

Film

Mehreen Jabbar strikes gold with her debut film

'Ramchand Pakistani' stirs souls

It is time to celebrate moviemaking in Pakistan with its 'new wave' cinema. And rightly so, as this tender and poignant film is winning applause hands down at the international film festivals circuits. — Editor

By Deepa Pant

Special to the Arab Times

"A poignant cross-border saga," is the only way you can interpret this film. Bridging divides across the Line of Control (LoC), comes the directorial debut of Mehreen Jabbar, 'Ramchand Pakistani'. The film recently premiered in New York's Tribeca Film Festival and is markedly different from most present-day South Asian cinema.

Director Mehreen Jabbar is the daughter of Javed Jabbar, the former Information Minister of Pakistan, who is a legendary and inspirational figure in the arts and is said to have shaped the advertising industry in Pakistan. Filmmaking seems to be in her DNA.

Javed came up with the idea for this film, based on true events about a father and son who were kept in India after an accidental border crossing.

Javed had the opportunity of meeting the real father and son on whom the film is based in the Thar desert, where he has an NGO that has been working there for over two decades, and subsequently, that was the starting point. The screenplay is effectively written by Mohammad Ahmed, a TV drama writer who has delivered highly acclaimed award-winning plays in the past.

This heart-wrenching film portrays the lives of a family that is at the bottom of a discriminatory religious ladder and an insensitive social system, which is nevertheless tolerant inclusive and pluralist. The irony is compounded by the fact that such a family becomes hostage to the acrimonious relationships between two neighbour-states poised on the brink of war.

A tender and moving film, it revolves around a Pakistani Hindu boy and his father who accidentally cross the border into India from their village in Pakistan at a time of extreme war-like tension between the two countries (June 2002). The two end up spending five years in an Indian prison, caught between the bureaucracy of the prison system in India, while the mother left behind wonders what has happened to them.

Mehreen aptly draws out the inner turmoil, and the silent world of these victims of chance, in this unforgettable movie. She has dealt beautifully and brilliantly with the subject.

"The simplicity of the story drew me in: a family separated for no fault of their own and forcibly put into a situation where they have to deal with circumstances not of their making. With this simple story came layers upon layers of subtext—about relationships, discrimination and the politics of the region—told not in a propagandist way but rather through the eyes of a child and a woman," says Mehreen in the director's statement.

"I have always wanted to work with children because of the rawness and intelligence a good child actor can deliver. A lot of it has to do with being greatly moved and inspired by Iranian cinema and Mira Nair's 'Salaam Bombay', " she further notes.

The main cast includes Nandita Das, a Bollywood actress, and Pakistani actors like Rashid Farooqi, Noman Ijaz, Maria Wasti, Navaid Jabbar and Syed Fazal Hussain. Nandita Das plays the Pakistani mother, Rashid Farooqi, dons the role of Ramchand's father and, Syed Fazal Hussain, plays magnificently Ramchand, the main protagonist. Music for the film is composed by India's Debajyoti Mishra and the singers are Shafiq Amanat Ali Khan and Shubha Mudgal. The film was made at a budget of 60 million Pakistani rupees.

