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Doha film fest's opening film takes a fresh look at extremism

By **Gautaman Bhaskaran/Doha**

India-born Mira Nair, who shot into the limelight with her first feature, Salaam Bombay (yes it was still that, and not Mumbai) in 1988 winning Cannes' prestigious Camera d'Or prize, forays into religious extremism with her latest film, The Reluctant Fundamentalist. The movie, which opened the fourth edition of the Doha Tribeca Film Festival on Saturday, has already had a remarkable run, kick-starting the major Venice Film Festival in August and later travelling to Toronto and London among other cities.

Nair probably loved the fact that The Reluctant Fundamentalist began its Festival journey with Venice, for it was there in 2001 that she won the top Golden Lion Award for her arguably boldest work, Monsoon Wedding, a boisterous look at an Indian wedding where some of the slimiest of skeletons are pulled out of the cupboard. Child abuse had never been dealt with such brazen bluntness in Indian cinema as it was in Monsoon Wedding.

In The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Nair – who divides her time between New Delhi and New York punctuated by visits to Uganda – examines fundamentalism from a new angle. Narrating the story of an exceptionally bright Muslim youth, Changez (played by Riz Ahmed), who lands a Princeton scholarship and a plum position with an equally plum firm as a financial analyst, the movie underlines how his American dream crashes after 9/11.

The America that was so welcoming begins to look at him with suspicion, even hostility. His American girlfriend, Erica (Kate Hudson), trying to grapple with her own personal demons, angers Changez when she in some sort of misplaced ignorance and enthusiasm, paints all the wrong things in her art exhibition. Nair's hero is no mullah, but is pushed onto a reluctant path, particularly after this incident and an earlier one, where he is humiliatingly strip searched at an airport.

A disillusioned Changez packs and leaves for his home in Lahore, but the ghosts of 9/11 chase him there as well. Suspected of having a hand in the kidnapping of a US academic in Pakistan, Changez finds himself playing a cat-and-mouse game with Bobby (Live Schreiber), an American journalist/CIA agent.

It is apparent that Nair's film is a ruthless look at the animosity between the sub-continent and the Western world, although she told me during an interview in Venice that it would be more appropriate to see her work as "a genuine dialogue between the East and the West". Beyond this, The Reluctant Fundamentalist is all about "personal compulsions of my protagonist", and more importantly it takes a fresh look at modern Pakistan "which is so different from what one reads in newspapers".



Director Mira Nair with Doha Film Institute CEO Abdul Azeez al-Khater. The Reluctant Fundamentalist directed by Nair opened the fourth edition of the Doha Tribeca Film Festival on Saturday. The film has already had a remarkable run kick-starting the major Venice Film Festival in August and later travelling to Toronto and London among other cities

Nair, whose father hailed from Lahore, but later settled down in Rourkela (India) as a civil servant, said that although she was raised as almost a Lahori (“We spoke Urdu, we recited Urdu poetry, and we dressed like Muslims...”), she went to Pakistan only six years ago. “I was dazzled by the culture. It was so old, so refined and so different from what you read or heard. I felt like I was in sea of uncles and aunts”.

She said: “I wanted to tell a tale of modern Pakistan”. Later, when she read Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 Booker-shortlisted work, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Nair knew that she had to adapt it to the screen.

“The book was a springboard for me to weave into my movie the story of two men, Bobby and Changez, and their often tense dialogue after the academic is kidnapped,” Nair elaborated. These two men could have been great friends in another time, in another situation. But terrible political machinery builds walls between countries, she claimed, referring to India and Pakistan.

However, she clarified that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was not essentially about India and Pakistan, but about the East and the West. More specifically the work was about America and Pakistan, and the animosity between them that began to grow when George Bush said: “You are with us or you are not with us”. With that single sentence, he caused an enormously deep divide – and much angst.

Shot in Delhi, Lahore, Istanbul, New York and Atlanta, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been scripted as a political thriller. Arguably not Nair’s best shot, it is a little too long with uneven performances (especially Hudson) in a plot that might have lost its appeal with time. Religious extremism may still be a live issue, but 9/11 happened over a decade ago. The narrative is often laborious, and what could have been an intimate story opens up into an unwieldy canvas with far too many characters. The movie thus loses some of its zing.

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