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Cannes Film Festival: Pakistan's Joyland Critiques Age-old Traditions



Saim Sadiq's debut feature, Joyland, does have a lot of freshness as far as performances and settings go.

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GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN

Joyland poster

Joyland, reportedly the first-ever Pakistani work at the Cannes Film Festival, has a huge resemblance to [Bollywood](#) fare, and not surprisingly so. Karachi in Pakistan was the centre of Hindi and Urdu cinema before the Indian subcontinent was divided. Saim Sadiq's debut feature, Joyland, which was part of the 12-day event's Un Certain Regard meant for experimental cinema, does have a lot of freshness as far as performances and settings go. There is a natural ease with which the actors play out their parts, and Lahore's lower middle-class ambiance infuses a touch of lovely authenticity. And it is bold for a Pakistani work that traces a love story between a trans-woman and a married man with a couple of intimate scenes thrown in.

Considered a 'sin', it becomes a path to liberation, which though, comes with a painful heartbreak and a tragic death. Examining the underlying tension in a family, which is firmly entrenched in the laws of patriarchy with an elderly father firmly in the saddle of the household of two sons, their wives, and children, Sadiq (whose 2019 short, Darling, won a prize at Venice), nudges us towards a storm. The clouds get dark and ominous as the scenes flit by.

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A little into Joyland, we do see murmurs of protest and even a streak of defiance that come from the younger daughter-in-law, Mumtaz (Rasti Farooq), who is terribly unhappy at having to quit her beautician's job, when her husband Ali Junejo's Haider lands one. In fact, it is his story that the director places at the centre to lead us into a couple of alleys. His work involves being a background prop to a trans dancer, Biba, essayed by Alina Khan with steely courage fighting a society that is terribly unkind to her. But when Haider begins to respect her and

even love her for what she is, Biba's harsh exterior melts, and hope fills her heart.

The film mocks at age-old traditions; Haider happily plays house-husband taking care of his three little nieces and helping his sister-in-law with chores, including cooking. Sadiq's screenplay gently navigates through these in a complex plot of lies. What emerges is a compelling human drama in which gender roles and narrow thinking are challenged. The walls of Haider's home begin to crumble laying bare family secrets that have remained buried for years. Contrasting this is the sweet and subtle romance (with bits of daring passion) between Bibi and Haider captured in the shadows of the night or the red glow of backstage lighting through the lens of Joe Saade. A melancholic sense of joy is created with long silences.

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Sadiq distracts us now and then with lighter and really novel moments. When the power fails while Mumtaz is getting a bride ready at the parlour, the girls there switch on their mobile phone lights to get the job done. The scene would be repeated during Biba's erotic stage show when members of the audience keep the dancers going by shining their phone torches. There are moments of lyricism as Haider glides through the night on a scooter carrying a giant wooden promotional image of Biba. But beyond these, Joyland is a haunting critique of a punishing social system that refuses to go away.

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