Matir Moina (The Clay Bird)

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Abstract
This is a review of Matir Moina (The Clay Bird) (2002).

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Matir Moina ("The Clay Bird"), directed by Tareque Masud, recently won the critic's prize for best film at Cannes, and received the best screenplay award at the Marrakech Film Festival. The film masterfully incorporates unexpected reserves of drama and emotional disquiet, as it tells the story of a young boy, Anu, in the late 1960's, set against the backdrop of the political crisis in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). His younger brother, an easy-going leftish intellectual, introduces Anu to sensuous folk rituals. As a punishment for his participation, Anu's father sends Anu to a strict Muslim school, where he adopts a new Muslim identity. Along with this family drama the film also contrasts the political turmoil with some wonderful depictions of rural Bangladesh. Scenes of rural fairs with huge crowds and folk songs increase the visual attraction of the film.

The director clearly expresses that the film is made for a Western audience, and its production was funded through the prestigious Fonds Sud Grant, given by the French Government. This was a timely funding award, since the Western world is currently taking pains to understand Islam. The movie makes some hints that madrasas are teaching pupils to use force for religion if necessary, or at least to combat anti-religious forces (in the movie, the communists). This part will certainly support Western stereotypes about Islam.

The real objective of the film, it seems, is to depict the ignorance and misunderstanding about the real cause of the struggle for freedom in then-East
Pakistan, just before war of liberation. The film is about the mentality of the Bengali Muslims and their feeling about Pakistan, which largely arises from their apprehensions about the fate of Islam in the new country (i.e., Bangladesh). For many at the time, it was difficult to separate Islam from Pakistan, and so the rise of a new nation seemed to be a threat to Islam. However, the film sometimes establishes Islam and clerics as the source of evil and violence, as blind faith seems to be equated with social injustice. At the end of the film, one character says, "your Muslim brothers have killed them," a phrase that may sum up some of the objectives of the filmmaker. The depiction of some Muslims as ignorant may even be a ploy on the filmmaker's part to make the "other" acceptable to Western viewers. Nonetheless, several viewpoints are depicted, and Islam is seen in a broad, critical light.

The film ably displays the struggle for a collective imagination, especially seen in the conflict between Muslims, who express their own notion of modernity, and the so-called educated intellectuals, who also participate in the collective imagination but without ever trying to analyze its roots. In this way, the director is able to bring out many of the real reasons for the freedom fighting that led to the new nation.

There was a time when Western filmmakers used to make films to show what they imagined about Muslims in third world countries. Now some of us have
become smart enough to present ourselves according to the Western imagination, and to continue receiving sentimental attention from the western audience.