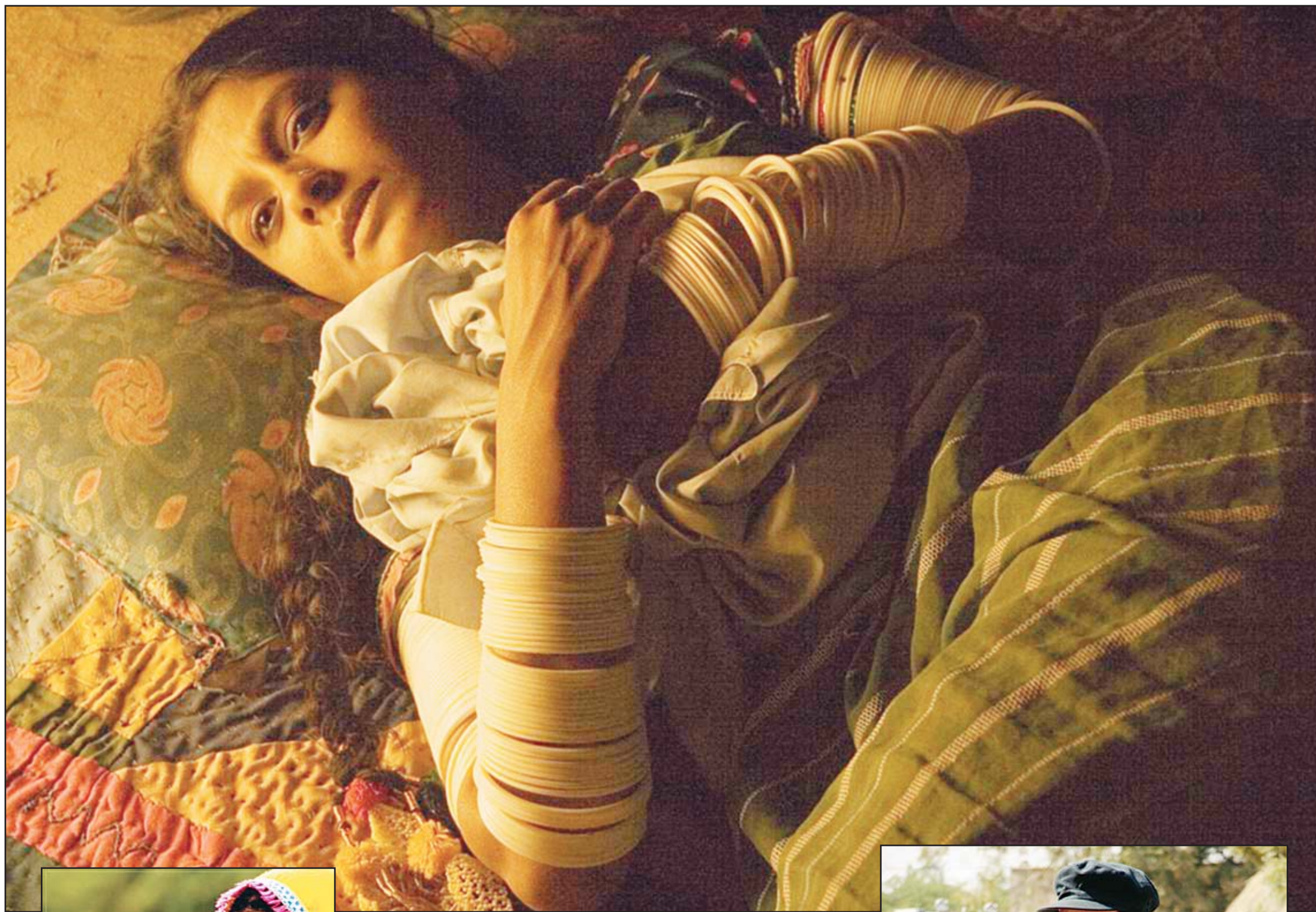
"Every single member of the cast, a hugely talented pool of TV and stage actors, both established and amateurs, contributed with great integrity and hardwork to the entire process from rehearsals to the sometimes grueling shooting timelines."

'Ramchand Pakistani' takes you completely by surprise. Not just by its sheer simplicity of human emotions, but also because it is so flawlessly made, with not a hint of the proverbial absurd politics.

This richly textured film combines arresting images, a stirring camerawork and masterful performances to create an incredible film. With this notable film, Mehreen Jabbar has established herself as a filmmaker with commitment as well as cinematic talent.

