

An innovative superheroine: *Burka Avenger*

A CONVERSATION WITH AARON HAROON*

What was the beginning of *Burka Avenger*?

Aaron: I am a musician and over the last 10 years I got more and more involved in directing my own music videos. That gave me the chance to work together with some of the top directors and I step by step learned how to put a story together. When you have a 4- or 3-minute song, each shot has to be thought about because you only have 3 minutes to work with. Then I started thinking: "Let me try to do something on a larger scale." I wanted something which had some relevant social topic and which was



Ill. 1: The school teacher Jiya (left) takes on an alter ego, burka-wearing superheroine Burka Avenger (right), to fight crime

relevant to Pakistan. And around that time in 2010 I read about girls' schools being shut down by extremist elements. That made me angry, like most Pakistanis were angered by it. Pakistan has a very low female literacy rate, in some villages and towns the literacy rate for women is 0%. Many problems in Pakistan such as corruption and terrorism stem from illiteracy. One of the most important issues is education for girls.

So reading a newspaper article was the beginning of *Burka Avenger*?

Aaron: Yes. After reading about the schools shutting down I imagined a school teacher saying: "No, I am not going to let you bad men shut down this school! These girls need education. So go away!" I started imagining this idea in my head and I thought that could make

a very interesting story about a female protagonist who would stand up and be powerful and be strong. And little by little the concept of the superheroine Burka Avenger (Ill. 1) started to develop.

Was it planned as animation from the very beginning?

Aaron: From my music videos I was used to live-action, so I actually thought more in the direction of a movie. I started imagining a live-action movie and I started to think of actresses in Pakistan who could play a different female character. And then I realized that a movie would be maybe one year of my life. And since I would be investing in the project it would probably be very straining on my financial situation. So I decided to start small and I started with an iPhone game app. I got together

with some friends and artists and I told them my idea of a game called *Burka Avenger*: this idea of a female character protecting a girls' school which the bad guys are trying to destroy (Ill. 2). She is throwing books and pencils at them – instead of using guns, because I wanted to be anti-violence. So they drew some really cute little doodles. Then we got in touch with a game programming team and they too didn't think my idea was too crazy. So we moved forward, we developed, we started to work on this.

So it was a game first. What happened then?

Aaron: I realized that a lot of games offer an animated back-story that advertises the game by telling a little story. So I wrote a little story, got in touch with my artist friend and he made a cute storyboard. I also got in touch with some animators. I did sound effects, voice-overs and music in my own recording studio, and the result was a 3-minute animation. It just turned out so amazing. I was blown away when I saw the final results.

How did you feel?

Aaron: It just was fantastic. And I became so excited, I was like: "I can't believe it. I am sitting here in Islamabad in Pakistan. Who would have thought



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Ill. 2: To defeat the villains and protect the children, *Burka Avenger* uses *Takht Kabaddi*, an ancient mystic martial art. In the series, it involves throwing books and pens in conjunction with acrobatic moves

that we could have developed such a high-quality production of animation?" And I started pacing around in the room very excitedly and my heart was beating, saying: "Yes, we can do this or that." Because I had thought that for animation you have to go to Pixar or Disney and that it is very difficult to do. I had no idea about the animation world. So I started putting a plan together and I got in touch with the team members I had been working with. And I said: "How about we plan more than just a 3-minute animation? How about a TV series?" And then we started talking about a TV series. I rented a place, bought the computers, got the team members on board. They were excited to work on this project and the different drawings and works they came up with were absolutely fabulous. So I was like: "If I am going to do this, I have to do this well and I am going to put my heart and soul into this to make sure it turns out really good."

Is there a connection to Malala?

Aaron: Yes and no. The story in one of our episodes is very similar to Malala's. Actually we kept the project a secret for quite a time and just worked on it. Many girls' schools had been shut down so that was a very common occurrence. Episode 1 was about a little girl standing up against the baddies. I wrote this first episode in 2011 when I started working on the game. In October 2012, when we heard about the Malala inci-

dent, where she had been shot in the face by the Taliban, we had done about 7 episodes including episode 1. We were all standing in the office because we thought, "This is just an uncanny coincidence!" And people were saying "Release it. This is your first episode, release it now!" But I thought that people would think we were cashing in on this tragedy that happened to that little girl. I didn't really want to do that. So we finished all episodes and then released the whole season.

Interestingly, another coincidence happened. Our launch date on Geo TV was delayed by the broadcaster by a few months and it happened that very shortly after Malala's UN speech our TV series was released. The public interest exploded. It became a worldwide story. A lot of newspapers, Associated Press, Reuters picked it up. *Burkaavenger.com* got 4 million hits within the first few days.

