[**Negotiating joy and dignity**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1722968/negotiating-joy-and-dignity)

[Usama Khilji](https://www.dawn.com/authors/7248/usama-khilji) Published November 25, 2022 Updated a day ago

The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

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AS if self-censorship in the media and the blocking of websites were not enough, Pakistanis had to yet again rally for their right to view a harmless film in cinemas after it was celebrated and decorated globally at the most prestigious venues a filmmaker can dream of.

Joyland, a film by Pakistani director Saim Sadiq, got [standing ovations](https://www.dawn.com/news/1722636/saim-sadiqs-joyland-nominated-for-best-international-film-at-the-independent-spirit-awards) at Cannes, where it won the Jury prize, as well as at the Toronto International Film Festival.

The large team that worked hard for six years to bring together Joyland was overjoyed when the film was selected as Pakistan’s official submission to the prestigious Oscars. It has been tipped by international publications as a front-runner for the best international film award.

All was joyous in the land of arbitrariness as these wins were celebrated, and the censor boards in Islamabad, Punjab and Sindh cleared it for screening starting Nov 18. Joyland — named after the iconic amusement park in Lahore — was deemed too controversial by a largely irrelevant political party that unsuccessfully appeals to the people’s religious sentiments, as obvious from its single seat in the Senate and National Assembly. Their criticism? The film is promoting ‘homosexuality’ when the film does not mention or allude to it.

In reality, this is deliberate obfuscation of the plight of Pakistan’s khawaja sira community. One of the leads in the film is Alina Khan — a brilliant transgender actress from Lahore, who plays the role of Biba in the film.

A character all too real, she realistically portrays the struggles a khawaja sira faces in Pakistan where, prior to partition, the British Raj managed to relegate the community that was once the keeper of secrets in Mughal courts to the margins of society.

The dignity of subjects in films that are under attack, the dignity of filmmakers, and the dignity of the viewers of the films must be respected.

It is ironic that in the film, Biba faces all the criticism from other characters that detractors wanting to ban the film in Pakistan have hurled at it.

Saim’s ‘crime’ seems to have been to humanise the khawaja sira community and to dare to cast an actual khawaja sira character in the film, rather than a man or woman playing the role of one. The other crime seems to have been not portraying the character of Biba as the butt of jokes but as a breathing functioning complex human being trying to survive in an oppressive society.

But the focus on this discussion is a distraction from the main thesis of the film: a mirror to the moral ambivalence in our society related to gender roles and familial patriarchal pressure, and the violation of dignity out of the loug kya kahay gein (what will people say) fear. The film’s poignancy lies in powerful moments of silence — where so much is said without a word.

So under what law did the information and broadcasting ministry all of a sudden issue a notification banning the release of the film a week in advance? Why was the Central Censor Board’s certificate overruled arbitrarily based on ‘complaints’ from people who had not seen the film?

Why did it take consistent public outcry for the prime minister to take notice and constitute a cabinet committee? Why did this committee refer the film back to the Central Censor Board for a full board review when the board had already certified the film? How could the federal information and broadcasting ministry overrule the certification of the provincial censor boards?

These are critical questions that the ministry, the provincial and central censor boards, and indeed the Prime Minister’s Office, must set a concrete policy for. The release of a film should not play out like a T20 cricket match; each step that a film has to go through should be concretised in policy, without room for arbitrary censorship because of undue pressure.

Is the state so weak that criticism of a film will lead to such banal wastage of taxpayers’ resources just to placate the holders of misinformed ideals? The dignity of subjects in films that are under attack, the dignity of filmmakers, and the dignity of the viewers of the films must be respected and upheld in accordance with the values the Constitution clearly spells out.

It is admirable on the part of the government to stand behind the Transgender Protection Act, 2018, which has also come under fire this year, and to which the agitation against Joyland was connected, as stated privately by some opposing the film.

At least four transgender people have been killed since the vile campaign against the law protecting them was started, and there must be consequences for this hate speech.

At the heart of this is an attempt to completely dehumanise transgender people — a hurtful process that is also responsible for severe mental health issues among them, often leading to suicide in the face of helplessness.

This makes such campaigning criminal, as it puts the life of an already vulnerable community in further danger. The campaign is deliberately attempting to confuse the term ‘transgender’ with ‘homosexuality’ to repel people and encourage transphobia through homophobia.

However, there was a glimmer of hope on Sunday when Pakistan’s first Sindh Moorat March was held in Karachi with participation from khawaja sira community from across Sindh.

They refused to be let down and celebrated their rich indigenous history in South Asia, in solidarity with the ‘zan, zindagi, azadi’ slogan of Iranian protesters. The organisers mobilising the transgender community from different strata of society.

It is time that the state paid heed to the demands of the transgender community who are demanding: criminalisation of hate speech against transgender people; keeping the blood money law out of the murder cases of transpersons; safeguarding the right to self-perceived gender identity; criminalisation of discrimination in housing and property; criminalisation of disowning transgender children by parents and guardians; implementing the existing 0.2 per cent quota for transpersons in employment and education; protection of the Transgender Protection Act and that Sindh pass a bill for the protection of transpeople; including the history of khawaja siras in the curriculum; sensitisation campaigns for respecting khawaja siras; action by Pemra against hate speech against khawaja siras on TV; safe state-backed housing for khawaja siras; and reserved seats in the parliaments for khawaja siras.

*The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.*

**Twitter:** [**@UsamaKhilji**](https://twitter.com/UsamaKhilji)

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