

October 2023

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Recommended Citation

Javed, Salma (2023) "Joyland: A Story of Unquenchable Desires," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 7, Article 18.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss7/18>

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Joyland: A Story of Unquenchable Desires

Reviewed by Salma Javed¹

Film Information

Title: *Joyland*

Director: Saim Sadiq

Country of origin: Pakistan

Year: 2022

Length: 127 Minutes

Original language: Urdu and Punjabi

Genre: Drama

Abstract

Contrary to the title, Saim Sadiq's debut work *Joyland* is about struggling with gender identities and unquenchable desires in a conventional society. This heart-breaking drama of a conservative family belongs to the exceptional kind of cinema that sews craft with content. This poignant tale contains such intrigue that the viewers feel glued to the aching narrative until the very last minutes of the movie. The storyline follows three men protagonists from a damaged family, and four women characters, including a transgender woman. The story takes a turn when Haider, one of the main characters, falls in love with Biba, a transgender woman, causing him to experience significant changes. This review discusses some heart-breaking scenes which make the viewers question who the real villain in Pakistani society might be.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender, Women, Gender discrimination, Oppression, Transgender relationships

Introduction

Joyland is a Pakistani movie directed by Saim Sadiq and acted by Alina Khan, Ali Junejo, Sameer Sohail, Rasti Farooq, Salmaan Peerzada, Sarwat Geelani, and others. Sadiq makes his directorial debut with this brave and passionate movie released in Urdu and Punjabi languages. The film focuses on a patriarchal family in Lahore, Pakistan. Although it takes up a neo-realist approach to the characters' daily lives, the movie often turns so personal that it distresses the audience to another level of frustration. However, *Joyland* itself never judges.

The film tells the story of a damaged family consisting of Rana Sahib and his two sons, Saleem and Haider. Rana Sahib is unhappy that his sons have not given him a male heir, which has caused a rift in the family. Haider, the younger son, is a sensitive house-husband and a feminist, unlike his elder brother who is a domineering personality. Haider has been struggling to find a job for a long-time and is the kind of person who helps his sister-in-law Nucchi with daily household chores and takes care of her kids. Haider's father and elder brother often humiliate him for his willingness to do chores deemed women's work. His wife Mumtaz is not like the usual homemaker; she works in a neighboring beauty parlour and is passionate about her job. Through a friend, Haider finally gets a job at a local theater as a background dancer,

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leading Mumtaz to give up her career to handle the house chores. She must sacrifice her passion for working to stay at home as Nocchi's domestic partner.

In the meantime, Haider meets a trans starlet named Biba, a passionate dancer determined to make a name in the theatre industry, which is usually dominated by female heroines. Though Biba is vulnerable, she has the confidence to take a stand for herself and is powerful enough to resist those who oppose her. Meanwhile, Haider falls in love with Biba and begins a journey of self-discovery. Haider and Biba's scenes on the screen are sensual yet pricked by Mumtaz's unspoken misery. The viewers can sense that Mumtaz's character is silently fighting for emotional, sexual, and narrative space in a movie that focuses on the two other underdogs. Bit by bit, Mumtaz suffers in the film, unnoticed by her spouse, who is preoccupied with his own awakening.

Analysis

Most modern-day Pakistani movies are full of swirling romance, but Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* is a masterpiece that simultaneously features different and daring themes. Patriarchy, belonging, sexuality, identity crisis, social stigma, discrimination, and gender are the varied themes witnessed in this two-hour movie. Every character in the film is socially imperfect; however, there is nothing incorrect about how they feel. The movie received considerable critical acclaim and has won several international awards.

The movie's craft makes the audience notice the complex love between Haider and Biba: the strength and sadness of their love, which Pakistani society will never accept. However, Mumtaz is pushed aside, reflecting the broader prejudice that shapes Pakistani society. Haider has a very friendly relationship with his wife and takes care of her, but this care differs from his love towards Biba.

The women characters in the movie have been penned with rare sensitivity by the filmmakers which is evident when the audience comes across the well-meaning neighbourhood aunty; a widow visiting the house. The viewer notices that the patriarchal nature of Rana Sahib has been passed on to his son Saleem, who objects to the growing proximity between his father and the neighbouring aunty. Saleem's exasperated disapproval of her often stopping by and carrying bowls of delicacies completely breaks her, which throws light on the loneliness and social rejection that a widow experiences in a traditional society. But ultimately, it is Mumtaz's character that made the biggest impression upon this viewer. Mumtaz tries to take matters into her own hands and masturbates but grows embarrassed when caught by a family member. By including this scene of masturbation, the filmmaker suggests the consequences of a lack of love from a partner.

The film shows that Haider, Biba, and Mumtaz are marginalized in their own different ways, and South Asian society forces a kind of hierarchy even upon the downtrodden. The desires of a man steal the spotlight from the desires of a woman. Mumtaz's suicide at the end of the movie leaves a question in the minds of the audience: who is the villain, and who is the victim? It makes us hate the patriarchy a little more than ever. The movie beautifully captures moments of "Joy" in a "Land" full of miseries. The performances by the lead actors are impressive, particularly Ali Junejo's portrayal of Haider, which is both convincing and emotionally charged. In the last scene, Haider visits a seashore, which he had discussed earlier with his wife. He keeps walking in the sea, portraying that he is now submitting himself to the waves.

The sound of the waves is symbolic of the screams of the suppressed section of the society: the women expected to bear a male heir, the widows expected to throw away all the color from their lives, and wives expected to live a domestic life. The supporting cast also delivers strong performances, adding depth to the film's characters and their struggles.

Conclusion

In contrast to the movie's title, the characters follow a life devoid of joy where they conform to be accepted, surrender their passions to measure up to the patriarchy, and suppress their desires in order to fit their society's dictates. The movie's storyline is a powerful and poignant portrayal of the struggles faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan, and the societal pressures and expectations that families face. The director has done an excellent job of building the characters and their relationships, and the film's cinematography captures the beauty and complexity of the story. It depicts the misery and confusion that the characters experience while coping with their circumstances.

Overall, *Joyland* is a thought-provoking and emotionally charged movie that sheds light on the struggles faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan and the societal pressures and expectations faced by families. The film undoubtedly is successful in unmasking sordid and distressing social realities. The film's excellent storytelling, stunning cinematography, and strong performances make it a must-watch for anyone interested in socially relevant cinema. The impeccable delicacy by which the director has exhibited the "what-will-they-say" (*log kya kahenge*²) belief is worth praising. The movie is a character examination of people who conceal themselves in homes situated not only in narrow lanes in Pakistan but around the globe. Art is boundless when it forces you to look at and experience things around you in a way you would not have done earlier. Art is most poignant when it gives you a wake-up call about the revolutions required to improve society.

² "Log kya kahenge" is a Hindi phrase that translates to "What will people say?" in English. It is a concept deeply ingrained in Indian society and culture, reflecting the significance of societal opinions, norms, and expectations in people's lives. In the Indian context, the phrase refers to the fear or concern individuals often have about how their actions, decisions, and choices will be perceived by others in their social circle, community, or society at large. While "log kya kahenge" can have positive aspects, such as encouraging individuals to consider the impact of their actions on their community and family, it can also be a source of stress and restrict personal freedom. It can lead to conformity, suppression of individuality, and even compromise on personal happiness to meet societal expectations.