

Maula Jatt: The man, the myth, the legend

This reboot of the 1979 cult classic made us wait, but was worth it

There is no one reason we were excited for the Maula Jatt reboot, reimagined by director Bilal Lashari – who also wrote the story, edited the film and directed photography.

On top of the list of reasons to be excited was the fact that Maula Jatt himself is one of Pakistan's most iconic characters, representative of the common man who may not have the resources or education to know better, but learns to do better. This character can almost be the cultural pin dropped onto a 1980's map of the country – or even region. We needed a savior among us, and even if we weren't getting one in real life, Sultan Rahi would have to do.

Over time, Maula Jatt and Noori Natt, the antagonist in the original film and its spin-offs, became pop culture icons. They were over-the-top, loud, exceedingly evil, violent, or both, and hit the jackpot of incredible one-liners penned by Nasir Adeb. Even if you don't speak Punjabi, or care for Pakistani cinema, chances are you've had the lines said to you, seen them on a mug or tee, or said them yourself.

The actors, Sultan Rahi as Maula, and Mustafa Qureshi as Noori played the characters to their heavy-handed best. Qureshi was petrifying as Noori Natt, and Rahi was – well, he was Sultan Rahi: silent, stoic, ready to kill hundreds of men bare-handed, all by himself.

The second reason to anticipate The Legend Of Maula Jatt as a well-made, well-planned film was the fact Bilal Lashari was at the helm of this ship. One of the first career markers for Lashari would have to be 2007's music video for Jal single, 'Sajni', he also worked on 'Hungami Halaat' for Atif Aslam, but if you've seen

both videos (and one of Overload's) you will come away impressed by 'Sajni', simply because of the very dream-like translation of song to video, and the technical planning and skill that went into it.

Thirdly: the cast. While yes, we think that Fawad Khan is the one actor in Pakistan who will be first choice for most big-budget, large-scale productions, he hasn't gotten to his star status on his good looks alone. Over the years, Khan has



Bilal Lashari as the director gave as much prominence to Humaima Malick and Mahira Khan as he possibly could without compromising the focus of the film, which is the enmity between Maula Jatt and Noori Natt. Mukho Jatti may yearn to hear Maula's confession of love, but she is no damsel in distress and can take care of herself. Daaro Natti is actually a whole new level of terrifying, which we can't explore till we examine the Natts. The Natts as portrayed in The Legend Of Maula Jatt are unrelentingly, unapologetically evil. Like, they just don't care whom they are hurting (or hacking to pieces), when they're doing it, or who's watching. If a Natt wants to do away with you, they will.

Our first introduction to the family is through Maakha Natt, played by Gohar Rasheed, and while Rasheed had joked at an interview a few months prior that he never really gets a choice to play anything but villain, it's just that he's so good at it. Maakha does bad to do bad. That's quite simply it. If there is anyone who could match or outmatch his evil, it's his sister Daaro. The way Humaima Malick carries herself as Daaro Natti is incredible. If you had watched her in Bol and thought she was good, wait till you see her villaining her way through TLMJ. The way she walks, the way she gestures, the thoughts that reside in Daaro's head translated to facial expressions, are absurdly beautiful. In fact, if I could, I'd rewatch the scene Daaro makes an entrance a few times to really soak it in. Their father, Jeeva Natt, essayed by Lollywood's all-time favorite villain Shafqat

Cheema, though obviously drunk on power and corrupt, is no match for his progeny, including Noori, who for a while is away from the family fold till he is asked to reenter with a bang.

Speaking of whom, Noori Natt is possibly the most noble of his siblings. He fights fair, he fights with honor, and his hair game is tops. When faced with the mere concept of Maula Jatt, he feels he has finally met a worthy opponent, which for Noori

Natt, is rare.

Which leads us to what makes The Legend of Maula Jatt, legendary.

The chemistry between Maula and Noori, curated by Bilal Lashari, and cultivated by Fawad Khan and Hamza Ali Abbasi is excellent. They spar with words, wits, weapons, and never tire of the dance. Maula Jatt is often good-humored and pleasant if left to his devices, and actually offers amicable solutions before jumping to violence, while Noori Natt extends every courtesy to this rival he admires but is set on defeating. On the Jatt end, we have Faris Shafi as Maula's brother and sidekick Moods, who brings love and laughter where needed. As does Ali Azmat's Gogi, who rounds the village's most successful (and only) carnival. Where



Lashari delivers as expected is the photography and lighting. The art direction and sets are spot on, even when you can tell that just a little portion of a particular area has been utilized to look like the entire fort is inhabited. We've known he has a knack for catching certain light, giving importance to shadows and negative space, and during the film itself you will notice how someone's eyelashes rise and fall, or how a tree casts a certain shape, and know that this is by design, not happy coincidence. The film is edited as sharply as possible, everything rendered to its most beautiful.

