to be a little stagnant in creating an independent film scene. Pakistan, with Kara Festival, and Nepal, with Himal Festival, has taken steps we have not. What are your thoughts on current Bangla independent film scene? Are there other directors whose work you admire?

Masud: In a society like Bangladesh, individuals as role models can have a very powerful and positive influence. We have seen how senior professionals, through their own effort and vision, have played a pivotal role in galvanizing and guiding younger generation of filmmakers. In Nepal you have Kanak Dixit and others involved in Himal, and in Pakistan you have Haroon Hameed behind the Kara team. For better or worse, young filmmakers in Bangladesh have been without this kind of strong supportive guidance for sometime. Many senior filmmakers and personalities who could have played this kind of role were killed in '71, and we lost another leader with the untimely death of Alamgir Kabir in 1989. In a way we have tried to support each other, and there are many occasions when other filmmakers such as Morshedul Islam and Tanvir Mokammel have rallied to our cause and vice versa, although the movement has been weakened by infighting and division. We see signs of hope in the promising work of talented new directors who are outside of narrow politics and cliques.

Mohaiemen: What are your thoughts on recent international films with Bangla connection, such as MY ARCHITECT and TELLING NICHOLAS?

Masud: Recent films such as "My Architect" and "Telling Nicholas", targeted for general audiences in the US, give a positive view of Bangladesh and its culture. We've always felt that even as the mainstream western media often feeds into the common stereotypes about Bangladesh as a land of flood and famine, more positive portrayals from credible sources can go a long way in combating those stereotypes. We see the example of Iranian cinema, which despite the media-fostered image of Iran as a "terrorist state", has successfully shown the world the beauty and diversity of Iranian culture without resorting to crude propaganda.

The Story of *The Clay Bird*

For many years, Tareque and Catherine Masud had dreamed of making a feature film based on Tareque's childhood experience in a *madrassa* (Islamic seminary) during the late 1960s in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This was a very turbulent period in Bangladesh's history, when as the eastern wing of the greater Islamic state of Pakistan, the country was torn between a strong secular and democratic movement and a pro-Islamic military junta bent on stifling dissent and reform. Although there are oblique references to the historical events of that time, the story the Masuds wanted to tell was essentially a human one, told through the eyes of a child.

In May 2000, they received the prestigious French Government Fonds Sud (South Fund) grant for the film's production, based on the quality of their script. This grant covered the film stock, 35mm camera equipment and laboratory facilities from France that were necessary to ensure the technical quality of the production. In addition, Tareque and Catherine were extremely lucky to secure the involvement of MK2, a prestigious Paris-based production and distribution firm, as co-producer and international distributor.

The Masuds then embarked on an eighteen-month-long odyssey to produce the film, investing their entire savings in an ambitious project involving extensive seasonal shooting and period production design. The cast was comprised almost entirely of non-professionals: street children, actual *madrassa* students and teachers, folk musicians and villagers. For the first time in a Bangladeshi feature film, location sound recording was used to capture

spontaneous performances and live ambience. Over a period spanning one full year, the film was shot on actual locations in rural settings and small towns, during winter, monsoon and spring seasons. The filmmakers' intention was to create an authentic picture of the country, showing Bangladesh in all its color and complexity: its seasonal beauty, its rich folkloric traditions, and pluralistic culture.

In early 2002 the film was completed, and in May, *The Clay Bird* became the first feature film from Bangladesh to be selected for presentation at the world-renowned Cannes Film Festival. At Cannes, it was given the honor of being the opening film of the Directors' Fortnight section of the festival, and won the International Critics' Prize for best film in that section. However, even as the French and international press were lauding the film for its positive portrayal of Bangladesh and its tolerant traditions, the Bangladesh Censor Board gave their own verdict: the film was banned from public screening because it was deemed too religiously sensitive. For the Masuds, who had endured so much struggle and sacrifice to make the film, it was a crushing blow.

The film was subsequently released in France to wide appreciation, but initially it could not be shown in the country of its origin. A massive campaign was launched in the Bangladesh press and over the Internet against the ban, and pressure mounted on the Bangladesh government to reverse their decision. After taking their case to the Appeal Board, the Masuds succeeded in getting the ban lifted, but several cuts were demanded by the board. Finally, in October 200, the film had its Bangladesh premiere breaking box office records.



Music and Mysticism in Bangladesh and in *The Clay Bird*

In Bangladesh, the majority of the population is deprived of literacy. However, a rich oral tradition has evolved over time as a powerful means of creative communication. One of the major examples of this intricate oral literacy is vocal music. Folk songs are a critical component in all popular art forms, such as poetry, theatre, and film. Even in painting, such genres such as Patachitra or Gazir Git, which appear in scroll form, are displayed in combination with narrative songs. Many of the popular musical traditions are theatrical in presentation, and likewise, most folk theatre forms are musical in structure. In film also, the

main genre of popular cinema in Bangladesh is known as “folk fantasy,” which incorporates song and dance within a fantasy story structure. In all of these various art forms, the central and unifying factor is their oral and narrative nature.

Orality also forms the base of the Bengali mystical tradition as well. In contrast to the written tradition of Sufism in Iran, which is based on poetic texts, mysticism in Bangladesh took on the oral and musical forms of rural Bengali society. Although in the stricter sense of Shariah (see glossary on page 25 for definition) music is forbidden, in Bangladesh, mystical vocal music has become a powerful, yet subtle, form of protest. The lyrics of mystical songs are suggestive, restrained, and highly metaphoric in nature. This genre of local folk music is a confluence of Muslim Sufism, Hindu Vaishnavism, and Buddhist mysticism.

The mystic singers, who are often authors and composers of their songs, are known as Bauls. They live a life of simplicity and detachment from the trappings of material life, perpetually traveling from one mystical gathering to another. Their songs also travel from singer to singer and place to place and the “texts” continue to evolve and change. Although Bauls live like Buddhist monks and refuse to sing professionally, they attract large followings in the villages.

