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Pakistani actors are now appearing in Hollywood films

Earlier, most of the Muslim roles went to the Greek guys.

By Laaleen Khan

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ISLAMABAD: There was a time when Hollywood industry types could barely point out Pakistan on a map. Screenwriter, Kamran Pasha, recalls, “Most of the Muslim roles went to the Greek guys.” The need for authenticity became apparent after 9/11, leading to the creation of a Hollywood Bureau for the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) in 2007.

“There’s a curiosity about Islam and a curiosity about who Muslims are — and a lot of the fear that we’re seeing comes from only hearing one story or these constant negative stories,” said Hollywood liaison Deana Nassar. “Most of the time it’s innocent oversight, and they’re very happy to get our take on what they’re doing, to get our feedback.” Aspiring writers were recently invited to attend a Screenwriting Workshop for Film and Television “to really give Muslims an avenue to tell our stories.”

The good news is that Hollywood now seems to be an attainable goal, as demonstrated by the following success stories (none of whom are Greek!):



The dramatic actor: Faran Haroon Tahir, 48.

Tahir was born in LA to Pakistani UCLA alumni and brought up in Lahore. He studied theatre at UC Berkeley and Harvard, leading to an impressive career on *Star Trek*, *Iron Man*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, "Grey's Anatomy", and "Blue Bloods". He can next be seen in *Jinn* (written/directed by Pakistani Ajmal Zaheer Ahmad), *Two Mothers* (with Mahnoor Baloch as the parents of a boy blown up in a US shopping mall), *Ashes* (set in inner-city NY), and the sci-fi TV series, "Warehouse 13". "There are scripts that are written with a certain stereotypical angle, but I think it's not for nefarious reasons, and maybe I can go in, create a dialogue and change a few things on it," he said in 2009.

The screenwriter: Kamran Pasha, 39.

Pasha was born in Karachi and grew up in New York. A writer and co-producer of "Sleeper Cell", "Kings" and other TV dramas, Pasha's interest in retelling history from the Muslim perspective led to the novels, *Mother of the Believers* (the rise of Islam from Hazrat Aisha's viewpoint) and *Shadow of the Swords* (a Crusades-era saga about Saladin the Great and Richard the Lionheart's tussle over Jerusalem, as well as over Miriam, a beautiful Jewess). Pasha's next project is an epic film, *The Voyage of Ibn Battuta*.

The news anchor: Syma Chowdhry, 30.

This well-groomed New Jersey native and Telly award winner has a Pakistani father and an Indian mother. After appearing on *MTV*, the "Rachael Ray Show" and "Law & Order", Chowdhry scored local news anchoring positions but got her big break from CBS as their Detroit anchor, where she currently hosts "First Forecast Mornings".

The comedian: Kumail Nanjiani, 33.

A Karachi Grammar School alum, Nanjiani grew up in Karachi and developed a taste for stand-up comedy while an undergraduate at Grinnell. His success in the indie comedy scene led to a multi-city 'Unpronounceable' tour (sample joke: "Shave the moustache. There's a fine line between Tom Selleck and Saddam Hussein"). He once said, "There are a lot of roles out there that are stereotypical...I made the decision that I wouldn't do a part where I had to put on a thicker accent. It just gets hard for me to distinguish whether something is funny because it's funny or because it's a stereotype." Ironically, his big break came in the form of Pindar Singh, a computer geek with a strong Indian accent, starring on the new legal drama, "Franklin & Bash".

The rom-com starlet: Dilshad Vadsaria, 33.

Karachi-born Vadsaria is ethnically Pakistani, Indian and Portuguese. She plays Rebecca Logan, daughter of a US senator, on the hit TV series "Greek". Vadsaria grew up in Chicago, Virginia, and Philadelphia and attended NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. "I moved around a lot in the States — every state is very different, people are different, the cultures are different. So I became very sensitive to all of that," she said in 2009. Vadsaria currently appears in the comedy caper, *30 Minutes or Less*, with Jesse Eisenberg and Aziz Ansari.

The sitcom star: Iqbal Theba, 47.

This Karachi native has had memorable roles on "Married With Children", "Friends", "Nip/Tuck" and "ER", but it's his iconic characterization of Principal Figgins on the hit musical "Glee" that's made him a household name. He can currently be seen playing a UN Secretary General on *Transformers 2 — Dark of the Moon*, a far cry from his first on-screen stint as a cab driver on "Seinfeld". "As

'brown people' we also have a responsibility to get up and be counted," he said in an interview. "You cannot underestimate the positive impact a friendly brown face can have by appearing in people's living rooms all across the country."

The playwright: Ayad Akhtar, 40.

The son of Pakistani parents, Akhtar grew up in Wisconsin and studied film at Brown and Columbia. His writing/acting credits include *The War Within* (nominated for an Independent Spirit Award) and *Too Big To Fall*. Akhtar addresses Pakistani-American identities in his stage plays, *The Invisible Hand* and *Disgraced*, and his soon-to-be-released debut novel, *American Dervish*.

The character actor: Geoffrey Arend, 33.

The product of a Pakistani mother and Caucasian Jewish father, Arend attended performing arts schools — high school at LaGuardia, Tisch at NYU, and London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. After small parts on *Super Troopers*, *Bubble Boy* and *500 Days of Summer*, the New Yorker got his big break starring as Dr Elliot Gross in the new medical drama series, "Body of Proof".

The soap star: Christel Adnana Mina Khalil, 23.

This LA native is famous for her Daytime Emmy award-nominated career as Lily Winters in the long-running "Young and the Restless" (Y&R). Khalil has a Pakistani father and is a blend of African American, Native American and Caucasian from her mother's side. Childhood acting classes led to parts on "That's So Raven", "Malcolm In The Middle", "W.I.T.C.H.", and "Y&R". "There are a lot of parts I haven't got because they couldn't define my look. 'Oh, you're not black enough, you're not Hispanic enough,'" she said in an interview. "If it's a role within a family, I wouldn't get it because I didn't look enough like the rest of the family. It definitely has affected my career, but not in a good way."

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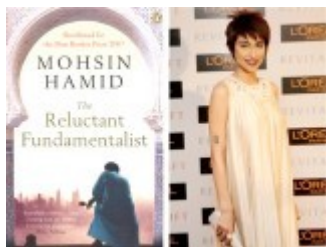
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