

Exhibition: Who does British-Asian art serve?



in the UK, has showcased 'Zaibunissa', a solo show of Maryam Wahid's photographs from her trip to Pakistan in 2019. The work relays the artist's personal journey of self-discovery, her identity as a British Pakistani, contemplating notions of Partition and migration, asking how and why the Pakistani community in the UK came to be.

She travelled to Lahore, accompanied by her mother, for the first time ever at age 23, to meet her family and visit her maternal ancestral home. The photos highlight a personal but parochial aspect of Pakistani life and culture in the vibrant city of Lahore.

Visually and conceptually, the exhibition can be divided into two. The first part uses the photographer's mother as the main subject, with members of her family and friends appearing in some images. Most of the solo shots of the artist's mother relay a sense of detachment and are a bit lacklustre. These are shot in different parts of Lahore as well as in the family home.

The artist's mother and her friend Kosar meeting after 38 years. The red brick architecture that forms the backdrop in the images reflects both beauty and age. It serves as a marker of time; portraying a somewhat rundown and candid version of the city. Undoubtedly, these staged colour prints lend exoticism to affliction. One photo that stands out is composed of a grid of four squares with repeated imagery, which is the skyline at the Wagah border, with the Bab-e-Azadi [Gateway to Freedom] at the bottom, tilting sideways. It exudes a sense of positive abandon and energy that the rest of the work lacks.

Wahid's understanding of life in Pakistan was pieced together from old family photos (some of which are on exhibit) and



her parents' verbal accounts. Her trip to Pakistan in 2019 would have been the final piece of this puzzle, except she experienced utter culture-shock as she visited cities like Karachi and Lahore, and attended events like the Karachi Biennale. These places, having evolved significantly since the time of her parents' marriage, were not at all what Wahid had expected. This brings me to the second part of the show, which adopts a Cindy Sherman-like style, where the photographer herself enacts an imagined alternate reality, one in which her family doesn't migrate to the UK, and in which she is born and raised in Pakistan.

In this series, Wahid poses by a kitchen stove while cooking, riding on the back of a motorcycle with a niqab covering half

her face, standing in front of a grimy mirror staring at a photo of her late grandmother, wistfully recalling the relationship they would have shared. Not to undermine the artist's personal journey for self-identity, but these photos perpetuate stereotypes at best.

Indeed, this is what she witnessed of women in her family, but she also encountered completely different environments in the buzzing metropolises she visited. Since it is an imagined alternate identity, she could have imagined herself at events such as the Aurat March or an integral part of an NGO or simply sipping coffee at a cafe alongside the roles she portrayed. This would have been a more egalitarian representation of women in Pakistan.

Self portrait of an alternate identity if the artist's family didn't migrate to the UK 'Zaibunissa' raises several questions. What audience does the work of a British Asian artist cater to? Who and what dictates these visuals? What is the artist's autonomy and responsibility in producing such works? The Mac tried coaxing Pakistani expats who have been residing in the UK for decades, into the gallery space where they would seldom venture. Undoubtedly, they would find the visuals sweet and nostalgic. However, a more likely audience would be white, possibly an uninformed, white audience that doesn't know South Asians beyond stereotypes. This unimaginative alternate identity series only reinforces those clichés.

As for the second question, for a British Pakistani to make it to this level, they need to be good at their craft as well as have the support of the gallery system, which is primarily composed of white Britons — who then propel the artist to make content through a primarily colonial



lens that fuels pre-existing, Anglicised notions of the East. The feminist author and critic Rebecca Solnit once wrote, "... museums love artists the way taxidermists love deer." She was referring to the categorisation of work and how it limits interpretation of art. It also implies that institutions may lead artists into directions that are determined by their own intellectual and experiential limitations; they frame work to resonate with certain audiences.

Despite their noble intentions of inclusivity, institutions sometimes fall into a pattern of highlighting a version of Pakistan that is only partially true. The responsibility to upend this lies with both the artist as well as curators, who need to direct the content in a way that it starts the

In the recent past, museums and galleries in the United Kingdom have put remarkable effort in facilitating visibility for UK's South Asian minorities. Some of these minorities who arrived in the UK as early as the 1970's, live mostly in isolation from British culture, forming support systems and social networks within their communities that embody the character of the country they left behind.