Inspired by the timeless lyrics and tunes of Baul songs, thousands of professional mystical singers, known as boyatis, have popularized this spiritual music. Boyatis have taken the mystic tradition to a more polemical plane through their bahas — debate-songs on theosophical themes. In more recent times, many of the most popular boyatis have been women singers, adding a new dimension to the evolving and ever-dynamic oral musical tradition of Bangladesh.

The Clay Bird principally deals with the social and political environment in which Tareque Masud grew up, but also attempts to show the various aspects of Bangladeshi culture. In fact, one of the main sources of inspiration of the films was music, including folk music, melodic chants, flute and string instruments. The filmmakers were especially inspired by musical oratorical duels known as bahas. For example, in one song, a man and a woman debate fundamentalism and other more complex forms of Islam. Often these village musical gatherings will last all night and take on such philosophical themes as the superiority of men vs. women or the nature of the true God. The singers initially improvise their lyrics (which often include references to the Koran and the Vedas) and then the songs are transmitted through oral tradition.

Through its exploration of the musical traditions of Bangladesh, *The Clay Bird* also conveys the country’s pluralistic culture and tradition of tolerance and openness. In Bangladeshi villages folk music remains very popular, despite the growing influence of television. And while it is said that Shariah prohibits music, in essence these songs are a means of prayer and meditation for all. They are treasures of Bengali culture.

The original soundtrack of music from *The Clay Bird* is available from MK2 Music. The title of the CD is *Bande Originale L’Oiseau d’Argile*. Composed by Moushumi Bhowmik, it is available online at:

<http://boutique.mk2.com/home.asp>

<http://www.fnac.com/>

<http://world.abeillemusique.com/produit.php?cle=6347>

<http://www.amazon.fr>

Selected Song Texts from *The Clay Bird*

Jodi Bheste Jaite Chao — Duel of Poets (*If You Wish to Go to Heaven*)

Shishwa (Disciple)

If you wish to go to heaven
Keep fear of Allah in your heart

Guru (Teacher)

If you want to be close to Allah
Keep love within your heart

Shishwa (Disciple)

I'm just your daughter's age
I'll assume the side of shariah
And take an anti-Sufi stance
Don't take what I say to heart
You ignore the Holy Scriptures —
What kind of Muslims are you?
Why are the mullahs
always angry with you?
Keep fear of Allah in your heart

Guru (Teacher)

You need a measure of wisdom
to grasp the Koran and Hadith
How can half-read mullahs
interpret the intricate Scriptures?
They preach to others
without knowing the texts
The dogmatic mullahs
make their living from deception
Well fed and fattened, they use
their strength to abuse us
Keep love within your heart

Shishwa (Disciple)

You Sufis chant Allah's name
Ignoring creed and prayer
You smoke pot during Ramadan
With the excuse of meditation
What kind of Islamic creed
Sanctions this immorality?
Keep fear of Allah in your heart

Guru (Teacher)

Just showing off your rituals
Is that true namaz?
Namaz is meditation,
To attain tranquility
Fasting is self control
How many really follow that?
They skip their meals by day

And eat double by night
We don't lust for heaven
And have no fear of hell
Keep love within your heart

Shishwa (Disciple)

You don't go on pilgrimage
You don't give charity
What do you have against
Ritual sacrifice?
Why should Muslims
Quaver at the sight of blood?

Guru (Teacher)

You're asked to sacrifice
Your dearest ones
Are these cows and goats
Your most beloved?
Nothing is dearer than yourself
The supreme sacrifice is self sacrifice
If you can, restrain your senses
Control your passions
Keep love within your heart

Shishwa (Disciple)

You roam around with women
Without wedding them
You sing and dance together
Without shame
The outside world is for men
The woman's place is at home
Keep fear of Allah in your heart

Guru (Teacher)

Woman is the seed of life
The source of creation
Those who believe in inequality
Lock women into marriage
Woman is the vessel of love
Woman is the Mother
Without Woman we would not
Come into being

(Together)

You need both man and woman
For procreation and creation
Keep love inside your heart
If you want to be close to Allah
Keep love inside your heart

Shere Khoda Ali Shabe
The Ballad of Fatema

Ali, the Tiger of Allah,
Thinks himself so handsome,
Seeing his own masculine beauty
In the mirror

Ali's son Hossain tells his father,
"If only you knew
My mother's true beauty"

Ali rushes to his wife and says,
"Show me your beauty
that you've hidden even
from your own husband"

Fatema replies,
"It's not a physical beauty
that can be seen with the naked eye."

Then Fatema utters her curse:
"Whoever beheld my divine image
will die in a fratricidal war."

Ali says, "Your curse is for none
other than your own son.
Hossain witnessed your sacred self
in an invisible mosque."

Hearing Fatema's cry, Allah says:
"I can save your son
but no other child will be
spared their mother's curse."

Cries out Earth-Mother Fatema,
"O Allah, let me lose my son.
But let no other child
suffer from the curse of their mother!"

The inner grace of Mohammed's
Daughter illuminates the world
Thus Fatema's pain redeems
The suffering of all women

Pakhita Bondi Ache
The Bird Is Trapped In the Body's Cage

The bird is trapped in the body's cage
Its feet are bound with worldly chains
It tries to fly but falters to the ground
The bird is trapped in the body's cage

Rainbow colored birds
Circle freely in the sky
Their brilliant splendor
A rapture for the eye

The bird pines with longing
It yearns to spread its wings

It wants to join the joyful birds
Leaving its fleeting home behind

The clay bird laments:
"Why did you infuse
My heart with longing
If you didn't give my wings
The strength to fly?"

