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THE SALT IN OUR WATERS

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English Title THE SALT IN OUR WATERS

Original Title NONAJOLER KABBO

Genre Drama

Language Bangla

Country of Production Bangladesh, France

Writer & Director Rezwan Shahriar Sumit

Producer Rezwan Shahriar Sumit, Ilann Girard

Cast Fazlur Rahman Babu, Shatabdi Wadud, Titas Zia, Tasnova Tamanna, Dulari Begum, Aminur Rahman Mukul

Production Year 2020

Running Time 106 min

Aspect Ratio 1.85:1

Format 2K DCP, Dolby Digital

social: facebook.com/thesaltinourwaters
instagram.com/saltwatersfilm

SHORT SYNOPSIS

For his latest art installation, Rudro journeys to a remote mangrove isle on the Bangladeshi Delta, a day's boat ride and a world away from modern, crowded Dhaka. Welcomed by the local fishermen and their leader Chairman, Rudro's modern ideas and lifelike sculptures enchant the village boys and his landlord's daughter. But when the local Ilish catch proves elusive, the elders blame Rudro's "idolatry" for the curse of empty nets. In this vanishing land where sea and sky merge, a storm is brewing and change –welcome or not—is coming.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Set in a tiny mangrove isle in the Bay of Bengal, *The Salt in Our Waters* is the story of RUDRO (32), a city-raised sculptor who comes to this place, hoping to understand the people and way of life that captivated his coastguard father. He is welcomed by local headman and religious leader, CHAIRMAN (60), and hypnotized by the lowering sky and restless seas of the teeming delta.

He rents a makeshift studio from native fisherman, BASHAR (45), whose children TUNI (19) and TAHER (12) are enchanted by Rudro's artistry and way of being in the world. With them as guides, Rudro explores this extraordinary land and seascape, which nature both restores and menaces, seeing for himself what motivated his father's lifetime of work in these waters.

On the first day of fishing season, the men of the village take to their boats, but return with empty nets: the plentiful local Ilish are not to be seen. While Rudro describes climate change as the reason, Chairman blames Rudro's lifelike sculptures. The devout Muslim villagers call him an idolator and shun him. As Rudro rethinks his plans and choices, Tuni continues to visit and inspire his art. The Ilish finally arrive which persuades the locals to re-think their conclusions about Rudro and their blind allegiance to Chairman.

But when a cyclone's approach threatens the village, Chairman overplays his hand, demanding the fishermen ignore the storm warnings and return to their boats to recoup earlier losses. Concerned for his friends and neighbors, Rudro inspires a revolt among the fisherman leading to the precautionary evacuation of the village. As a deadly storm threatens this defenseless spit of sand, Rudro finds himself center stage in a primal, elemental conflict between land and sea, man and nature, past and future.

ORIGIN STORY

In Bangladesh, we have the longest unbroken sea beach in the world. It is almost 100 miles in length. I have been to the coasts many times since my childhood. Back in those days, I used to venture off the popular tourist trails and walk miles at a stretch to check in on the local fishing communities. During my first visit, I remember watching them in awe as they pushed their tiny wooden boats into the choppy waters of the Bay of Bengal. Each boat usually has to face three waves. The first one is a gentle tap, the second one tests your nerves, and the third one can topple the boat. It sends the boats flying! I kept on wondering what makes the fishermen face this danger every day. They became a subject of interest.

They catch Hilsha which of course has a very high demand in the city, but it did not take me long to realize that there is more to their lives than just money. Their coastal livelihood is in constant peril due to climate change. Their homes are ravaged by tidal bores regularly, yet they simply pick themselves up and return to

fishing without any kind of lament or second thought. A primordial drive is at work here and that's what fascinated me the most.

When I left Dhaka back in 2012 to join the graduate film program of NYU Tisch School of the Arts, I knew I was going to return eventually. I always wanted to tell stories of my land and my people. I still remember the day when I started writing my first feature script *The Salt in Our Waters*. I was sitting on the top floor of the famous Bobst Library in New York. Its larger-than-life floor-to-ceiling windows led to a magnificent view of Washington Square Park, most of Manhattan's midtown, and the one and only Empire State Building. Let's just say I was staring at one of the peaks of human civilization, the American dream was up for grabs. Yet, my mind transported me to the good old fishing village in the coastal wilderness of Bangladesh where a small community of fishermen goes about living life dangerously. The floodgates were open – a series of vivid memories came rushing in.