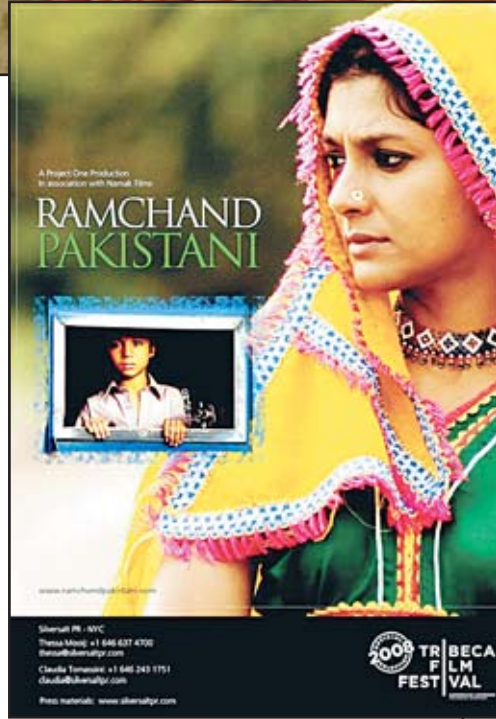
The spectacularly successful film was screened earlier at the 10th Asian's-Cinefan Film Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema and shared the International Federation of Film Critics award with Palestinian film 'Salt of the Sea', Tribeca Film Festival and at the Seattle International Film Festival. The film will also screen at the London Film Festival and the Pusan Film Festival, South Korea in October.

Director: Mehreen Jabbar. **Main Cast:** Nandita Das, Rashid Farooqi, Syed Fazal



Photos courtesy of Mehreen Jabbar

Clockwise from top: Nandita Das as Champa; Pakistani film director Mehreen Jabbar on the set, Syed Fazal Hussain as Ramchand and a poster of 'Ramchand Pakistani' film.



Hussain, Maria Wasti, Noman Ijaz, Navaid Jabbar. **Screenwriter:** Mohammad Ahmed. **Producer:** Javed Jabbar.

Editors: Aseem Sinha, Mehreen Jabbar. **Associate Producer:** Mariam Mukaty. **Director of Photography:** Sofian Khan. **Music:** Debajyoti Mishra. **Singers:** Shubha Mudgal and Shafiq Amanat Ali Khan.

Mehreen Jabbar is a 14-year veteran of the industry, with a prolific career as a Director/Producer of gritty, hard-hitting films for Pakistani Television. Her portfolio ranges from short art films to tele-plays, and is quoted widely as an expert in her field. Mehreen graduated from UCLA in 1993 with a Film, Television and Video certificate, and returned to Pakistan to direct and produce made-for-TV movies and drama series/serials under the banner of Tasveer Productions, almost all of which were critically acclaimed by the Pakistani press. Mehreen has been a member of the National Board of Film Censors in Karachi, a founding member of WAR (War Against Rape), the KaraFilm Festival in Karachi, and has also served as a juror at the Leeds International Film Festival in 2002.. She currently resides in New York City.

Q and A

The Sub-Continent has a voracious appetite for films, however, there is certainly a noticeable shift away from hardcore commercial entertainers to films that ask tough questions and make poignant statements about life in the region today. Such is the

brilliant film 'Ramchand Pakistani,' directed by Mehreen Jabbar. In this exclusive interview with the Arab Times, Mehreen answers questions about her film and much more.

Arab Times: You have started a commendable trend on film making by bringing Indian and Pakistani artists together. How was it working with the Indian artists?

Mehreen Jabbar: It was very effortless working with Indian artists because everyone involved in the film was working as a team whose sole purpose was to put their best efforts into making this film. It was a labor of love almost for all of us and that is the

approach that both the Pakistani and the Indian artists had.

AT: What has your creative journey from 'Nivala' to 'Ramchand Pakistani' been like?

MJ: It's been a very fruitful and inspiring journey. I value all my years that I've spent making TV dramas in Pakistan because I've learnt a lot from that experience and because it gave me a chance to tell so many stories that were close to my heart. Making a film anywhere is a huge endeavor and it had been my dream for a long time. I think I am very lucky that I got the opportunity to make it, mainly because of my parents support and the support of all the people involved in the film, from the investors to the crew and cast.

AT: What inspired you to take up this project?

MJ: For me to want to tell a story is how I feel when I first hear it, and this particular story moved me immediately. There were so many layers to it, with so many interesting characters and yet at the same time, it was a simple tale of a forced separation of a family and how they deal with it.