Its feet are bound with worldly chains
It tries to fly but falters to the ground
The bird is trapped in the body's cage

Milaad
Islamic Death Ritual Chant

Persecuted by his own tribesmen,
the Prophet took refuge in Tayef

The people of Tayef abused him too,
but Mohammed silently endured

When Angel Gabriel sought revenge
Mohammed restrained him

The Prophet prayed, Oh Allah,
forgive them for they know not what they
do

When the Prophet left this world,
All cried, followers and foes alike,
Hearing of his sad demise

Dialogue Excerpts from *The Clay Bird (Matir Moina)*

Conversation between two *madrasa* teachers:

Ibrahim (a moderate *madrasa* teacher): What the Head Teacher said about *elem* (knowledge) and *amal* (practice) may be misleading to some of the students... You see, Islam didn't spread in this country through the sword. It was only the selfless and swordless Sufis and darvishes who went door to door to spread Islam's message of peace and equality among the poor and low caste Hindus. The lords and kings from Iran and Arabia conquered the land, but not the hearts of the people. It was the half-naked fakirs who won their hearts. Only then the people embraced Islam. You cannot make Islam flourish with politics and force. It is only by disseminating *elem* that Islam will prosper.

Halim Mia (junior teacher): So you want to say that our mission is to spread *elem*? Just *elem* for *elem's* sake?

Ibrahim: Definitely not. What are we doing here? This is not just *elem*. This is *amal* also. You see who comes to study in our *madrasas*? Many are orphans, of course. Also, parents who cannot feed and clothe their children, not to mention educate them, send their children here. Isn't this so? Our duty is to care for these children and make them into pure Muslims. This is our mission. Our *amal*. It's not fair to use these children for any political end.

Halim Mia: But in the name of secularism, the pro-communists are endangering the very existence of Islam in this country. We need to confront them, don't we?

Ibrahim: Then tell me, what is the difference between us and the communists?

Halim Mia: How can you separate Islam from politics? Now the existence of Pakistan is at stake. And if Pakistan is torn apart, Islam will be destroyed as well.

Ibrahim: Halim Mia, please tell me. Why do you think Islam will be endangered by the collapse of Pakistan? Did Pakistan strengthen Islam, or has it rather established military rule?

Conversation between four student friends:

Milon: ... Uttam, you've got to understand. It's not just a matter of democracy and national liberation. The real issue is economic emancipation. And here's where imperialism comes in. And the need for class struggle.

Uttam: You're still under the spell of your communist ghosts. You know what's funny — don't mind this — despite your differences, there's a strange similarity between you and your big brother. Kazi shaheb's homeo-path, and you're Marx-path: both came from Germany. Did you notice that?

Shaheen: And fascism also has its roots in Germany!

Fourth Friend: Marxism, capitalism, all isms — in the process of fighting over all these Western isms and schisms we're just screwing ourselves!

Shaheen: So what about Islam? Isn't that just another thing from the West?

Fourth Friend: Why should that be? I think our Islam has flourished from our own soil.

Milon: No matter how much we argue, the truth is that nothing is purely indigenous. Everything is mixed up.

Conversation between the student Milon and the mystic boatman Karim Majhi

Milon: ...There's only one way left open to us — to fight for freedom.

Karim Majhi: Politics is just another game, isn't it Milon bhai? There's nothing in it for people like us. If people only understood what true freedom is...

Milon: Karim bhai, what are you talking about? It's because of blindly religious people like you that the country is in such a mess.

Karim Majhi: What do you mean by blindly religious? Actually, Milon Bhai, no true religion — be it Hinduism, Islam or Christianity — will ever make people blind. True religion opens people's eyes.

'Bird' Bidding for Oscars 'Moina' first Bengali-language pic submitted to AMPAS *Variety*, November 7, 2002

New Delhi — A Bangladeshi film that's won two international awards despite being banned by the Dhaka government has been submitted for Oscar consideration by the country's film industry.

Shahidul Islam Khokon, president of the Bangladesh Film Directors' Assn., announced Tuesday that "Matir Moina" ("The Clay Bird") has been entered in the race for foreign language film nominations, becoming the first Bengali - language film to be submitted for the Academy Awards.

A censored version of the pic preemed in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, two weeks ago after finally being cleared by government censors, who had initially banned it on grounds it could "hurt the religious sentiment of one section of society."

Pic, which portrays life in an Islamic *madrasa*, or religious school, won the director's award at the Cannes Film Festival and screenplay kudos at the Marrakech Film Festival in Morocco.

"The Clay Bird" is directed by Tareque Masud and produced by his wife Catherine Masud.

Comments from the International Press:

"Easily one of the finest pictures of this year or any other. Masud's expansive fluidity is rapturous, inspired equally by the floating equanimity of Satyajit Ray and the work of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami." — Elvis Mitchell, *New York Times*

"Quietly superb filmmaking ... a valuable and independent engagement with Muslim history, a nuanced riposte to both religious dogmatism and Western Islamophobia. It is one of the films of the year." — Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian* (UK)

"This accomplished, emotionally involving film—an intimately observed story of divisions within a family that reflect the wider clash between moderate and extremist views—will have

universal resonance as it echoes other secular and political conflicts throughout the world.”
David Rooney — *Variety*

“A hymn to tolerance, against all religious and political dogmatisms, this autobiographical first film, presented at the opening of the Directors’ Fortnight, is a symphony of color and music. A must see.” — *Agence France Presse*

“The plot is timely, as critics around the world denounce *madrasas* as the breeding grounds for Afghanistan’s hard-line Taliban regime and Pakistani extremists.” — *ABC News* (Australia)

***New York Times*, Saturday April 5, 2003**
FILM FESTIVAL REVIEWS; A Child Copes with Dad’s Zealotry
By Elvis Mitchell

This is probably an unusual — but perhaps apt — time for Tareque Masud’s intelligent drama, “The Clay Bird,” an offering of the New Directors/New Films series and easily one of the finest pictures of this year or any other. Masud’s expansive fluidity is rapturous, inspired equally by the floating equanimity of Satyajit Ray and the work of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, who deftly uses ritual behavior to provide social commentary.

