

MEHERJAAN ON TOUR

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While the film "Meherjaan", suspended from viewing in Bangladesh due to the offence it caused through its depiction of romance in the midst of wartime brutality, may have quietly slipped from memory in Dhaka, its director, Rubaiyat Hossain, has been taking her work on tour outside Bangladesh in an attempt to garner credibility from an outside world little educated about the history of Bangladesh.

Rubaiyat's frankly strange film is about a relationship between a Bengali woman and a Pakistani soldier during the Liberation War. The soldier is supposed to be a good guy and saves the woman from his Pakistani colleagues. They fall in love, romance develops, and they frolic through the fields. The director apparently thinks the film has a message about hope, and there is supposedly content about the status of women and feminism as well.

A panel of Boston-area academics set the stage for discussion following a November 3, 2011 movie showing sponsored by the University of Massachusetts Boston, the South Asia Initiative at Harvard University, the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights at UMass Boston, and the CARR Center for Human Rights Policy, Harvard John F. Kennedy School of Government.

While the barbarity of Pakistani wartime behaviour was clearly spelled out and the audience was informed that the film had been withdrawn in Bangladesh, some of the speakers and also various members of the audience wanted to highlight the supposedly pro-woman view of the film, with one speech dissecting the feminist content in detail while apparently feeling able to put the unimaginable suffering of



A scene from "Meherjaan".

a country that the director was exploiting to produce her work in the background.

There are many problems with the film. On a trivial level, it is poor cinematography: many of the characters are stereotyped, the storyline is clichéd and lacking in subtlety, and the movie drags along slowly.

More seriously, the film lacks credibility because it has no basis in reality: Few Pakistanis opposed the oppression caused by their government and army that killed and raped so many in Bangladesh with a brutality almost beyond belief. There

are some wars where there has been a "righteous" enemy that refused to cooperate with evil, but, beyond a few intellectuals, this was not the case in the Pakistani rape of Bangladesh. The Pakistani government has not to this day apologised for its misconduct -- and, before that event happens, it is simply inappropriate to develop a fantasy love affair about a Pakistani soldier who is supposedly a good human being. And what sort of a human being is his supposed Bangladeshi lover who has an affair with an enemy soldier while so many friends all around her languish

in at best pools of tears and, at worst, blood, after suffering devastating rape at the hands of the Pakistani army?

The biggest objection is simply the hurt this film inflicts on Bangladeshis. What does the director think is to be gained by insulting the memory of those whose lives were destroyed and drawing yet more tears in this way? How does a survivor of rape feel about a story of love supposedly taking place at a time she was violated? Does she need to gain the "redemption" of thinking there was something positive going on around her -- or would she not instead cringe and cry from the lie that there was anything romantic about a time of rape? Would she not prefer the world to instead learn more about the truth of Bangladesh's fiery birth, and for Pakistan to have the decency to apologise?

The director simply should not have made this film.

The academics' and other commentators' disconnect with reality after the movie showing was perhaps most disturbing. Perhaps they should be forgiven since the history of Bangladesh is not well known in the West -- yet the introduction to the event had spelled out the horrors of the war, and I found it hard to imagine that a group could be so insensitive to the destruction inflicted on Bangladesh to see any sort of feminist narrative or other redeeming message in the film.

Posh white ladies in the audience who have no idea about the life or history of Bangladesh commented on the beauty of the film or the pleasurable erotic nature of the film. But if the film is erotic, it is in raping the country.

JONATHAN RICHMOND RECENTLY LIVED IN DHAKA AS AN ADVISOR TO THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH.

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