Director Spike Lee was the first person who gave me a grant for this project, not without a warning – “You are going to shoot a first feature, in Bangladesh, during monsoon, on boats? May Allah be with you! Allahu Akbar!” I might have laughed that day, but he was right. This project – from development to post-production – tested me in ways I never imagined it would. If I were given a second chance and taken back to Bobst Library, would I write a different script? Nope. ‘Salt Waters’ made me who I am today.

The film is also a classic clash-of-cultures tale where a stranger from the city is first welcomed, then misunderstood, and eventually ostracized by a rural community. My protagonist Rudro, a sculptor, believes he can honor a fishing community by creating sculptures that capture the raw beauty of the people and their traditions. He ends up finding himself in a conflicted relationship with the conservative local leaders. I see the fishing island of this film as a microcosm of Bangladesh, in unity as in division. It would take courage for a sculptor to step out of his/her urban confines and go to such a secluded pocket to practice figurative art. At the same time, I do not think any of the villagers would harm an artist without provocation. There needs to be enough dialogue between these two groups of people. My one image or one film will not save their worlds, but it will work as an icebreaker. I am most excited to show this film to a room full of artists, fishermen, believers, skeptics – all laughing at the same jokes.

ARTISTIC APPROACH

The film was shot in a tiny fishing village consisting of fifteen families. The village is neatly tucked into the Patuakhali shore where Mother Nature is both restorative and menacing. Here the sound of breaking waves is omnipresent, and it gets quite disconcerting during monsoon. Despite the looming threat of cyclones, tsunamis, and high tides, the villagers put in a lot of hard work in building their wooden boats and thatched huts. The craftsmanship of these structures is unique and adds picturesque charm to our frames. We constructed four additional shooting-friendly structures right where the housings trailed off, so they would look like just an extension of the village. We used locally found objects such as fishing nets, multi-colored

floats, anchors, oars, styrofoam ice boxes, dead crabs, drying fishes to prop up these structures. The interiors were always quite colorful as they used saris as both blankets and curtains.

In terms of cinematography, we decided to go entirely handheld. The film was shot from Rudro's POV, who being an artist, tends to examine tiny details, jump in, get wet, touch, and feel objects. He also has an unhealthy obsession with human figures. Through his eyes, we wanted to see human bodies in their fullest glory, in riveting shapes and superbly animated motion - think Tuni chopping at woods, Bashar and Abdul planting fishing poles, and kids playing danguli. The camera movements had to match Rudro's frantic pace and capture his spurts of creative energy. Chananun and I agreed on shooting the film on ALEXA Mini - to be able to stay lightweight and chose ZEISS Master Prime lenses for their unique cinematic look.

We shot the film in the middle of monsoon (July - August) when the coconut trees begin to undulate to strong gusts and the mangrove trees get saturated with fresh green leaves. The sky was always overcast which worked in our favor. The clouds were a natural filter causing the light on the landscape to be very dramatic. There were occasional bursts of rain starting mid-July, but as the shoot progressed the showers slowly receded.

Casting: Rudro, Tuni, Chairman, Talash, and Bashar - these five roles were played by trained Dhaka city actors. The rest of the cast were Patuakhali locals. I went to that village and other surrounding areas many times for research, and that is when I also used to look for potential actors. I found a few of the boys on Kuakata tourist beach where they were selling trinkets. I made sure they were familiar with the entire shooting crew at least a week before we started shooting. They also participated in training camps - but never in actual rehearsals. I thought that would take the freshness out of their performances. The trained actors on the other hand underwent a different process. I was keen on getting naturalistic performances, so the first step was to watch a lot of movies together. Tulpan, Embrace of the Serpent, Woman in the Dunes, and Breaking the Waves are some of the movies we studied. The actors moved to Patuakhali a little early so they could immerse themselves in the rural way of living. I wanted to make sure the film is authentic to the place in every possible way, hence speaking in the Patuakhali dialect was also a challenge the trained actors had to respond to within a relatively short period.

FAZLUR RAHMAN BABU (CHAIRMAN): INTERVIEW

1. Describe your process.

After reading the script, I had long meetings with Sumit where I tried to find out more about the Chairman. I was interested not only in his present but also in his past. I tried to understand what his faith meant to him.