Set in Bangladesh in the 1960s, *The Clay Bird*, showing tonight and tomorrow at noon, questions the nature of dedication to Islam. It doesn’t attack fealty, but eventually rebukes zealotry by showing a boy’s reaction to his father’s recent total immersion.

Anu (Nurul Islam Bablu) is sent off to a religious school by his father, Kazi (Jayanto Chattopadhyay). Kazi — who once “dressed as an Englishman,” one of his friends says — doesn’t want his son tainted by the outside world. His obedient though doubtful wife, Ayesha (Rokeya Prachy), quietly expresses through frowns her concern about Kazi’s close-minded new seriousness. She gently reasons with her boy, and the bright Anu resigns himself to his new life.

At the school, despite the rigorous discipline meted out by the teachers, there’s the cliquishness and hierarchical behavior found among any group of young people. The boys initially ostracize the new kid but eventually accept him.

Anu gravitates toward the one boy who will never be accepted: the oddball Rokon (Russell Farazi). Rokon can’t suppress his enthusiasms, and he hasn’t learned how to play up to the teachers by pretending to go along with the program, as the other boys have; they’ve already picked up the duplicity that adults often mistake for maturity. (They have to conceal much of themselves, since they’re allowed to play only when practicing martial arts.)

The loss of innocence is only one of the motifs here. Anu’s sister becomes sick and suffers even more when Kazi refuses to let his wife give her antibiotics. He’s wedded to homeopathy and prayer as treatment.

Rokon is constantly rebuked by almost everyone. At one point, he’s punished by a teacher for using his left hand to write; it’s thought to be disrespectful. But Rokon keeps to his ways; his naturalness represents sacrifice, the biggest casualty of zealotry. He loves his imaginary friends and runs off to hiding places where he snacks on desserts that he claims to have received from a nonexistent playmate.

The school does have one teacher not bound to rigid ideology: Ibrahim, who recognizes Anu’s decency and takes as much interest in Rokon’s well being as he can under the

circumstances. But it's hard when Rokon is plagued by a buzzing in his ears, occurring at the worst times, as when one of the instructors delivers a grim sermon on the conviction needed for Islam.

Masud's sensitivity gives the film a pungent emotional clarity; he recognizes that naïveté isn't a province only of childhood. Kazi's a naïf, too, and learns the hard way that following a path without independent thought is a fool's errand. He's ultimately devastated when he learns of the civil war and Muslims attacking other Muslims: the revolution is coming and it claims Kazi's way of life. His brother, the bespectacled, curious Milon, can smell change in the winds and waxes rhapsodic about it. (He slips the medicine for Anu's sister to Ayesha and scolds Kazi for his "Hindu nonsense.")

The Clay Bird is not without a sense of humor. Milon has his strongly held beliefs, too; he's devoted to Communism and its ideals. Such a need connects these men as brothers, and it's gently mocked: "Kazi's homeopathy and your Marx party, both came from Germany," one of Milon's pals says. It's also evident that Masud loves all his characters, even the small-minded ones — the sign of a real director. It's no small achievement to make a picture that extols the necessity for clear, free thought while dramatizing the barriers that challenge such a capacity.

THE CLAY BIRD

Directed by Tareque Masud; written (in Bengali, with English subtitles) by Mr. Masud and Catherine Masud; director of photography, Sudheer Palsane; edited and produced by Ms. Masud; music by Moushumi Bhowmik; art directors, Kazi Rakib and Sylvain Nahmias. Running time: 98 minutes. This film is not rated. Shown with a 10-minute short, Nilesch Patel's *Love Supreme*, tonight at 9 p.m. and Sunday at noon at the MoMA Gramercy, 127 East 23rd Street, between Lexington and Third Avenues, as part of the 32nd New Directors/New Films series of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the department of film and media of the Museum of Modern Art.

WITH: Nurul Islam Bablu (Anu), Russell Farazi (Rokon), Jayanto Chattopadhyay (Kazi) and Rokeya Prachy (Ayesha).

***The Guardian* , July 4, 2003**

***The Clay Bird*
By Peter Bradshaw**



As good fortune would have it, Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*, speaking so eloquently of the Bangladeshi experience in Britain, arrives at the same time as an outstanding new movie about Bangladesh itself.

This is a first feature from documentarist Tareque Masud, autobiographical, but refreshingly without egotism or conceit. It's a vision of childhood with its own beguiling simplicity and gentleness, alternating an intense family chamber drama with breathtaking crowd scenes and giant setpieces. It is quietly superb film-making, and Masud makes it look as easy as breathing. The affecting story he has to tell is positioned alongside both the political trauma of Bangladesh's emergence as an independent state from the wreckage of East Pakistan and, perhaps most remarkably, a critique of Islam, offered without rancor or sensation, but enough to get the movie banned until relatively recently in Bangladesh.

Kazi (Jayanto Chattopadhyay) is a doctor in a remote East Pakistan village in the late 1960s. In middle age, he has abandoned the worldly, westernized ways of his youth and embraced the severities of Islam, becoming fiercer and more distant with his wife Ayesha (Rokeya Prachy),

his young son Anu (Nurul Islam Bablu) and ailing little daughter Asma (Lameessa Reemjheem) whose worrying illnesses he treats not with the medicines and clinical practices imported from the non-Muslim world but with only homeopathy - a stubbornness for which he is to pay dearly.

What enrages Kazi more and more is the subversive existence of his younger brother Milon (Soaeb Islam), a liberal intellectual figure forever campaigning with his excitable friends against the military's suppression of democracy. He is also a genial uncle to Anu, taking him for high-spirited little excursions to see the local Hindu festivals, high days and holidays, filmed with terrific intimacy but without ethnographic condescension. The boy is bewitched by their sheer, sensuous enjoyment of life - something that's in short supply at home.