AT: How long did it take you to complete this film?

MJ: A film is a long process and even now it's not over because we had our first theatrical release in Pakistan on August 1st and then it will be released in India on Oct 2 and we hope for releases in other countries later this year. The script which was written by Mohammad Ahmed was started in May 2006. We shot in early 2007 and the final print or version of the film was complete in Jan 2008.

AT: What was your greatest satisfaction?

MJ: The greatest satisfaction is that it got made!

AT: Do you feel that films can enlighten people and transform society?

MJ: I don't think one film has the power to transform society. It can certainly enlighten people, but most importantly it must be an experience that moves you and evokes emotions. Watching a film is a very sensory experience and every single individual takes something very different from it. That is what makes it so exciting.

AT: How has the audiences responded to the film so far?

MJ: I think it has been received very well.

Audiences in the US, India and Pakistan have seen the film so far and many have responded in very different ways, many in very similar ways.

AT: If you had an unlimited budget, what sort of films would you make?

MJ: I would still make films with stories that get me in the gut. With more money of course, there would be less hassle and more opportunity to spend on facilities, etc.

AT: After such a successful debut, where to from here?

MJ: I am currently working on a TV serial in New York for a Pakistani satellite channel and thinking of ideas for the next film!

AT: Do you have any parting words for young filmmakers who want to follow in your footsteps?

MJ: Keep at it. Be patient. Watch cinema from around the world. And read.

AT: What are your thoughts and wishes for the people of India and Pakistan?

MJ: I wish that the peace process that was started between the two countries stays its course and goes from strength to strength.



Mehreen Jabbar

11:00 pm, at the Mayadeen Shooting Range in Subhan during the Holy month of Ramadan. For details call Manny Cornelio 9633967.

Danny San Juan 9540595, Lambert Bernardo 9681912.

Kuwait Darts and Social League: The Kuwait Darts and Social League, 2007-2008 season, will be starting soon. New players and teams are invited to join. Please contact Stan (tel 4847259) or one of the captains (see website http://kd18.tripod.com) as soon as possible to register your interest.

FPSC announcement: The Filipino Practical Shooting Club announcement. What:

FPSC Sanction Match for PPSA. When: September and October 2008. Where: Mayadeen Shooting Range Complex.

We are inviting our Philippine Practical Shooting Association (PPSA) members and prospective members to join us in this FPSC qualifying sanction match which will be stage in September and October 2008 at the Mayadeen Range Complex.

The Filipino Practical Shooting Club will hold the following 3th Breiting Shooting Championship Cup 2008 (Anwar Al Qathami & Co) in October 2008 at Mayadeen Shooting

Range Complex. We are launching an open competition for the following category: 1. Stage 1 - Air Rifle - Cal. 4.5 (Hunter's Target); 2. Stage 2 - Air Pistol - Cal. 45; 3. Stage 3 - Precision Shooting - Cal. .22 (rifle); 4. Stage 4 - Precision Shooting - Cal. .22LR (pistol); 5. Stage 5 - Precision Shooting - Cal. .40 (pistol); 6. Stage 6 - Kneeling Position - Cal. .22 (Hornet rifle); 7. Stage 7 - Ready & Fire - Cal. 40 (pistol); 8. Stage 8 - Practical/Combat Shooting - Cal. 40 (pistol).

For particulars, please call the following:

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Sports

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Eagles, 6. Starbucks Cafe, 7. Tropang Fahaheel (Pesigan Boy's), 8. Subway, 9. Angel Eyes, 10. Qiblers.

PBLKU commercial league: Philippine Basketball League in Kuwait (PBLKU) is inviting all interested participating teams in this division 5'9 under, inter-company and open unlimited height category. Please be advised that the following division will be a pulling system from the upcoming Commercial League in Kuwait. For more details please call the following 9828622, 7835373 and 9289034.

FAST Ramadan Fun Shoot: Filipino Action Shooting Team (FAST) will hold the Fun Shoots every Tuesday from 8:00 pm to