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Seattle bedazzled by "Josh"

Ethan Casey | 3rd April, 2013

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Pakistani film Josh's Seattle screening.—Photo courtesy <https://www.facebook.com/thefilmjosh>

On March 5 in my home city of Seattle, I had the pleasure of being part of the first North American audience to view the fine debut feature by a talented and enterprising Pakistani filmmaker, Iram Parveen Bilal. *Josh* (English title: *Against the Grain*) is the story of Fatima, an elegant and well-bred elite Karachiite who involves herself in village society and politics – thereby endangering herself and others – when she insists on finding out why her beloved maid has gone missing. It's a cross-cultural story but emphatically a domestic Pakistani one, with minimal reference to the world outside Pakistan. This is as it should be, though it renders *Josh*, like other serious Pakistani films, less accessible to Western viewers.

Americans are accustomed to seeing other countries, especially Pakistan, as refractions of our own national worries and self-regarding obsessions. That is our problem, not Pakistan's, and *Josh* serves us well by declining to pander or spoon-feed. It is a very good film, well conceived and executed on a small budget, and the question in my mind as I left the cinema was whether and how it might be possible to shoehorn such a serious piece of Pakistani storytelling into the awareness of some measurable fraction of the millions who know Pakistan only through TV news and Hollywood movies such as *Zero Dark Thirty*. I was very nearly the only *gora* at the Seattle screening.

Fatima is a tender-hearted and perhaps naïve member of Karachi's cosmopolitan elite. She wears sleeveless dresses; she socializes with fashionable young friends in trendy restaurants; her feckless artist boyfriend (not husband) wants to emigrate to America. She could have left well enough alone, but to do so would have been to abandon her servant to a cruel and undeserved fate. By going to the village and raising awkward questions, she not only leaves her own comfort zone but compels others to leave theirs as well. It's dangerous, even potentially explosive stuff, as all good art is. It holds a mirror up to a flawed society and asks its own characters, and by extension its viewers, to try to become better versions of themselves.



This applies, certainly, to the habitually timid villagers in the film and their thuggish local landowner and his gundas. But by definition the Pakistani-American audience members in Seattle and other cities are counterparts of Fatima and her privileged urban friends, and the film addresses them primarily. How can we, who enjoy affluence and freedom of action, intervene in a rustic world of rough injustices that are usually inflicted offscreen? Should we intervene? If we do, how can we avoid inadvertently doing more harm than good? How might we be involved regardless, perhaps without realizing it? Because, make no mistake, we elite city dwellers are involved in the lives and deaths of the poor and vulnerable, whether we like it or not. If Fatima had chosen her own safety by averting her eyes, her involvement in her maid's terrible fate would have been no less. Thus the choice she does make, to enlist her privilege and other resources in the service of justice, is the more courageous and better one, whatever the outcome.

The things Iram Parveen Bilal said during a post-screening discussion with the warmly appreciative Seattle audience suggest her awareness of the importance, as well as the further potential, of what she has achieved with *Josh*. Although she has an undergraduate degree in engineering, she said, "I felt that there are a lot of doctors and engineers in Pakistan, and there are not many storytellers. Everybody makes documentaries about Pakistan. I wanted my **first feature-length film to be from Pakistan**. We

worked with a completely Pakistani cast and crew." She singled out for praise another young Pakistani woman, Nausheen Dadabhoy, who did the film's beautiful cinematography: "She was pretty awesome."

About Fatima, Iram said: "She is ignorant. Everybody's telling her, 'Don't go, don't go.' But in that ignorance is her strength. "No matter how dangerous things are, people who want to do things do them. Most of my positive role models have been very strong women; Pakistani women are very strong. It's about whether you have a conscience or not. Rich or poor. Do you really care about what's going on around you? I think Fatima is blessed to have that."

JOSH is on its North American distribution tour currently prior to an announcement soon for its release in Pakistan. The film is set to hit screens in NYC, DC, Boston, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Chicago, Calgary, Houston, Dallas, Phoenix and Atlanta. For latest updates, please join www.facebook.com/thefilmjosh.

*ETHAN CASEY (www.ethancasey.com) is the author of *Alive and Well in Pakistan: A Human Journey in a Dangerous Time* (2004, to be reprinted next year in an updated 10th-anniversary edition).*

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COMMENTS

 April 5, 2013 4:39 am

D... and S. This film is about the masses as well. They are the main subject. The two extreme classes are shown and the subject of class divide is also discussed. The entire theme is "ittehad main azadi" hai. Would love for you to come watch it when it is released in Pakistan. Thanks for your comments.

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 April 4, 2013 12:23 am

A... hope we'll soon bag a few oscars..Pakistani movies are so much better than the Indian bollywood "tamasha"..

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 April 3, 2013 6:43 pm

T... Mr Casey, I'll check it out.