So with cold ruthlessness, Kazi removes Anu from the influences he fears are poisoning his mind, and sends him away to the madrasa, a strict Islamic school and ideological boot camp combined. Poor Anu finds himself deeply lonely and scared, like many a new pupil at any boarding school in the world; Masud shows a sure and humane touch by having Anu find a kindred spirit in another boy, Rokon (Russell Farazi), with whom he plays melancholy fantasy games. This is someone else who is unable to fit in, because he suffers from tints, tormented by sounds inside his head - leading to an awe-inspiring exorcism scene.

On his brief holidays home, Anu finds his village fraught with tension and anxiety at the coming violence, though his father assures family and neighbors that Muslim soldiers would never dream of using force on their civilian co-religionists. Anu brings back a poignant little present for his sister: a blue painted clay bird which he warns her to keep hidden from their father. The bird's existence is echoed in the songs performed by the musicians and troubadours: songs about the its spirit of flight and a yearning for freedom, imprisoned in its clay shell - these resonate in the life not just of Kazi's fragile daughter but also of his wife.

But it is in the madrasa, not at home, that Anu hears a compelling dissentient voice. A kindly teacher argues with his colleagues about the importance of the Sufis: figures who used the inspiring example of peace, and not arms or politics, to spread Islamic knowledge.

As a sceptical assessment of Islam's secular authority, *The Clay Bird* is at the very opposite end of the spectrum from, say, the macho and hostile spleen of Michel Houellebecq. The film offers a valuable and independent engagement with Muslim history, quite different from the ugly fight-to-the-finish promoted elsewhere in the media, and constitutes a nuanced riposte both to the dogmatic verities of religion and also to a species of Islamophobia that assumes the Muslim world to be crudely monolithic.

All this is encased in a powerfully accessible piece of storytelling: a classic tale for children and adults alike. Masud's film-making moves with such an easy swing and canny feel for narrative, contriving a down-to-earth, unassuming cinematic vernacular for narrating the adventures of childhood and the awful choices of adulthood.

It has been many decades since south-Asian arthouse cinema has been fashionable; now it's the movies from Iran, Latin America and the Far East that get talked about, and Satyajit Ray's work doesn't dominate the Top 10 lists the way it used to. Maybe *The Clay Bird* will reverse that — inspired, as it clearly and unapologetically is, by Ray. And it's not going too far to say that it has much of the ease, the visual rapture and sheer unforced naturalness of Ray's great picture *Pather Panchali*.

The Clay Bird has marvelous humor and flair, and compassion for children's sadness and their resilience in the face of life's trials. It is one of the films of the year.

Variety, May 18, 2002
The Clay Bird (Matir Moina)
By David Rooney

Documaker Tareque Masud makes a confident transition to narrative drama with “The Clay Bird.” The filmmaker returns to his childhood in the politically turbulent period before East Pakistan gained independence and became Bangladesh. This accomplished, emotionally involving film—an intimately observed story of divisions within a family that reflect the wider clash between moderate and extremist views—will have universal resonance as it echoes other secular and political conflicts throughout the world. Its wealth of cultural and folkloric detail also should help secure festival interest as well as modest exposure on the arthouse fringe. Joint opener of the Directors’ Fortnight marks the sidebar’s first-ever selection from Bangladesh.

Action takes place in the late 1960s as a democratic movement gained force in its bid to overthrow military rule. The attempt succeeded in 1969 but the martial law government that followed disregarded the subsequent democratic election results. This led to a violent civil war that brought an estimated 3 million casualties among Bengali freedom fighters and created almost 10 million refugees before independence was finally achieved in 1971.

Against this backdrop, stern orthodox Muslim Kazi (Jayanto Chattopadhyay) becomes increasingly concerned about the influence of his free-thinking young brother on the former’s preteen son Anu (Nurul Islam Bablu). Disturbed by the boy’s enthusiasm for the village Hindu festivities, Kazi packs him off to a *madrasa*, or Islamic school, where he is trained in the rigorous ways of monastic life. Miserable and lonely, Anu befriends underdog Rokon (Russell Farazi), feeling a kinship with his outcast status.

When Anu’s younger sister takes ill and dies after homeopathic doctor Kazi refuses to have her properly treated, the children’s grieving mother Ayesha (Rokeya Prachy) grows further apart from her stubborn but confused husband, who has forced a life of traditional confinement upon her.

The increasing divide between them parallels the political clash in the country and the emergence of opposing views within the *madrasa*. Bittersweet final act takes place as the Army descends on the village, with Ayesha’s decision for her own and her son’s future transmitting a spirit of hope and independence.

Ideas such as the conflict between and Islamic beliefs and armed violence occasionally are addressed in slightly didactic dialogue. But the script—written by the director and his American wife Catherine Masud—deftly uses the family drama to mirror the nationwide political ferment, outlining the historical context clearly and accessibly stating its case for tolerance with subtle eloquence. Music also is used resourcefully for the central themes, via Bengali oratorical duets and other songs performed in village concerts.

The drama builds a gentle, fluid rhythm, shifting between family’s home life and Anu’s time in the *madrasa* while keeping the political picture in focus through street protests and radio broadcasts.

Pic is handsomely shot in soft natural light and warm interiors with a leisurely, graceful camera style.

Showing a strong personal connection to the material, director Masud coaxes lovely, natural performances from the inexperienced child cast as well as poignant work from the adult leads.

ABC News Online Australia, Tuesday, May 14, 2002
Film-maker recalls his past to take Bangladesh to Cannes

Matir Moina or *The Clay Bird*, which on Thursday inaugurates the directors' fortnight at Cannes, marks a journey into the past for Bangladesh's Tareque Masud, who hopes his film will show the world a nuanced view of Islamic religious schools. The film, portraying a Bangladeshi boy attending a *madrassa* against the backdrop of political turmoil, is deeply personal for Masud, who spent eight years in such a seminary until the bloody 1971 independence war against Pakistan.