The Legend Of Maula Jatt is a visual joy. What Lashari delivers rather unexpectedly is the humor with which he maintains the integrity of traditional Punjabi cinema in Pakistan. The characters move with deliberate exaggeration, the bloodshed reaches traumatic scale, the voices are loud, the symbolism in-your-face. Even the costumes and props are beyond the realm of any reality we know.

This is truly Maula Jatt 2.0. Imagined in this millennium, but preserving what we hold most dear of traditions past. In case this got too poetic, we really do mean that The Legend Of Maula Jatt is as loud, brash, sometimes inappropriate, and unrealistic as any Pakistan Punjabi movie you have ever watched, but it is simply gorgeous, well-designed from the first shot to last, and hits you hard. You might just walk away thinking, what did I just watch and why did I like it so much, but you

The rise and fall of Pakistani drama

Why don't we make dramas like we used to?

Having grown up in the '90s, I have gone through the long history of ground-breaking drama, theatre and music. All the stakeholders, from actors, directors and writers to the audience, saw an elevated performance and viewership in every realm, as the industry raised the bar with every breakthrough. It seemed to set ever higher standards with each new play and great role models for fresh talent. The crème de la crème of the industry brought out the best for the audiences.

The popularity and creative streak allowed us to export these offerings to more than 160 countries worldwide, in more than 45 languages. Pakistan's drama industry was always creative and forward-thinking with meaningful scripts, heart-rending performances, strong dialogues and unbeatable original soundtracks (OSTs). Despite simple costumes, plain outlook and understated makeup, the stories had a strong message. Solid performances by the likes of Bushra Ansari, Behroz Sabzwari, Marina Khan, Shehnaaz Sheikh, Sania Saeed, Nauman Ijaz and Moin Akhtar and many more, brought to life the works of Haseena Moin and Anwar Maqsood.

Why do they not make those dramas any longer? We don't see those powerhouses of presentation in action now. I wonder if we will ever be able to experience again an era of great works flowing from great minds, as we did in our childhoods. Performances like those in Aansoo, Thori Khushi Thora Gham, Khamoshiyan, Mehndi, Dhun Hamari Tumharay Naam Hui, Loose Talk, Tanhaiyan, Aangan Terha, Fifty-Fifty, and Dhoop Kinarey continue to enthrall audiences. One wouldn't expect any mediocrity. The writer and director always got to the heart of the story. There were few digressions. Works of such extraordinary calibre are rare nowadays. What happened to our industry? What happened to the talent? What happened to the music?

One is forced to wonder if economics dictates most of what is being produced nowadays. What we see today in terms of stories, scripts and dialogues is said to be the "demand" of the audiences. Most of it falls in the broad genres of romance, drama, comedy, dramedy or love triangles. But then it is the same Pakistani audience that had admired the works mentioned above. Why is it, then, that we see so much of the saas-bahu played out with mostly mediocre performances? Why is it that the writers are so fixated with run-of-the-mill scripts?

It seems that increased commercialisation has badly affected the industry norms, as writers are trying to write something that could make "good business" instead of cultivating positive ideas. Talking to The News on Sunday, Rasikh Ismail Khan, actor and entrepreneur says, "there were times during the PTV era when scripts were not allowed to incorporate vulgar scenes. Today we see women being slapped. We see men and women cheating in relationships. Every stakeholder, needs to realise the power of

visual content. It always has an impact, and a powerful one at that. The media plays a crucial role in addressing stigmas and reshaping the society. Our responsibility is not limited to entertaining the audiences. We also need to raise awareness by educating the masses through story telling."

Pakistani dramas have been known for relaying some epic depictions of reality. They were not some ordinary amalgam of fictional experiences strung together. They gave a true picture of the social (dis)order drawn from everyday lives. They emphasised storytelling rather than gaudy makeup, endless twists, grand mansions and ostentatious looks. The dramas used to be short and sweet, no more than 20 episodes as the story progressed substantially, instead of dragging on. The story was brought to a close through a structured form, addressing the plot and the issues it raised. I am glad that that hasn't changed. An indefinite number of episodes would risk leaving the audience bored.

Tragically, our entertainment industry in general and the drama industry in particular has fallen for clichéd themes, overarching toxic masculinity and patriarchal culture. The obsession with a villain-ish saas, a nosy nand, a supportive husband, and a victim bahu needs to end. Many of these stories lack originality. It is time to address the real issues that have existed in the society for long and to perpetuate positive change. The stereotypical prejudices and notions need to be challenged. Women's property rights, divorce issues, parenting struggles, unemployment, child abuse and drug use need to be highlighted.