Often these communities continue to live by norms that were practised in their home country at the time of their migration. However, the second generation of these immigrant families are carving niches for themselves as they assert their hybrid identities. Justifiably, the Midlands Arts Centre (Mac) in Birmingham, which has the largest Pakistani origin population

The grapevine



JOYLAND TO THE WORLD

Pakistani film, Joyland, directed by debut feature filmmaker Saim Sadiq has been selected in Un Certain Regard, a section of the Cannes Film Festival's official selection that runs parallel to the competition for the Palme d'Or. This is significant because it's the first Pakistani movie to receive an official selection at the celebrated event. In 2019, Saim S had won an award for his short Darling at the Venice Film Festival. News is that, like his short, the feature has a trans character at the centre of the story. Congratulations to team Joyland! We hope the film dazzles the viewers at the festival and brings joy to its makers.

GRUMPY IJAZ



What's up with Naumaan Ijaz? His interview of Ayesha Omar on his talk show, in which he grilled the actress about her 'bold shoots' and 'statements' detailing her harassment in her profession, stepped over the line. To be clear, the problem is not in asking questions, but giving his own preconceived opinions — he dismissed her relating her story as unnecessary and done only for bandwagoning — shows that the intent was not to learn but to preach. He needs to sit down, perhaps on his own show, to talk in detail about what his own anger is about. Inviting guests on the programme and putting them on the spot may be one way of getting viewership, but to make them feel uncomfortable is a bit uncalled for.

BALCONY BETROTHAL



On April 13, Bollywood A-listers Ranbir Kapoor and Alia Bhatt got married in Mumbai. The ceremony was attended by the families and friends of the bride and groom. Arguably, the most interesting part of the whole event was the 'spot' where it took place, as Alia B on her In-

stagram wrote, "Today, surrounded by our family and friends, at home in our favourite spot — the balcony we've spent the last five years of our relationship — we got married." Cool. It reminds us of the famous balcony scene from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. So, heartiest congrats to the couple! We wish them a happy life together.

THE COMPLEXION COMPLEX

Nida Yasir is one of those morning show hosts who are often in the news, for a variety of reasons, sometimes not unfunny. Recently, she gave a detailed interview about her professional and private life, in which she revealed that her husband, actor and director Yasir Nawaz, did not want her to do morning gigs out of fear that her work may encroach on her family life. Talking about their pre-marriage meetings, she said he used to be arrogant, adding, "I think he was too proud of his fair complexion." Hmmm... wouldn't that make him the perfect morning show guest, then?



ROYAL THAW



It seems that the tensions between the British royal family and their estranged fearsome twosome, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, are on the wane. Last week, after a gap of two years, the couple visited Queen Elizabeth II, the prince's grandma, in London on their way to the Netherlands to see the Invictus Games. Those in the know say that the meeting was held in a pretty cordial atmosphere and the Queen met Meghan M warmly. Kyunke saas ki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi...

UNTRENDY MOTHER

You would think that Friends star Courtney Cox's daughter, the 17-year-old Coco, would be in awe of her mother. Well, yes and no. Yes, because she loves her. No, because she keeps checking her mum's social media accounts for un-cool things. Apparently, she immediately informs her mother when a certain trend is not in vogue anymore. Talking to a journo about the subject, Courtney C said, "Coco gets really embarrassed by a lot of things I put on Instagram. Sometimes, I'll find something on TikTok and put it on Instagram and she'll say, 'Mom, that is so over.'" Yep, believe her, it's over, friend.



'Ghabrana Nahi Hai' review: A few good moments and plenty to rethink

KARACHI: Neil Gaiman in his assortment of favourite horror stories titled Unnatural Creatures talks about how growing up in a world where the natural history museum existed changed him as an imaginative person. He praises the dinosaurs and the volcanoes he grew up with only to take a step further and make a case for what he likes to call the museum of unnatural history where the mermaids, the elves, the griffins, and every other mythological creature would exist. "I was never surprised that they did not have a phoenix at the display. There is only one phoenix at a time, of course, and while the Natural History Museum was filled with dead things the phoenix is always alive," he writes.