"The making of *Matir Moina* was not only a return to my own childhood, but also a journey into the deep heart of my own country and my own soul," Masud said.

Masud, the first Bangladeshi to be so honoured at Cannes, grew up in a middle-class family in the country's central Faridpur district. His father, an English teacher and musician who turned devout, sent him off to a *madrassa*.

"I didn't have to invent a story as almost every event and character are actual," he said.

In the film, the boy is torn between a *madrassa* teacher who believes in political action and a moderate instructor who feels students should not be used for ideological ends. The plot is timely, as critics around the world denounce *madrassas* as the breeding grounds for Afghanistan's hard-line Taliban regime and Pakistani extremists. But in *Matir Moina* Masud does not take a confrontational tone but instead tries to present a sympathetic picture of life at an Islamic school.

"It had been a long dream to share this experience with my fellow countrymen, many of whom like Western people, are completely ignorant and misinformed about *madrassas*," Masud said. "When you see something from afar it has a very flat and simple appearance, but when you see it from a closer perspective you perceive its complexity and diversity, beyond stereotypical impressions" he said.

For Masud, the 1971 war, in which the Bangladeshi government says three million people were killed by Pakistani forces, ended in liberation in more ways than one. "My father... emerged as a transformed man after the nine-month war, having seen the atrocities carried out by his fellow Muslims and the genocide carried out in the name of Islam," he said.

Masud says the lessons of the war bore heavily on Bangladesh, where Islamists came to power last year as part of the ruling coalition and human rights groups have reported attacks on the Hindu minority community. "Being victims of the war ourselves, we have learned the hard way what kind of violence and genocide can be committed in the name of religion.

"I don't think Bangladesh is potentially vulnerable to any extremism, not only due to the fact that the state is founded on secularist principles, but also because of the great syncretic and mystic tradition among the population. "What many other countries are learning today though bloody strife and conflict, Bangladeshis learned that 32 years ago," he said.

Masud, 45, came to the limelight with two short films about the independence war, *Mukti Gaan* and *Muktir Kotha*, which like *Matir Moina*, he produced and edited with his American wife, Catherine.

"I feel more than honoured that our film is selected as the opening film of the Directors' Fortnight of Cannes 2002. It is not only a great moment in my film-making career but also a good opportunity to project a different image of Bangladesh," he said.

Masud says increasingly accessible technology was making work easier for Bangladesh's independent filmmakers. With his wife, he runs a Dhaka production company called Audiovision. They have introduced computer-based film editing and digital sound dubbing and mixing.

"I hope that the film's selection will also inspire my fellow film-makers, particularly the younger generation, to strive for a better cinema and to try to bring our vision of our rich culture and heritage to the rest of the world," he said.

To: Film Censor Board, Bangladesh
PETITION: Remove the ban on *Matir Moina*

The Bangladesh Film Censor Board (FCB) has refused to issue a censor certificate to the film *Matir Moina* (Clay Bird). This ruling overturns the earlier decision by the FCB (which is a division of the Ministry of Information) to issue an "uncut" certificate to the film. In a letter to the director Tareque Masud, the FCB said the film should not be projected in public as it contains "religiously sensitive" material.

This decision comes as a great surprise to those who have seen the film. The nation's leading newspaper Daily Star called it a "sensitive portrayal of a multi-cultural and multi-religious Bangladesh." The film is set against the historical backdrop of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war in which 3 million people were killed by the Pakistan army. The lead character is a *madrasa* (Islamic religious school) student and is based on the personal experiences of the director Tareque Masud. Mr. Masud is a former *madrasa* student and said in a newspaper interview, "I made the movie as a fellow Muslim and wanted to inform people about the life in a *madrasa* that has both strict and liberal teachers... As a former *madrasa* student, I have portrayed not only the religious tolerance and broadmindedness of Bangladeshi society but also a positive, credible and objective picture of the country against the negative propaganda of western media about *madrasas*" (*Daily Star*).

Expressing surprise at the decision, the *Daily Star* newspaper wrote in an editorial: "Given that the film depicts *madrasa* education in a very sensitive light and presents the socio-religious contradictions in any society trying to adjust to the modern world, one is left wondering what caused the ire of the censors. In fact the film takes a very sympathetic view of *madrasa* education which contrasts radically with Western depiction of Muslim religious education in such institutions."

The FCB's decision comes at a time when the film is receiving attention all over the world and creating a positive image for Bangladesh. *Matir Moina* was selected as the opening film for the prestigious Directors Fortnight section of the Cannes Film Festival. This is the first time a Bangladeshi film has been included in this world-renowned festival. On May 16th, the film's premiere received a standing ovation at Cannes. Responding to public demand, the festival organizers added three special screenings of the film.

On May 17th, the film was released in France nationwide by the French distributor MK2 (http://www.mk2.com/oiseau_argile/index.html). MK2 is an internationally renowned distribution house and is responsible for bringing the Iranian films of Abbas Kiarostami to a global audience. *Variety*, the leading newspaper of the US film industry, called *Matir Moina* an, “accomplished, emotionally involving film—an intimately observed story of divisions within a family that reflect the wider clash between moderate and extremist views.”

In an interview with the *Daily Star*, Tareque Masud said, “(it is) a good opportunity to project a different image of Bangladesh. I hope that the film’s selection will also inspire my fellow film-makers, particularly the younger generation, to strive for a better cinema and to try to bring our vision of our rich culture and heritage to the rest of the world.”

Matir Moina provides a nuanced and subtle view of Islam, rather than the stereotypical Islam-bashing of western media. We believe the FCB of Bangladesh has committed a grave error by banning this film. This action will only give ammunition to those who portray Islamic culture as rigid and unyielding. Rather than protecting religious sentiments, the ban will only stifle open discussion and progressive change. We urge the FCB to reconsider their decision and give the film the censorship clearance necessary for its domestic release in Bangladesh.

