

PAKISTANI FILMMAKER CAPTURES HIS HOMELAND

THE MIDDLE EAST from the Inside Out

After a Pakistani woman was gang raped under the orders of her tribal council, she did something unheard of in Southern Punjab. Shunned by her community and ignored by the government, Mukhtaran Mai told her story to journalists and human rights groups until her attackers were brought to justice.

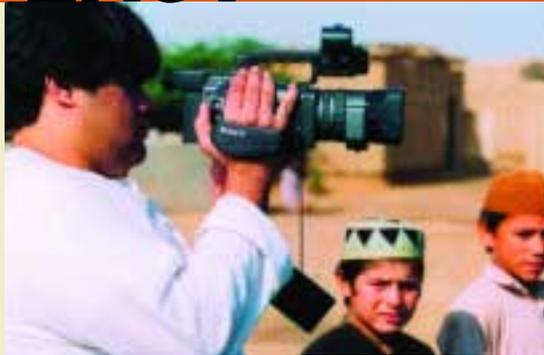
Mai was the victim of an honor punishment, an eye-for-an-eye form of justice in which tribal elders allow a “wronged” family to inflict the same harm that it has endured. Women are most often the victims, and they usually end up disavowed by their family or killed.

Mai’s compelling battle to fight an occurrence of honor punishment is the subject of a new documentary by Mohammed Naqvi, C’01. His film *Shame* tells the story of her transformation from an uneducated peasant woman to an international symbol for women’s rights. It will air later this year on Showtime.

“A lot of the films that I choose are international in scope and somewhat human-rights oriented,” Naqvi says. “What makes Mukhtaran exceptional is the fact that — not only did she fight back — but the six men who raped her were put on death row. It’s made her the Rosa Parks of the 21st century and a national hero in Pakistan.”

In the five years since he graduated, Naqvi has compiled a resume that includes credits as director and producer on several documentaries and independent features. The common thread running through many of his productions is a focus on issues surrounding his home country of Pakistan.

As a child, Naqvi spent considerable time in the United States, including summers and two years of elementary school in New York City. He returned there after graduation and began producing and directing off-Broadway theater in a company he founded. The 9/11 terrorist attacks gave him an opportunity to break into filmmaking. When the news media reported on the Middle East, Naqvi detected a bias in how they treated Islam. “The media had people all over Afghanistan and Pakistan, but because of their cultural background they produced everything from a very Western perspective,” he says.



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He pitched an idea to *The New York Times* for an hour-long documentary examining *madrassas*, Islamic religious schools that are thought to be breeding grounds for terrorists. “The fact that I speak fluent Urdu, that I grew up in Pakistan and that I am a Muslim meant that people were less guarded with me than the Western media,” Naqvi says. The resulting film, *Terror’s Children*, won the Carl Spielvogel Award from the Overseas Press Club of America. The award is given to the best international broadcast reporting that shows a concern for the human condition and has been shown at film festivals around the world.

Among his upcoming projects are finishing a screenplay about honor punishments, which is based on several real-life examples, and finalizing the release of *Big River*, a Japanese-Pakistani-American venture that he produced. “It’s basically a road movie about three strangers traveling through the southwest United States — a Japanese tourist, an American girl, a Phoenician and a Pakistani,” he explains.

Naqvi would like to establish himself as a New York director. In Hollywood, he says, the economics of what will be profitable dictate which films get made, while there is freedom to pursue all kinds of experimental and mainstream projects in Manhattan. “The filmmaking community here in New York is much more well versed and intelligent, so hopefully I’ll continue to choose good projects and build my production company.” ■

—JOSEPH MCLAUGHLIN