How long has he been holding on to this particular faith? Was his upbringing any different from the rest of the villagers? I went to the location early. I met with locals and studied their body language, their culture, their routine. I was particularly fascinated by how brave they were. Each of them was survivors of a disruption related to climate change. Fresh storms are brewing as we speak, so where do they find the energy to bounce back? These inquiries led to a better understanding of the Chairman character.

Chairman plays both a legal guardian and a spiritual leader in the film. He does business on their behalf and makes money, in return he brings food and supplies from the city. He also teaches their children. It seems like a fair system at first sight. But when you add religion to that mix, it starts to get complicated. He falters when he is supposed to take decisions in favor of science.

2. Is the Chairman basically a bad person then?

In average Bangladeshi films, characters are portrayed merely based on binaries. As if life has only two sides – it is either black or white. In our film, however, we tried to introduce a very new grey hue. Chairman for example is quite grey. He seems like a cold, heartless man in the beginning, but he did have a softer side when his wife was alive, he still remembers her vividly. He loved his son wholeheartedly, but never got any affection in return. So he thinks he failed as a father. Maybe that is why he has chosen to use brute force to preserve his rule. He started from the bottom and knows what works and what does not in these waters. He fished, weaved nets, planted fishing poles underwater, and went the whole nine yards pretty much. It has not been smooth sailing all the way. He shares much of this knowledge with the villagers. But he also uses religion to influence them, to blindside them. There are times when it feels like he is doing this on purpose, and we begin to question his morality. But then there are other times when he seems like a Good Samaritan. He is flesh and blood, just like you and me.

3. What was the most memorable moment on set?

It was a multicultural set. There were people from Thailand, the United States, France, and Bangladesh. All of us had to work hard to get through a day, we were knee-deep in the mud trying to perform ballet, but it never felt like work. We were all in it together. I used to love it when our Director, DP, and Production Designer would get together and have a bit of a laugh after wrapping a scene. I could tell we were on the right track. It helped me prepare for the next day. I enjoyed every bit of the shoot. I will treasure these memories for the rest of my life.

PRODUCER'S NOTE

I met Writer and Director Rezwan Shahriar Sumit at the 2016 Film Bazaar Co-Production Market in Goa where his project was invited to participate. It is the most prestigious forum for South Asian filmmakers where every year select projects are matched with international co-producers who, in turn, bring the projects to the industry's attention worldwide.

I was drawn to Sumit's project for two sets of reasons: Firstly, due to its story which pits a charismatic religious leader from the village against a young and liberal artist from the city. One has an entire fishing village under his spell, and the other one is destined to break this spell. Secondly, due to the film's setting - Bangladesh, a country which is fighting several modern-world challenges: global warming, radicalization, refugee crisis, etc. in its unique ways, however, is not often seen on mainstream media beyond the scope of clickbait headlines. Sumit manages to blend never-before-seen social, cultural, and religious elements and create a story world that feels grounded in reality. He sets this against the spectacular backdrop of Bay of Bengal during monsoon - which makes the film even more special.

Shooting the film has been a trial by fire for Sumit, particularly due to the unsparing nature of Bangladeshi monsoon which followed him for nearly two months. But I must say the story of a young city artist confronting the archaic values of a fishing community came to life against the backdrop of such adverse conditions. The spell of the imam felt all the more profound.

BIOGRAPHIES

CAST

TITAS ZIA

Rudro

Titas is a National Award-winning film and theater actor. He has performed in twelve theatre performances at home and abroad, including at Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, and directed more than fifteen theatre performances. His film credits include **Mrittika Maya**, **Ujan Gaanger Naiya**, and **Nonajoler Kabbo**. He received the Sergeant Ahad Parvez Memorial Scholarship for achieving first class first position while pursuing a Bachelor in Dramatic Theater at Dhaka University. He is currently a Ph.D. researcher at the Russian University of Theater Arts - GITIS in Moscow.

TASNOVA TAMANNA

Tuni

A business school graduate, Tasnova's debut as an actor was in a short film titled **Aro Kichu Drishyaboli** in 2010. Since then, she has acted in several short films, TV commercials, and two feature-length films titled **Nree: The Son of Soil** and **Live From Dhaka**. She later bagged the Best Director and Best Actor award at the 27th Singapore International Film Festival and screened at Rotterdam Film Festival. She temped as a voice actor on foreign-language TV shows and animations.