Sincerely,
The Undersigned (529 Total Signatures as of May 13, 2003)

Flight from Bollywood: The Meaning of “Bengali Cinema” — By Catherine Masud

Until the Partition of 1947, Bengal was a united province in British India, and thus there is a strong common cultural heritage between West Bengal, now an Indian state, and the Eastern part of Bengal, now the independent country of Bangladesh. “Bangladeshi” denotes a national identity of people who are citizens of Bangladesh, while “Bengali” has a more specifically linguistic and cultural reference that has common denominators on both sides of the border. However, the term “Bengali cinema” has come to mean different things at different times.

In the 1950s and 1960s, with the emergence of such renowned Calcutta-based filmmakers as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen, there was a strong association of “Bengali” cinema with films from Indian Bengal. But the growing influence of Bollywood in West Bengal brought about a parallel decline of Calcutta art cinema. Bengali-language films are still produced in West Bengal, but W. Bengal cinema halls frequently run Hindi language Bollywood films. Today, films by Calcutta filmmakers are generally known abroad as “Indian” films, a smaller subset of a diverse panorama defined more by national origin than by language.

After Bangladesh’s independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh cinema incidentally became exclusively Bengali-language cinema. Furthermore, an embargo on Indian films initially precipitated by the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War has evolved post-’71 into an ongoing protectionist policy on both sides of the border. Bollywood/Indian films are not allowed to run in Bangladesh’s commercial theatres, while Bangladeshi films are likewise shut out of India’s distribution circuit. Thus at the exhibition level as well, the Bangladesh industry is purely Bengali language-based. Since nation and language are very much interrelated in the case of Bangladesh, the country’s cinema is interchangeably identified as Bengali/Bangladeshi cinema.

For more information on the history of cinema and the current film industry in Bangladesh:

<http://www.bangladesh.net/cinema/>

<http://www.bangladeshshowbiz.com/filmcelrb.htm>
<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr1100/rzfr11d.htm>
<http://213.93.55.248/pics/flags/BANGLADESH.CFM>

A Brief Timeline of Bangladeshi Cinema (1896-1971)

- 1896 John Stevens exhibited the first bioscope shows in Calcutta, then the capital city of undivided Bengal, and in Dhaka.
- 1898 The Royal Bioscope Company, established by Hiralal Sen (1866-1917), was the first Bengalee exhibition-production organization. Hiralal Sen was also the first film director/producer of undivided Bengal.
- 1918 Dharendra Nath Ganguly established the first Bengalee owned film production company: Indo British Film Co.
- 1919 Joytish Benerjee made *Bilwa Mangal*, the first silent Bengali feature film, produced under the banner of Priyonath Ganguly and Madan Theatres.
- 1923 Naresh Mitra created the first adaptation of famed Bengali poet Rabindra Nath Thakur: *Maan Bhanjan*.
- 1929 The short film *Sukumari (The Good Girl)*, spearheaded by the Nawab family, was the first film production in Dhaka. Until 1956, there were several production attempts (including success by the Nawabs with a silent feature, *The Last Kiss*, in 1931), but Dhaka primarily had exhibition.
- 1931 The first Bengali sound picture, *Jamai Shasthi*, was released in Calcutta.
- 1947 Dhaka became the capital of new province East Bengal (East Pakistan) in the newly created state of Pakistan.
- 1948 Radio broadcaster Nazir Ahmed, using technical help from Calcutta, produced a newsreel covering the visit of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the first Governor General of Pakistan, to East Bengal — East Pakistan's first film.
- 1955 The East Bengal Provincial Government established a film studio and laboratory in Tejgaon, Dhaka, producing documentaries and publicity films.
- 1956 *Mukh-O-Mukhus (The Face and the Mask)*, the first full-length sound theatrical feature film, directed by Abdul Jabbar Khan, of East Bengal and West Pakistan. The Bengali language movement was the film's catalyst.
- 1957 The East Bengal Provincial Assembly established the Film Development Corporation (F.D.C), which really jumpstarted the nation-state's film industry. The FDC's first film was *Asiya (The Life of a Village Girl)*, directed by Fateh Lohani, and planned by Nazir Ahmed.
- 1970 *Jiban Theke Neya (From the Glimpse of Life)*, by veteran director, Zahir Raihan, combined its family drama/romance story with political content and predicted the liberation of Bangladesh.
- 1971 December 16th, Bangladesh gained its independence after a bloody civil war in which many film directors, talent and technicians took part. Films about the liberation war were produced, including Zahir Raihan's documentary *Stop Genocide* about the Pakistani military oppression and documentaries from the exile Bangladesh government's film unit under the leadership of Abdul Jabbar Khan.

Glossary

Bahas: Literally "debate" in Arabic. In Bangladesh, a typical *bahas* is a formal debate organized in front of an audience between two Islamic clerics on various religious creeds and issues. But *bahas* also has a wider meaning as a duet performance between rival mystic singers who debate through song on a higher theosophical plane. Sometimes these improvised "song duels" extend beyond religion and enter the domain of philosophical polemics, in keeping with the more Sufistic tradition of the quest for truth through a process of questioning.

Madrasa: Traditionally, a *madrasa* is a religious school, often located near a mosque, for teaching Islamic theology and religious law. Most of the young *madrasa* boys come from very poor families; others are orphans. By providing free food and lodging in addition to education, *madrasas* provide a sanctuary for these children. However, the atmosphere is very strict, and in the more orthodox *madrasas*, music, drawing and playing games that involve implements or boundaries are forbidden. Insular and conservative, *madrasas* have become more and more numerous in recent times in Bangladesh.

