

# Cultural Daily

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## Thank you my friend, Tareque Masud, for your Films

Charity Hume · Wednesday, November 23rd, 2011

Tareque Masud, the director of *The Clay Bird*, was tragically killed this past summer in a car accident that cut short a filmmaker's career at the height of his powers, and was a terrible loss to his native Bangladesh, his family, and his international circle of friends. As one privileged to have known Tareque as a friend over the course of his maturation as a filmmaker, I am one of many who grieve his loss. At the same time, I am deeply thankful that he chose to dedicate his life with such unrelenting courage, vision and daring to tell the story of his country with films of such wisdom and depth.

In the obituary of Masud for *The Guardian*, James Leahy writes: "Although Tareque was genuinely a pioneer, his work had deep roots in both the film art of the past (Jean Renoir, Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson) and in Bengali culture, not only the "high culture" of Rabindranath Tagore or Satyajit Ray, but, as he told me, the "rural, folk and un-modern parts," which he described as "egalitarian, inclusive and syncretic." Like Rey, Masud captures the mysterious and subtle aspects of rural life in Bangladesh in his films. Satyajit Ray described the challenge of finding this texture in his films: "You had to find out yourself how to catch the hushed stillness of dusk in a Bengali village, when... the plaintive blows on conch shells from homes far and wide are joined by the chorus of crickets, which rises as the light falls, until all one sees are the stars in the sky, and the stars blink and swirl in the thickets." Masud's films have an ineffable quality of the simple poetry in the play of wind in a tree, or sparks that illuminate faces round a fire. At times, the personal and authentic portrayal of the country seems to blend the feature film with the realism of documentaries.

In *The Clay Bird*, Masud captures the human contradictions of character and paradoxes that express Bengali culture with tender intimacy. Masud parallels Anu's maturation with the escalation of Bangladesh toward civil war, but he never lets the political take over the film. Masud allows the nation's story to unfold in human scenes that show his deep understanding and familiarity with the rural culture. Folk singers inspire soldiers to fight for freedom in the ballads performed in remote villages. In a heartbreaking scene, Anu witnesses the beating of one of his childhood companions at the Madrasa, punished for symptoms that are interpreted as signs of heresy. In this scene, Masud shows the curious paradox of a fundamentalist's cruelty mixed with well intentioned piety. In another subtle and powerful scene, an idealistic university student, Milon, reproaches the boatman Karim Majhi with a superior attitude: "It's because of blindly religious people like you that the country is in such a mess." Karim Mahhi responds with unexpected philosophical insight: "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." As Milon absorbs the mystic wisdom of the boatman's words, the scene becomes a microcosm of *The Clay Bird's* larger message, to shed preconceptions of religion or politics that divide us, and to search for the deeper values that unite us.

Through his intimate and powerful portrait of the characters in *The Clay Bird*, Masud tells an important part of the story and people of Bangladesh with moving detail and subtlety that was rare in his country, and in today's cinema. As one of the thousands who mourn Tareque Masud, I am thankful that he was able to leave behind a body of work that will continue to illuminate the light of humanity in each of us.

*Image: Catherine and Tareque Masud with their son Nishaad in 2010, photo by Mishuk Munier.*

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