FAZLUR RAHMAN

Chairman

Babu started his acting career in 1978 when he joined the theatre group Baishakhi Natya Ghosthi in Faridpur. He started his television acting career in the soap opera **Mrittu Khuda** which was produced by Abu Zafar Siddiqui and aired on Bangladesh Television in 1991. However, it was his role in **Poran Majhi** and television drama **Iti Kotha** (1991), written by Rashid, which secured him roles in prestige dramas such as **Shundari** and **Danab**. Babu emerged as a playback singer after he performed two songs for the feature film **Monpura**. After the film's success, Babu published his first solo music album **Indubala** in 2009 which was a super hit in Bangladesh across all tiers of audiences.

Babu will play one of the leading roles in the upcoming Sheikh Mujib biopic titled **Bangabandhu** to be directed by veteran Indian director Shyam Benegal.

CREW

REZWAN SHAHRIAR SUMIT

Director, Writer

Sumit was born and raised in Bangladesh's boisterous capital Dhaka. **City Life**, his first short, earned him a place at the Berlinale Talents in 2008. He went on to study at the Graduate Film Program of New York University as a Tisch Fellow. There he produced Barbara Cigarroa's acclaimed short **Dios Nunca Muere** that played at NYFF, AFI Fest, Palm Springs, and Kurzfilmtage Winterthur. His first feature **The Salt in Our Waters** was an official selection at BFI London and Busan in 2020. The project received support from France's CNC Aide aux cinémas du monde, TFL Audience Design fund, and the Spike Lee Fellowship. Sumit's second feature **A New Prophet** is backed by Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (\$100K grant), IEFTA, Film Bazaar and Torino Film Lab. The screenplay is in development at Film Independent's year-long Global Media Makers program.

Studio: mypixelstory.com

Personal: pixelrhyme.com

ILANN GIRARD

Producer

Former General Counsel of Pandora Cinema, Ilann Girard started ARSAM International -- a Paris based production company in 2003. He is also the founding partner of Olffi.com the largest database and toolbox about public funding (www.olffi.com) servicing more than 40,000 films and TV professionals. Olffi now provides consultancy to help producers finance their films abroad.

Ilann has been an executive producer on **Renaissance**, **March of the Penguin**, and **Plastic Planet**. He has produced **Goodbye Bafana** (Cinema for Peace Award at the Berlinale in 2007), **Lebanon** (Golden Lion Venice Mostra 2009 and Discovery Prize at EFA 2010), **I, Anna** (Berlinale Specials 2012), **Omblin** (Cannes Junior Prize 2012), **When Day Breaks** (Toronto 2012 – Academy Award 2013 Candidate for Serbia), **The Ghetto Of Venice** (Venice Mostra 2015), **Final Portrait** (Berlinale official selection 2017), and **Cunningham** (TIFF 2019).

A French lawyer, Ilann Girard graduated from the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris in Public Law and holds a master's degree in private law and a post-graduate diploma in telecommunications and television management. He travels extensively and attends all major international markets and festivals.

He is a consultant and advisor for several regulatory and training organizations, including Paris's ACE, Berlin's Erich Pommer Institute, Strategic Partners, The Producer's Network, Screen Australia, the NZ Film Commission, the French CNC, as well as Telefilm Canada.

CHANANUN CHOTRUNGROJ

Director of Photography

Chananun is a **Spirit Award**-nominated Thai cinematographer and artist based in Los Angeles. While pursuing her MFA in film at NYU, she was awarded the Ang Lee Fellowship and received the Nestor Almendros Award for Outstanding Cinematography by a Woman in 2013 and 2015. Her feature credits include **The Third Wife** directed by Ash Mayfair (Toronto, Busan, Locarno), **Pop Aye** directed by Kirsten Tan (Sundance, Rotterdam), **Motel Mist** directed by Prabda Yoon (Rotterdam), and **Karaoke Girl** directed by Visra Vichit-Vadakan. Most recently, she was awarded Best Cinematography - Southampton International Film Festival 2018 for **Don't Come Back from the Moon** by Bruce Thierry Cheung starring James Franco, and Best Cinematography - Imagine India Film Festival 2019 for **The Third Wife**.