Shariah: Literally “a path to life-giving water” — *Shariah* is the body of rules and regulations prescribed by Islam as divine law. These laws relate to all aspects of the life of a Muslim including daily activities, worship, and criminal law. It is obligatory on every Muslim to respect and follow the *Shariah* in every aspect of their life. It is also obligatory on Muslim nations to implement the *Shariah*, and make it the source of all law and legislation. The codes and doctrines of *Shariah* are often interpreted by Islamic authorities with reference to the Koran and other holy Islamic texts.

Sufism: Sufism is Islamic mysticism. It exists in Sunni as well as Shiite Islam. Like all mysticism, it is above all a searching for God and it can be expressed in very different ways. In its esoteric aspects, it has secret practices and initiation rites, which can also vary depending on the masters who teach it. Although Sufism claims to be rigorously Muslim, traditional Islam (both Sunni and Shiite) remains extremely wary of it. The importance of this secret Islam is remarkable. Historically, it has played a leading role in the rise of deviations from Shi’ism such as Ismailism and the Druze religion. In literature, it has profoundly inspired some of the most remarkable Arabo-Persian works such as *The Thousand and One Nights* or Nezami Ganjawi’s love poem “Leyla and Majnoun.” Sufism gives Islam a poetic, mystical dimension. The prophet Mohammed is said to have received, at the same time as the Koran, esoteric revelations that he shared only with certain of his companions. Thus, the Sufi masters link their teachings with a long chain of predecessors, which authenticate them.

Vaishnavism: A path of Hinduism in which Vishnu is worshiped as the Lord. Different sects worship different incarnations of Vishnu, including Brahma, Buddha, Jain Tirthankaras, Rama and Krishna.

Milestone Film & Video

With more than 13 years experience in art-house film distribution, Milestone has earned an unparalleled reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to the company’s rediscovery, restoration and release of such important films as Mikhail Kalatozov’s award-winning *I am Cuba*, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma*, and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, the company now occupies an honored position as one of the most influential independent distributors in the industry. In 1999, the *L.A. Weekly* chose Milestone as “Indie Distributor of the Year.”

Amy Heller and Dennis Doros started Milestone in 1990 to bring out the best films of yesterday and today. The company has released such remarkable new films as Manoel de Oliveira’s *I’m Going Home*, Bae Yong-kyun’s *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*, Hirokazu Kore-eda’s *Maborosi*, and Takeshi Kitano’s *Fireworks (Hana-Bi)*, and now, Tareque and Catherine Masud’s *The Clay Bird*.

Milestone’s re-releases have included restored versions of Luchino Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers*, F.W. Murnau’s *Tabu*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *Grass and Chang*,

Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Mystery of Picasso*, and Marcel Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Milestone is also working with the Mary Pickford Foundation on a long-term project to preserve, re-score and release the best films of the legendary silent screen star. In recent years, Milestone has re-released beautifully restored versions of Frank Hurley's *South: Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance Expedition*, Kevin Brownlow's *It Happened Here* and *Winstanley*, Lotte Reiniger's animation masterpiece, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, Michael Powell's *The Edge of the World* (a Martin Scorsese presentation), Jane Campion's *Two Friends*, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Wide Blue Road* (a Jonathan Demme and Dustin Hoffman presentation), Conrad Rooks' *Siddhartha* and Rolando Klein's *Chac*. Milestone's newest classic film, E.A. Dupont's *Piccadilly* — starring the bewitching Anna May Wong in one of her finest roles — played at the 2003 New York Film Festival and is opening theatrically nationwide in 2004.

For 2004, Milestone will also be releasing *The Big Animal*, Jerzy Stuhr's wonderful film parable (based on a story by Krzysztof Kieslowski).

Milestone has fruitful collaborations with some of the world's major archives, including the British Film Institute, UCLA Film & Television Archive, George Eastman House, Museum of Modern Art, Library of Congress, Nederlands Filmmuseum and the Norsk Filminstitut. In 2000 Milestone's 10th Anniversary Retrospective was shown in venues nationwide and Milestone donated revenues from these screenings to four major archives in the United States and England to help restore films that might otherwise be lost.

In 2003, Milestone released an important series of great silent restorations including the horror classic *The Phantom of the Opera*; an early neorealist adaptation of Emile Zola's *La Terre*; and an historical epic of Polish independence, *The Chess Player*. Other video highlights for the year included Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and Buster Keaton's *The Cook & Other Treasures*, and three incredible animation releases: *Cut-Up: The Films of Grant Munro*; *Norman McLaren: The Collector's Edition*; and *Winsor McCay: The Master Edition*.

In 1995 Milestone received a Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I am Cuba*. Eight of the company's films — Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (to be released in 2004), F.W. Murnau's *Tabu*, Edward S. Curtis's *In the Land of the War Canoes*, Mary Pickford's *Poor Little Rich Girl*, Lon Chaney's *The Phantom of the Opera*, Clara Bow's *It*, Winsor McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur*, and Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack and Marguerite Harrison's *Grass* — are listed on the Library of Congress's National Film Registry. On January 2, 2004, the National Society of Film Critics awarded Milestone Film & Video their prestigious Film Heritage award for "its theatrical and DVD presentations of Michael Powell's *The Edge of the World*, E.A. Dupont's *Piccadilly*, André Antoine's *La Terre*, Rupert Julian's *Phantom of the Opera* and *Mad Love: The Films of Evgeni Bauer*."

Cindi Rowell, director of acquisitions, has been with Milestone since 1999. In 2003 Nadja Tennstedt joined the company as director of international sales.

"Since its birth the Milestone Film & Video Co. has steadily become the industry's foremost boutique distributor of classic and art films — and probably the only distributor in America whose name is actually a guarantee of some quality."
— William Arnold, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"Milestone Film & Video is an art-film distributor that has released some of the most distinguished new movies (along with seldom-seen vintage movie classics) of the past decade"
— Stephen Holden, *New York Times*