

Emergent Focus of Asian Cinema: The 13th Dhaka International Film Festival 2014

by Hasan Mansoor Chatak

It goes without saying that the Festival plays an important role in building the country's reputation as a cine-friendly land in the region. For this year's edition, 178 films from 55 countries were screened. Some general, if not uncommon trends were immediately visible while pursuing the programme: the prevalence of international independent productions and documentaries. The festival's two most highly anticipated events: Women in Cinema and a conference on women's participation and role in cinema along with the 4th Dhaka Cine Workshop, a filmmaking workshop consisting of aspiring filmmakers. These events made the festival even more meaningful and educational.

The 13th Dhaka International Film Festival was held in Dhaka from 10 to 18 January 2014 in association with The Royal Netherlands Embassy in Dhaka. The continuation of the series of such festivals organized by Rainbow Film Society since 1992 aims at promoting better films, filmmakers and viewers with the motto Better Film Better Audience Better Society.

The political inconsistency in the country during the festival period and the lack of sponsors appeared as a threat to the continuity of the festival. But a devoted team of film connoisseurs and enthusiasts led the journey of the festival. In 2014, several hundred fiction features, short films and documentaries were showcased for audiences including numerous entries from home. The festival comprised of seven segments namely: Competition of Australasian Films, Retrospective and Tribute, Cinema of the World, Women Filmmakers, Short and Independent Films, Spiritual Films and Children's Films.

The Bag of Flour (2013) was screened as an opening film of the festival, directed by Belgian-Moroccan director Kadija Leclere, reflects on woman's role in contemporary Arab society. Tracing the unusual life of a young woman from her early years in Belgium through to her times as an adult in a remote Moroccan town, the film features impressive performances from Hafsia Herzi and the always talented Hiam Abbass.

The retrospective session showcased films of two contemporary acclaimed filmmakers, Iranian Asghar Farhadi and French Olivier Assayas. Each of Asghar Farhadi's directed films explicitly outlines importance in regards of the pressures of social life and how human interaction develops to pose deeply complex, some say intractable difficulties. His four feature films Dancing in the Dust (2003), The Beautiful City (2004), Fireworks Wednesday (2006) and About Elly (2009) were showcased in the festival. Dancing in the Dust follows the

struggles of a newly divorced Azerbaijani who has to meet the high demands of his matrimonial dowry. In *The Beautiful City* a youth is imprisoned for murder, as he approaches legal adulthood he becomes eligible for execution. *Fireworks Wednesday* again turns to the trials of marriage: A young woman, soon to be wed, begins to work in a wealthier north Tehran home. Her employers are undergoing their own marital problems and she is soon drawn in. *About Elly* takes a group of seemingly close middle class friends and charts the decline of their relationships when an outsider's disappearance plunges them into doubt and acrimony.

Olivier Assayas emerged as a filmmaker in the second half of the 1980s, after writing for *Cahiers du cinema*. This activity as a critic elicits an obvious parallel with the young Turks in the 1950s, who all wrote film criticism for *Cahiers* as a training ground, with an eye to directing later. So did Assayas, who used these years to articulate personal ethical and aesthetic choices, also experimenting with his short films in the meantime. Two of his fictional feature films *Cold Water* (1994), *Irma Vep* (1996) and a documentary *HHH: A Portrait of Hou Hsiao-Hsien* (1997), were screened in the festival.



Asgar Farhadi and Olivier Assayas: The retrospective session receptacles

The Dhaka declaration of the International Conference on Women in Cinema called on female filmmakers from around the world to work together on promoting their films, creating new opportunities and learning from one another. Appreciating the endeavors of women in filmmaking, the declaration called for creating opportunities for women filmmakers to take advantage of making and screening films set against the patriarchal attitude of society. The declaration also demanded a true portrayal of women in films with due respect. Afghan woman filmmaker Sahraa Karimi and Portuguese actor-director Francisco Veres Machado read the declaration at the closing ceremony of the two-day conference held on Saturday at the Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate Hall

of Dhaka University.

Subsequently, Afghan filmmaker Sahraa Karimi presented the keynote paper on the role of women filmmakers to bring a change in the world. Australian filmmaker Robyn Hujan, Dutch filmmaker Clementine Ederveen took part in the discussion in the first session presided over by rights activist Khushi Kabir. Filmmakers, critics, journalists, actors and academics of different countries took part in the discussion on depiction on women in war films in the second session. Kaberi Gayen, a professor of The Department of Journalism from The University of Dhaka, was the keynote speaker of the session in which Robyn Hujan and Sahraa Karimi and cultural activist Mofidul Haque replied to questions from the audience on the relevant topics.

In the first session of the second day's programme, Bangladeshi women filmmakers shared challenges and realities in the local film industry known as Dhallywood. Filmmakers like Fauzia Khan, Shabnam Ferdousi and Samia Zaman took part in the discussion presided over by renowned filmmaker Shamim Akhtar on Saturday morning at the same venue. In the second session, renowned Indonesian filmmaker Nurkurniati Aisyah Dewi presented the keynote paper on 'Women and Cinema: New Trend' featuring the role of women filmmakers and analyzing the relation between film and empowerment of women.