KRISTAN SPRAGUE

Editor

Kristan Sprague is a Spirit Award-nominated editor based out of Brooklyn, New York. His most acclaimed film **Manos Sucias** premiered at Tribeca and helped launch **Narcos** helmer Josef Ladyka's career. Kristan is also a Sundance regular where four of his films (as Editor) have screened, namely **Newlyweeds**, **Mulignans**, **Hair Wolf**, and **Buck**. His recently edited **Nigerian Prince** was an AT&T Untold Stories One Million USD grant winner.

SYLVAIN NAHMIA

Production Designer

Sylvain is a French Production Designer and Creative Producer. He has worked extensively in the Indian Subcontinent for the past two decades. His credits include Tareque Masud's **Matir Moina** (Cannes 2002, FIPRESCI Prize) and **Ontorjatra, Bhopal - A Prayer for Rain**, Oscar-nominated Ashwin Kumar's **No Fathers in Kashmir**, and most recently Rezwan Shahriar Sumit's **Nonajoler Kabbo**. The film was shot in fishing villages across Patuakhali and Chittagong. He spends his free time making experimental 'wind paintings' in his suburban studio in Paris.

LUIZA PARVU

Associate Producer

Luiza Parvu is a Romanian film director, editor, and educator, based in the US. She holds an MFA in Film Production from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. Films she has directed, edited, or produced have screened in various international film festivals including Sundance, Tribeca, Karlovy Vary, and Camerimage. She is now editing her directorial feature debut, **Ubi Bene Ibi Patria** (co-dir. Toma Peiu).

Her website: rootfilms.org

ARNOB

Music Composer

Arnob is Bangladesh's preeminent indie music composer. He hit the mainstream back in 2009 with his score for **Monpura** which went on to become a huge box-office success in Bangladesh. This album remained in the top chart for nearly six months and helped create buzz for the film. He followed up this success with two back to back albums which sold a million copies across Bangladesh and West Bengal. He has composed numerous jingles for TV commercials and branded content since then. He went to Santiniketan, a conservatory established by poet Tagore, for his graduate studies in art and music.

CREDITS

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mypixelstory & ARSAM International

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Half Stop Down
HD Systems Digital Lab

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Film Bazaar

Audience Design Fund
Torino Film Lab

Written & Directed by
Rezwan Shahriar Sumit

Produced by
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Ilann Girard

Cast
Titas Zia, Tasnova Tamanna
Fazlur Rahman Babu, Shatabdi Wadud
Ashok Bepari, Aminur Rahman Mukul and Dulari Begum

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Khandaker Golam Kabir
David Spratt

Associate Producers
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Luiza Parvu

Shirin Akhter Banu
Shaheen Mosharrof
Nicolas Pollachi
Guy Courtecuisse
Jaspreet Kaur

Director of Photography

Chananun Chotrungroj

Creative Producer & Production Designer

Sylvain Nahmias

Sculptor

Mahmudul Hasan Shohag

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Luiza Parvu
Sankha

Music Composer

Arnob

Casting Director

Rafi Sumon

Costume Designer

Edila Farid Turin

Post Production Supervisor

Guy Courtecuisse

Senior Color Grader

Olivier Garcia

Re-Recording Mixer

Bruno Mercère

Sound Design

Tiago Cardoso & Dinis Henriques

SONGS

“Heion Re Heion”

Singer: Abbasuddin Ahmed

Lyrics: Abdul Karim

Album: Allah Megh De

License from Nashid Kamal, Ferdausi Rahman, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi

“Porer Jayga Porer Jomi”

Singer: Abdul Alim

Album: Voktimulok Polligeeti

License from Abdul Alim Family

“Moriya Jamu Bujhi”

Singer: Rezaul Karim

Lyrics & Music: Rezaul Karim

Original Recording

Copyright: mypixelstory

“Ekbar Aashiya Sonar”

Singer & Composer: Abbasuddin Ahmed

Lyrics: Abdul Karim

Album: Allah Megh De

License from Nashid Kamal, Ferdausi Rahman, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi

“Ki Bolibo Shonar Chand”

Singer: Romiz

Lyrics & Music: Jasimuddin, Anonymous

Original Recording

Copyright: mypixelstory

“Keo Noy Jogot Shongsharey Rey”

Singers: Rituparna Banerjee & Arnob

Lyrics & Music: Anonymous

Original Recording

License from Shayan Chowdhury

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