

Gaining Strength to Strength: An Overview of 18th Dhaka International Film Festival



The Dhaka International Film Festival (DIFF) held from January 11 to 19, 2020, had every signature of growing in a short span of time. Not just logistically, but spiritually too the festival has many things to cheer about. Round the year it had added three more screens for public viewing of selected films from the buoyant package it offered. The founder of its organizer Rainbow Film Society, the festival director Ahmed Muztaba Zamal had no hesitation to reveal the budgetary blues, certainly a reason for the festival showing films in MP4 and Bluray projections. The traditional venues of the festival don't enjoy the DCP projection format, though sooner or later they have to go for it, feels Mr. Zamal. But all said and done, the budgetary constraints hardly dampened the inherent spirits illuminated in the smiling faces of the organizing team comprising old and young office-bearers and volunteers.

One of the prominent signs of the film festival's gaining maturity was the selection of

the opening film of the 18th edition of DIFF. A narrative driven by bonding of two aged persons of opposite sex eventually had given way to unshielded romance, albeit aesthetically. It immediately crossed my mind that in a decade's time this festival has outgrown itself, both by selectors' preferences and by the response of the viewers'. Had it been in 2010, the year I first visited DIFF, the theatre screen would have got momentarily dark to hide even the minimalist intimacy between the adult characters, as it was unacceptable to show any scene of lovemaking. That was a way to prohibit certain scenes of foreign films screened in the theatre. In comparison this time, the undeterred show of boldness in some of the scenes in the Greek-Spanish co-production was soothingly surprising. No objections I heard, no eyebrows raised, no fundamentalist threat came from any quarter, no hush-hush comments. The calmness shown by the public actually emanates a better atmosphere for film appreciation.

There is not an iota of doubt that DIFF has been developing itself with its general theme of “Better Film, Better Audience and Better Society” intact. Soon the birth centenary celebration of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was instrumental in a nation getting freedom from the clutches of military oppression, will commence. DIFF is expected to have a specially designed package of films and programmes to celebrate freedom of Bangladesh as well as freedom of artistic and civil expressions. It could be discerned from the opening ceremony itself as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. A K Abul Momin declared the festival opened in a packed auditorium at the Bangladesh National Museum. Equally ecstatic was the State Minister of Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam who as the chief patron of the festival certainly played a pivotal role in adding a cosmopolitan outlook to the ceremony that was flamboyantly displayed by traditional Manipuri dances.

The festival-opening film *Window to the Sea* (2019), the latest from director Miguel Angel Jimenez, had perfectly opened the window to the festival’s package of 220 films from around 70 countries. Sick with a fatal disease, 55-year old Maria finds solace in company of a lonely aged man Stefanos while she was on a self exploring trip to a tiny island in Greece. Maria’s negotiation with her son first meets embarrassing disapproval, but her plight has made her son realize what his mother is receiving before she slowly succumbs to the ultimate truth of life. The director skillfully takes viewers for a drive, as the narrative progresses from surface to deeper emotions of human bondage. Seeing the legendary actress Emma Suarez as Maria is a bonus for the lovers of cinematic acting.

There was no dearth of recent good films at the festival this year too. The main award of Best Film, in the Asian Competition section, was picked up by ace Iranian filmmaker Reza Mirkarimi’s social drama *Ghasr-e Shirin*

(*Castle of Dreams*, 2019). The coveted Best Director award too went to him which was an added reward to a film that had been on an impressive run at the festival circuit across the continents. The film focuses on a man who is just out of the prison. He goes to acquire a car from his ex-wife who is not well and apparently counting days. As he is leaving the place with the car, his in-laws made him take his two kids along with him. He has a selfish motive – a selfishness that drives him to the edges of attracting hatred and sympathy at the same time in a much engaging twist and turns of the plots. It is a subtle road movie exploring the frailties of relationships that is exposed repeatedly in differing terms and juxtaposed with given innocence of children’s loyalty.