On the questions of OSTs, why do we not get good music now? Where are the likes of Rohail Hyatt, Shoaib Mansoor, Ali Azmat, Waqar Ali and Shafqat Amanat Ali who brought incredible music to us?

Omar Alavi, the entertainment journalist, says, "This has been the problem in any form of art in Pakistan. We do not train replacements. We seem not to have any training grounds to bring forth great talent. Most new talent is either family legacy or happened to land in the field accidentally. We need to build a community of sorts where independent artists can share their work, be it theatre, dance, poetry, screenings, documentaries or drama – where the audience can appreciate and the producers can tap new talent. New talent will eventually take charge of the industry as they move from short scripts to long plays and then feature films. This alone will raise the bar." Only a fraction of the new scripts deals with actual issues and are therefore worth watching. Instead of learning from our past, many of us are trying to push the envelope in uncharted directions. We need more content on current issues and topics that matter. The whole industry requires a shift. Industry influencers must take the lead in a movement to stop socially irresponsible content. This is not impossible. We have done it in the past. We can do it now.



PARTY SEASON: #AboutLastNight: Decemberistan is coming



Decemberistan is a Pakistani phenomenon. It's a winter event attended by 90 percent of the elite in Karachi. The other 10 percent is either lucky enough to be travelling or busy pretending they absolutely do not care if they weren't invited to Popsie's daughter's sundowner.

There is much to love about winter in Karachi. It is festive, it is happening, the air is dry and static, and the city definitely does not sleep at night. But while we love, we also hate. And unfortunately, the hate list is longer than the love list. Top of the list is expats. It's the Christmas holidays, therefore the influx of people who are doing so well abroad. Not complaining, it's always nice to see faces other than the usual ten or 20 in your bubble. The downside though, is that they seem to infiltrate all the usual haunts. One cannot get a table at the beloved Test Kitchen for brunch. The car is usually unavailable because your out-of-town guests have taken the Vigo/Audi/Range Rover (or any other obnoxious Karachi car) to Okra for lunch. Salon appointments are also difficult to get as they are too busy doing Kitty and Lily's roots. Number two on the list are the fake complainers. We always come across the whiners lamenting about the hundred or so places to be at. The hundred events they have memorized and clocked into their brain to just 'have to show face at'. Secretly loving it and thriving on it, wedding season is oxygen. Everyone wants an invite; some will go to great lengths to acquire it, and will travel cities or fly across seas for the big destination wedding.

I love the concept of a shendi, but of course in our country what is a shaadi without a milaad? And then a dholki after that to lighten the mood. A small mayun thrown in can do no harm. And we must have a gaana so all and sundry can blame their buzz on the spiritually hypnotizing effect of the qawwal.

This brings us to our third number on the list; the buzzed. Like the expats, or seven dwarves, they come in various styles. Smelly, Giggly, Shaky, Huggy, Weepy, Confessy, and I-Don't-Have-A-Ridey. Park-

ing lots at the end of late-night parties end up looking like post-apocalyptic zombie horrors with these guys trying to figure out what to do with their existence.

For the ones who survive the night unscathed, there will always be hashtags for #thebestnightever. What's the point of socializing if you cannot publicize it? Phones must always be charged to post Instagram stories worthy of a documentary on the night life bubble in Karachi.

Themed parties, so fun when you see Gen Z dressing up for a Miami Vice party. They will only wear white, maybe if they ever watched the show they would know Tubbs never wore white and always wore a suit and tie. Gatsby parties are another great favorite and a totally acceptable theme for a four-year-old's birthday party. Such a delight to see little girls dressed as '20s sirens.

We are a well-brought-up nation. We must always say salam to aunty XYZ at every function only to be met with impertinent questions or statements targeting a) body type b) relationship status and/or children (if one is lucky/unlucky to be married) c) (if single) reasons why you are single and your fragile heart. It would be a different world if Vigilante Aunties did not exist.

This brings us to our last and final reason to not love party season. Everyone is broke by the end of it. Really didn't think a Maheem Karim dress would be so expensive since everyone and their mother is wearing her at the Winter Ball. In this economy one ends up doing grocery shopping from Delhi Colony since the expats and their riches have emptied out Fresh Basket and Springs. And in the small car.

The Alto set aside for sabzi from the mandi. The horror! "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired," said Nick Carraway in one of the most iconic novels of the early 20th century. December can be a joyous and memorable time for all. But some of us like to view the spectacle without participating too much, and be third-wheelers like Nick and watch the show from front-row seats.