

A Pakistani-American Tale Upends Expectations Onscreen And In Life

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Iram Parveen Bilal's newest feature, "I'll Meet You There," tells a novel story: A young Pakistani-American woman, Dua (played by Nikita Tewani), wants to pursue a career in dance, a path that would be frowned upon in Pakistan. Instead, her immigrant father, a Chicago police officer named Majeed, encourages her to follow her dream. At the same time, Majeed (Faran Tahir) is ordered to surveil a mosque — essentially to spy on his people, including his father, who has incidentally chosen now to visit from Pakistan.

The film's story lines signal a departure from how Muslims and South Asians have typically been depicted in American cinema: Parents are usually painted as oppressive and rigid. Women are given very little agency. And that's, of course, assuming the exploration of Islam is not immediately linked to terrorism. Bilal's film tells a story about being an American Muslim after the Sept. 11 attacks, an experience that can mean a cultural identity clash on multiple fronts.

Bilal — who was born in the United States but grew up in Nigeria and Pakistan — wrote the script 10 years ago. But she began to raise financing in earnest in the early days of the Trump presidency. His administration's travel ban, which affected immigrants from several Muslim-majority countries and has since been rescinded, horrified her and renewed her desire to present Muslims in a different light onscreen. The movie received largely positive reviews when it was selected for South by Southwest last year (before that festival was canceled because of the pandemic). On Friday, the film was released on major streaming platforms.

"I do think I was just frustrated with the constant oppressed-Muslim-woman situation that is always pushed forward," Bilal, 37, said in a recent phone interview, referring to media portrayals in Western television and film. "And all this sort of fresh but nuanced take is exactly why it has been so incredibly hard to get the film financed. Because that is not necessarily, I found, a narrative that was exciting for investors in the system to really support."

How Bilal entered filmmaking itself is a story of defying norms. When she arrived in the United States from Pakistan in 2000 at 17, she had a bright future virtually guaranteed. After qualifying for the Asian Physics Olympiad — an international physics competition — she received a full scholarship to attend the prestigious California Institute of Technology. She went on to earn an environmental science and engineering degree as well as the opportunity to pursue a stable, potentially lucrative career as a scientist — one that would make her South Asian parents, also scientists, proud.

Many children of South Asian parents will find Bilal's trajectory familiar, except for what happened next. She gave it all up after graduating. On a whim, Bilal opted to become a filmmaker, much to the bafflement of her parents, with whom art was never discussed. It was a profession she knew little about, except that she was sure that at heart she was a storyteller, not a scientist. She has since written and directed several short films and two other features.

In a phone interview, she discussed her shift from science to filmmaking, and “I’ll Meet You There.” Here are edited excerpts:

When you were growing up, were your parents pressuring you to pursue science?

My parents [started] from scratch. Their parents migrated from British India to Pakistan in the Partition and left everything. My father’s father ended up setting up a mechanic and auto workshop, and my mom’s father was a postmaster. For them, education was everything.

How did they react to you leaving science to pursue filmmaking?

They just weren’t sure that I was going to be able to make ends meet. My mother very clearly said filmmakers and people in this industry only succeed based on who they know and how much money they have. And she said, “We don’t know anybody.”

Did your parents disapprove?

My mother definitely disapproved, I think, for a really long time. She’d be sitting with the aunts and everybody would be talking about how their kids went to school and are now pursuing engineering or whatever corporate [job] — and she would just be like, “Yeah, Iram went to Caltech,” and then there would be silence. But now I think she’s understanding it, and they’re proud. It’s also just hard for them to understand what success is. For them, success is an Oscar.

How has your science background informed your filmmaking?

I fundamentally believe that the artist’s mind and the scientist’s mind are very similar because both are bent upon curiosity.

In terms of the father-daughter relationship in the film, did you purposely try to subvert the expectations of what audiences have come to expect of South Asian depictions?

The fact is that there are a lot of fathers out there in the world who are extremely sweet and positive to their daughters, and this exists. Even the grandfather, he’s still a very soft and sweet man. And I was kind of tired of seeing that narrative. I don’t think it was a conscious thing: “Oh OK, here’s that theme, let’s make it kind of the opposite.” I just think it was always another thing that I’ve often struggled with, that I feel that sometimes women have been conditioned to push the patriarchy more.

What impact do you think the film can have today, especially after the Trump presidency?

Anti-Muslim bigotry is very much present; communities of color are having to protect [themselves] even more in terms of surveillance. And the fact that this is a family that is just like yours — [the film can] basically humanize and connect so you don’t think of Muslims as unicorns, but they’re actually just like people you would know, like your neighbors. So we’re just hoping to provide another data point of what it means to be Muslim-American and hopefully create more similarities.

Because at the bottom of all of this, this is a story about a family trying to reconnect. Yes, they happen to be Muslim. But it’s about secrets, it’s about intergenerational trauma, conflict, those things.

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