Cut to children in the volatile West Asia: and what a documentary *Tiny Souls* (2019) is! Dina Naser, the young Jordanian director spent more than four years following families at the UNHCR refugee camps who escaped the harsh realities of Syria. She records the hardships and longing for returning to their homeland especially through unassuming revelation of a pretty little girl Marwa. “I may not be living in my homeland, but my homeland lives in me” – graffiti or songs echo their feelings. Reclining on a gripping structure, touching background score, transitory panning and hand-held shots of the camps, the feature-length documentary never allows the viewer’s attention to elapse. But over and above all, it’s the director’s selfless approach enlivened by her off-voice questions and the children’s honest replies, best amplified in bit-

ter accounts given by the “children of war” and also in the narrator’s desperate efforts to get permissions to visit the camps and find the familiar ones who often shift their cramped tents. The film ends on a sad note as the director i.e. the narrator lost touch with Marwa, who by then a lovely teenager made her way back to Syria where life hinges on uncertainty. *Tiny Souls* is the winner of Best Documentary award at DIFF’s Women Filmmakers section.



In the same section, the Best Feature Film and Best Director awards went to one film from Poland, Malgorzata Imielska’s *All For My Mother* (2019). The film is universal in its theme exploit; yet I prefer to mention its country of origin, because its treatment carries forward the legacy of the great Polish auteurs. A strong feminist oeuvre makes for some humanist tropes in this moving tale of a seventeen-year-old Ola who is detained in a rehab home for girls. For Ola, parental love is daydream, relationship is bruised, attachment means oppression, sex is dreadful seduction or rape, and society is practically non-existent. While dealing with her kind of helplessness, loneliness, and fear of losing anything, the author banks on the female gaze. Malgorzata’s signature is visible in shutting the doors to the usual bodily expose – and the plot is uniquely blended in the central character’s resoluteness to find her hiding, troubled mother, who used to be a champion runner in her heydays. Under guidance of a coach, Ola practices hard, believing that by becoming successful in running, she will win her mother’s heart. The obsession lands her in deep trouble too, but ulti-

mately wins her mother’s attention. The film conveys prudent images and haunting histrionics, mainly for Tomasz Naumiuk’s camera-work and a memorable performance by Zofia Domalik as Ola.



All For My Mother

The 18th DIFF is blessed with many precious creations of the moving images. Prasanna Vithanage’s new addition to his rich tapestry of Sri Lankan tales, *Gaadi (Children of the Sun, 2019)* is a survival drama in the face of an early-nineteenth century crisis brewing in a Tamil kingdom, brought by Buddhist threat of taking over, nagging casteism and British imperialist interests. South Korea’s Myoung Sohee’s uncommon family portrait *Bang-mun (The Strangers, 2018)*, is autobiographical and it certainly demands deep emotional involvement to understand how the shrinking spaces affects a sensitive person. Over and above all, the festival’s Retrospective section offered a good option in discovering Joanna Kos-Krauze’s works which were often completed jointly with her husband Krzysztof Krauze. After passing away of her husband, she completed such heart-wrenching docu-feature like *Birds Are Singing in Kigali (2017)* which was based on the infamous Rwandan genocide. *Papusza*, the couple’s 2013 film on poetess Papusza who was in fact the first woman from the gypsy Roma community to write poems, has a splendid combination of archaic social and aesthetic mores all coming in black and white scheme of colours.

An international conference on women in cinema has been a cynosure of all eyes in the festival since it was added five years ago. The



two-day long affair focuses on major issues and possible solutions concerning women in the film industry; and this time too it was no exception. This year speakers such as Sydney Levine, Meenakshi Shedde, Chaitali Somadder, Dr. Debjani Halder, and others had thrown lights on numerous issues, challenges, hopes and achievements of women in cinema in the sixth edition of the conference. However, the programme of “East Meets West” offering opportunities for local film-fraternity

to share thoughts with the guests from other countries – organized only for the second year this time – hadn’t been as fruitful as in the previous year. Last time there were promising participation and exchange of views amongst filmmakers from Bangladesh and others, but this time the discussions remained somewhat confined to the basics of how to promote a film in the international circuit, the do’s and don’ts of it all.

The festival of Dhaka indeed continues to provide a platform for many young and gifted poets of the visual medium to express their thoughts and works. Space is available elsewhere; but the sweet, homely atmosphere, the generosity and warmth from the organizers are rare, and so needs to be endorsed. As confessed by many who were present in the festival, DIFF has become a sort of annual pilgrimage for them.

Mr. Manoj Barpujari is a Member of FIPRESCI-India.