Academic Salimullah Khan, actor Rokeya Rafique Baby and Norwegian film programmer Gyda Velvin Myklebust took part in the session.



Discussants at the International Conference on Women in Cinema

Discussants and keynote papers presented at the conference analyzed the common trend of women's film in the world ever since women started producing films in the mainstream Hollywood and Bollywood from the middle of the last century. In most cases such films are made for business motive: to attract the women viewers by portraying 'women's concerns' such as problems revolving around domestic life, the family, motherhood, self-sacrifice, and romance which the conference analysed. The discussants also expressed

concern for depiction of women as a symbol of sex in the mainstream films in Hollywood and Bollywood.

A total of 37 film enthusiasts including seven overseas students have participated in the 4th Dhaka Cine Workshop. The workshop was introduced in 2008 as a parallel event to the biennale film festival designed to utilize the ambiance, resource and coming together of cine professionals as well as creative talents, old and new. International Film Critics Association of Bangladesh - IFCAB in association with the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh organized the workshop which began on January 12 and ended with the screening of around nine short films made by the participants during the workshop. From script writing to shooting and editing—the workshop facilitated the participants with logistic and intellectual support. The workshop was an intensive week-long academic work with creative professionals from diverse fields of the film industry as speakers and moderators. Internationally acclaimed Portuguese director Francisco Veres Machado was the course coordinator of this year's workshop.

In the Australasian competitive section no Best Film Award was announced on the concluding ceremony of the 13th DIFF. The juries of the Australasian Film Section explained that no film from the competition stood out as Best Film this year. Moreover, no Bangladeshi films have been awarded at this year's DIFF which featured 20 awards in different categories. As a solitary participant country in the festival, Iran dominated the award chart by winning a total of six awards: Best Director, Best Actor, Badal Rahman Award for the Best Children Film, Audience Award (film) and two Special Mention awards in Short and Independent films category.

The official jury of competition section announced The Best Director as Parviz Shahbazi for his fascinating moral thriller *Trapped* (2012) which is centered on the bristling relationship between two very different young women in contemporary Tehran. The Best Actor went to Levon Hafevan for his brilliant performance in Iranian film *Parviz* (2012). In his second feature director Majid Barzegar presents a sharp and powerful portrait of a man who does not comply with the norm, sketching the suppressed intolerance of an apparently harmonious community with a beautiful role by Levon Haftvan as Parviz. The Best Actress went to Vilma Santos for her fabulous acting in Philippino film *Ekstra* (2013). The Best Screenplay Award was grabbed by Japanese film *Miss Zombie* (2013) and The Best Cinematography Award by Australian film *Satellite Boy* (2012).



A scene from the Best Director Award winning film Trapped (2012)

Best Children Film Badal Rahman Award, a special include in the festival, was achieved by The Rooster Trademark Paper (2012) which tells the story of a young aspiring artist in 1971 Iran who is determined to enter a visual arts competition, but first he has to find a way to pay for the expensive papers he needs to enter the contest. The Audience Award went to the film Plastic. Sri Lankan film Siri Perakum by famous director Somaratne Dissanayake and Nepalese film Chokhaunee by Kamal Bhatta received Special Audience Mention awards.

In Spiritual section, Best Fiction Award went to an Indian film Adomya which tells a story of a simple village girl, Juri, who gets married to an engineer from her village. After a few months, Juri's husband dies of AIDS. Medical tests confirm that she is too HIV-positive and in face of obstacles from her in-laws and parents she leaves for a new place to carry on her struggle for life. This section is being introduced to promote public discourse on the place of faith and spirituality in the human context. The showcasing of films on spirituality would promote greater cross-cultural understanding and tolerance and facilitate dialogues within communities as between communities.



A scene from Satellite Boy (2012), Best cinematography award winner

In Women Filmmakers section, another special include in the festival, Best Fiction Award went to Swedish film Eat Sleep Die by Gabriela Pilchler which follows a girl with no high school diploma, no job and her roots deeply stained with the taboos of the small town she grew up in she finds herself on the collision course with society and a comical world of bureaucracy and contradicting values and expectations.

Best Documentary Award went to Afghan Women behind the Wheel by Afghan female film director Sahraa Karimi. Women not usually allowed driving public transportations in Afghanistan and this practice has become yet another barrier to achieving women's freedom in the Afghan society. This topic and many others were being discussed by young talented director Sahraa Karimi in her film Afghan Women behind the Wheel. The film is a fascinating portrait of women's life in Kabul, where dreams are different to reality.

Turkish film Patika and Nepali film The Korean Dream were honored with the Best Fiction Award and Best Documentary respectively in Short and Independent section. This portion of the Festival showcased feature films, documentaries and short films from young, talented and independent filmmakers from all around the world.