Mythologies may not be true but mythologies live through time and tradition because they are the shorthand of the human psyche; the vivid yet murky space where the imagination expands. Mythologies are 'real' and necessary for any rich tradition of thought and storytelling. The answer to two big questions: Why Pakistani cinema can't compete with Bollywood and why Ghabrana Nahi Hai doesn't work as a holistic offering, may just lie in Gaiman's wisdom; good storytelling comes from a place of rich and textured mythology, not a place where stunted ideas are repeated and retold with renewed vigor and a reimagined sense of morality.

This pattern leads to a risk-free approach to storytelling, an approach that has the familiarity of a folk melody and not the rapture of an epic tale. Simply because the milieu that the film belongs to, or let's even say, aspires to break away from, has never been exposed to, let alone, absorbed, the tremendous range of archetypes a mythological world has to offer. Metaphorically speaking, Pakistani filmmakers are so naturally fixated that there's hardly any room for anything new, anything unnatural on their canvas and in their imagination, even when a brilliantly thought-out film like Ghabrana Nahi Hai is laid out to exactly achieve that.

Saba Qamar's character Zuby in Ghabrana Nahi Hai is set up with the ideal baggage to bring out the worst in her, in order to find the best for herself! Zuby was raised by her parents like a son and while she was quite proud of that, her world falls apart when she finds out her father Chaudhry sb (Sohail Ahmed) has succumbed to the pressures of the land mafia and traded his life for 10 lakh rupees for a plot that he legally owns and is now worth hundreds of mil-

lions. Zuby, who by the way is also a TikToker, can't let this go so easily, so she decides to take it upon herself to get what she truly deserves.

You are exactly thinking what I was thinking, this is the ideal setup for a sinister turn, where the TikToker — a profession notorious for toppling views and governments — will shift gears and trick the world but that doesn't happen at all. Zuby who could have been your perfect trickster turns out to be a rather mellow mix of a damsel in distress and the embodiment of the feminine virtue. We are just afraid to offer flawed characters, scared to even tap into that direction with a conscious effort. Later on, bit by bit, Zuby bows down to everything that is expected of a driven and ambitious lower-middle-class girl, eager for justice and equal treatment.

Similarly, Zahid Ahmed (Sikander), who does a little too much with his eyebrows, at least for the big screen, changes from the ever-so-loyal corrupt policeman of the system into a con-man with zero sense of cause and effect. All it takes is a heartbreak and a monologue about respecting the system? If you are suddenly changing the archetypes associated with the characters then you also need to explain why, and, "it happens this way

in all such films" is not explanation enough. This lack of cohesion at large and the rough gelling of the plot with the romantic subplot also reminds us that the film begins at Zuby's wedding where another baraat arrives to lay their claim. Then we go into Zuby's flashback to explain what actually led to all this but all of a sudden, we see Sikander being established as a corrupt policeman without even meeting Zuby while the flashback was being told from her point of view.

Having commented on a lack of rich mythological tradition and a dearth of storytelling at large, one must acknowledge that Ghabrana Nahi Hai offers one of the most well-directed and powerful performances in the recent history of Pakistani mainstream cinema. Saqib Khan deserves all the credit for layering even the most basic scenes with precise attention to blocking and placement of props, so much so, that the film can be said to have a visual language of its own if not a coherent story. Saba's on-screen energy is infectious and her performance, not just in the loud and furious monologues, but also during the more subtle and subdued scenes, speaks volumes about why she has stayed with us through the hard end of her 30s, irrespective of being in the limelight for controversy



Katrina Kaif takes a trip down memory lane with an adorable throwback snap

Katrina Kaif left her fans in awe as she dropped an adorable throwback picture from her younger days. Taking to Instagram, the Sooryavanshi star treated fans with a picture of herself donning an oversized jacket. "Doing oversized even back then," the Bollywood diva captioned the post. In the photograph, the 38-year-old can be seen feeding two goats as a little girl. Katrina has her hair tied in a ponytail as she wore her denim jacket with ear rings. The actor's

husband Vicky Kaushal could not help gushing over his wife in the picture as he dropped a heart on the photo. Katrina Kaif takes a trip down memory lane with an adorable throwback snap Actors Neha Dhupia and Karishma Kapoor reacted with hearts as the latter wrote in the comment section of the heart melting image, "Love it." "Adorable," Shweta Bachchan expressed her views on the post. Aced film director Farah Khan also dropped a comment, "How lovely is this." —AFP

