

Baaji: Real Life to Reel Life



Writer Irfan Ahmed Urfi, based in Islamabad, has many TV and film ventures behind him. Belonging to a family of poets and writers, his poet grandfather Pir Fazal Hussain Gujrati, was subject of Irfan's book 'Funn aur Shakh-siat,' (Art and Person) research based on Pit Sahab's poetry. What followed was 'Paon' Feet - (collection of short stories), and 'Control Room' a fiction in 2017. For an interview session for this review, Urfi recalled "I was fascinated by writers and their biographies. Authors were my role models."

Earning Master in Public Administration, he did work in public sector but his passion was elsewhere-Film and Television. To turn his words into visuals, he was trained by Rahat Kazmi, his wife Saira Kazmi, Iqbal Ansari and Nurul Huda Shah. And then, he appeared with Zip-Bas 'Chup Raho' (Keep Quiet: a controversial subject on sex trade in Business Capital Karachi), 'Nail Polish' and 'Band Kharki Ke Peeche.' (Behind Closed Window).

And now 'Baaji'(Sister). Saqib Malik is a

well-known name all over Pakistan in television and world of advertising. In fact, it is a name to be reckoned with in television commercials. It was now time for Saqib Malik to venture into big screen, his long-time ambition. Young and upcoming writer, 'Suraj Baba', recommended Urfi to Saqib for a film concept. Urfi met Saqib in a cafe over a cup of tea for concept development. This resulted into director and writer getting on the same page. They both wanted 70s and 80s Lahore Film Industry romance on the screen (Urfi dislikes to call this Lollywood saga from the past). As for casting female lead, there was one and only name from producer-director Saqib Malik-Meera. And if Meera did not agree to be in 'Baaji', there was not going to be 'Baaji'. It was simple as that.

Urfi and Saqib were going to narrate the decay and left-behind Lahore film industry and its activities from 70s and 80s, now threatened by flourishing 2019 new film industry in Karachi. Urfi was to develop the screenplay in those lines (of course with artistic, technical,

and above all, financial resources available). Keeping these limitations, Saqib gave carte blanche to Urfi (call it artistic/creative freedom). Urfi had all the space to play around in order to get the best out of his imagination and creative strength. Urfi describes Saqib Malik as intelligent as you can get. Here, Urfi as a TV writer, was experienced and grown up to spread his teleplays into 26 hours. Saqib Malik working with TV commercials, was calculating and squeezing visuals in seconds. How were they going to outreach their expected audiences in two hours and twelve minutes! The combination of two extremes with a stroke of luck (and lots of hard work with imagination) worked well.

Actress Meera who came to limelight in the mid-nineties, had worked, in and out, for almost 25 years, Now, almost, a passe. When Saqib offered her to be 'Baaji', it was lifetime comeback chance (In the words of Mario Puzo's Godfather 'An offer which you cannot refuse'). However, role of an ageing actress, whose prime was behind her, was real life to reel life drama. Saqib was not so sure if Meera was ready for the change. Urfi was hopeful that she had adored the script and would accept the challenge by accepting harsh facts of life (in this case, ageing). The fact is that Meera, using her leftover bits of intelligence and commonsense, grasped the changes around her, and the fact that there were no other producers standing in queue to sign her, and no other screenwriters who would conceive a role like this, agreed to play 'Baaji'. For male lead,

Saqib's younger brother Adnan Malik (now a TV and film actor, in his own capacity) could have been roped in as suggested and recommended by Urfi.

However, Saqib, leaving family connections and all-in-the family nepotism aside, went for other names. The supporting male cast included Osman Khalid Butt, Ali Kazmi, Mohsin Abbas Haider and Nayyar Ejaz (the latter's dialogues were written with Saqib's briefing. Nayyar Ejaz has capacity to deliver lengthy and tricky dialogue). Meera's screen sister Nisho also happens to be an actress here and she too agreed for this senior ageing role. According to Urfi, Nisho has its own aura on screen. As for the second heroine Amna Ilyas, she was earlier cast in Nail Polish scripted by Urfi where she played a struggling young girl in the dog-eat-dog fashion industry. Urfi recommended her for 'Baaji'.

Mehwish Hayat is now a leading name. She too agreed for a brief guest appearance, showing her professional commitment and patience for being cast in a bit role singing 'Gangster guriya'(Gangster Doll). All in all, Saqib's name and status in Karachi film industry had its mark too, notwithstanding his debut venture.

As for commerce, 'Baaji' is reported to have been made at a budget of around six crore. As these lines go to the press, the film has its earnings in the neighbourhood of ten crore plus. The film is still playing nationwide.

(Aijaz Gul is a Member of Fipresci from Islamabad, Pakistan)