As mentioned above the festival also included a section Cinema of the World which was a collection of about 28 different films from different parts of the world. The coming together of global cinemas along with their makers made this section a very multicultural platform which enriched the whole festival. It created a wonderful environment of the interrelation of films from all around the world with a common interest.

Lastly, the message that DIFF has always tried to convey is that films being a modern tool or trend of influencing people's minds and hearts should be given more recognition in a country like Bangladesh. Better Film, Better Audience and Better Society is a slogan with which DIFF has been continuing its journey for more than two decades. The audiences are the ones who inspire the organizers and motivate them to carry on despite the several hurdles that the festival faces be it financial or bureaucratic. Needless to mention the delegates from all around the world play a very essential role in the fulfillment of the very purpose of arranging an international festival. We expect a more fulfilling and an even more successful trend of future film festivals in Bangladesh with more support from everyone.

Award's list of the 13th DIFF

1. Best Children Film Badal Rahman Award
(Childrens' Film Section) Crest & Certificate

The Rooster Trademark Paper
Dir- Maryam Milani
92min, Iran

2. Audience Award
Crest & Certificate

Plastic
Dir- Mehran Hemmatzadeh
8min, Iran

3. Special Audience Mention
Certificate

Siri Perakum (The Crown From Mud)
Director: Dr. Somaratne Dissanayake
Sri Lanka, 108min

4. Special Audience Mention
Certificate

Chokhaunee
Director: Kamal Bhatta
Nepal, 20min

a. Spiritual Section: Interfaith Jury for Spiritual Films:

1. Mr. Samir Nasr -Chairman, Egypt/Canada
2. Mr. Enamul Karim Nirjhar - Member, Bangladesh
3. Mr. Sanjoy Ghosh, Member, India
4. Mrs. Loh Chay Koon Winifred - Member, Singapore
5. Ms. Sahraa Karimi - Member - Afghanistan

5. Best Fiction Award (Spiritual Section)
Crest & Certificate

Adomya
Dir- Bobby Sarma Baruah
102min, India

6. Special Mention (Spiritual Section)
Certificate

Between Two Worlds
Dir- Ovido Salazar
76min, UK, Sweden

b. Women Filmmakers:

1. Ms. Samia Zaman - Chairman, Bangladesh
2. Ms. Barbara Stemplewska - Member, Germany

3. Ms. Maria Poell – Member, Austria
4. Ms. Mahmuda Choudhury – Member, Bangladesh
5. Ms. Nia Dinata – Member, Indonesia

7. Best Fiction Award (Women Filmmakers Section)
Crest & Certificate

Eat Sleep Die
Dir- Ms. Gabriela Pilchler
104min, Sweden

8. Best Documentary Award (Women Filmmakers Section)
Crest & Certificate

Afghan Women Behind The Wheel
Dir- Sahraa Karimi
56min, Afghanistan

c. Short and Independent Films

1. Ms. Zohreh Zamani – Chairman, Iran
2. Ms. Clementine Ederveen – Member, Netherlands
3. Ms. Esha Yusuff – Member, Bangladesh
4. Ms. Gyda V. Myklebust – Member, Norway
5. Ms. Robyn Hughan –Member, Australia

9. Best Documentary Award (Short & Independent Films)
Crest & Certificate

The Korean Dream
Dir- Ashok Thapa Magar
27min, Nepal, South Korea

10. Best Fiction Award (Short & Independent Films)
Crest & Certificate

Patika (The Country Road)
Dir- Onur Yagiz
23min, Turkey

11. Special Mention (Short & Independent Films)
Certificate

Suicide Letter
Dir- Huang PO-We
30min, Taiwan

12. Special Mention (Short & Independent Films)
Certificate

Long Days

Dir- Simin Fallahzadeh Tehrani
27min, Iran

13. Special Mention (Short & Independent Films)
Certificate

Plastic
Dir- Mehran Hemmatzadeh
8min, Iran

a. Competition Australasian Film Section

1. Mr. Mofidul Hoque, Chairman - Bangladesh
2. Mr. Henrik Peschel – Member, Germany
3. Mr. KIM Ji-Seok – Member, South Korea
4. Mr. Rasoul Sadrameli – Member, Iran
5. Mr. Amitabh Reza Chowdhury – Member, Bangladesh

14. Best Director Award (Australasian Competition)
Crest & Certificate

Trapped
Dir- Parviz Shahbazi
95min, Iran

15. Best Actor Award (Australasian Competition)
Crest & Certificate

Parviz
Actor-Levon Hafevan
107min, Iran

16. Best Actress Award (Australasian Competition)
Crest & Certificate

Ekstra
Actress- Vilma Santos
113min, Philippines

17. Best Screenplay Award (Australasian Competition)
Crest & Certificate

Miss Zombie
Dir- Sabu
85min, Japan

18. Best Cinematography Award (Australasian Competition)
Crest & Certificate

Satellite Boy
Dir- Catriona McKenzie
82min, Australia