Let's talk about the creative elements. How did you come up with the character *Burka Avenger*?

Aaron: There are many things that led to that. A few things are based on biographical experience. When I was younger I met a woman wearing a hijab or a burka and I told her: "I am so sorry. Your father or your brother forced you to wear this?" And her answer was: "My father hates me wearing this. This is my identity, this is my choice, this is the symbol of my faith." Well, a good time to realize that I was wrong, that my mind-set was wrong. I realized that a lot of these women are not suppressed. Yes, there are certain parts of the world like in Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan where they are forced

to wear it. But this is not the case in Pakistan.

Another incident was when I read in the Western media how in France the burka and the headscarves were banned in schools. Personally, I thought that was unfair because it is not liberal, it is oppressive in another way. So there were all of these things in my mind and also the fact that the Taliban are trying to hijack this religion of peace. So what if they were confronted with a woman in a burka, how would they react? They won't say: "Take off the burka so that we can see you." It was very interesting and it had many different layers for me. People associate "burka" with somebody who is submissive and who has been oppressed and "avenger" with somebody who is powerful. So when you bring them together it turns the stereotype on its head and makes people think. In this case she, as a school teacher, doesn't wear a burka at her job. She is choosing this outfit as a costume to disguise her identity to be like a superheroine. So it is very interesting bringing different things together.

When did you come up with the name?

Aaron: It was around the time just before I started working on it. Initially I thought of a more aggressive name like "Burka Revenge", that she is that burka woman who is revenging what happened at the girls' school. Then I realized that revenge can have negative connotations. And then I came up with the name "Burka Avenger" – and I couldn't stop smiling.

How did you develop the design of the character *Burka Avenger*?

Aaron: The initial design for the game was more like a loose-fitting burka. But when we decided to do the TV show the main artist I was working with did a few renderings and drawings and he came up with the look of the more tight-fitting burka. And when we saw her we were like "Wow, that is so cool!" It set her apart, it gave her an original look, it made her cool and sneak and superheroish and it gave her the free-

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dom to be up to all her moves (Ill. 3). And then I was developing a back-story for how she has chosen that costume.

How did you get the ideas for the special movements, e.g. the tree-gliding?

Aaron: I was trying to think of cool things she could do and we wanted to make her have less violence involved. So she would have to be very acrobatic and gymnast-like. And the burka can also be a loose costume. I imagined those flying squirrels that jump from tree to tree. I thought it would be really cool if she could glide in that burka, so that is where I got the idea. Initially when we started to animate it we couldn't get her to look good. Because she had this costume and no matter what we did it did not look good and I was like: "Oh my goodness, I have started this production, I have hired all these people, the rest of the animation is fine but her moves look terrible!"

But luckily around that time I hired Taha Iqbal as lead modeler. He was the one who got all her really cool poses and was able to do her moves. I said: "I want her to flip from branch to branch." And when he did the moves I was like: "We are saved, it's working!" Taha Iqbal is a huge fan of superhero cartoons and movies so he got all the very cool poses down. He got it right. We were very lucky. It is just things fall in place like this and so it worked out that way.

What about the ending? You, as the pop star you are, appear in an ani-

mated version of yourself.

Aaron: What happened was I started thinking it would be great to have some of my celebrity friends in each episode in the season. So I was calling up a few of my friends and they were not too enthusiastic about it. So one of my team members suggested: "Let's do a version of you and when they see it they would want to be in it, too." And I was like: "No, don't start with me." And they were: "No, no. We'll start with you." So they did this character of me and when I saw it I said: "That doesn't really look like me. It is very, very muscular, a lot more muscular than me. Broad shoulders ..." And they were like: "What are you talking about? It looks just like you." Well, I was flattered. The great thing about that was that when I showed it to my celebrity friends they were like: "Oh yes, we want to be in your animation. Give me a six-pack. Do me this and give me that." And I was like: "Yah, don't worry about it." So I got a lot of my friends, I got that very famous band Josh and I got one of the biggest stars in South Asia whose name is Ali Zafar. Ali Azmat contributed songs. So I was able to get different people involved.

Did you get any problems with the Taliban?

Aaron: Surprisingly, I didn't get any letters from the Taliban. What happened was that a French TV company came and interviewed me. Then, without telling me, they went to an Islamic scholar who is very conservative. They showed him the cartoon, they filmed it and



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Ill. 3: The character Burka Avenger should be acrobatic and be able to do all possible moves despite her burka. Therefore she was given a tight-fitting burka

they probably thought he was going to issue a fatwa against me. They thought they are going to get it live on TV. So they asked him: "What do you think?" And he was like: "I like it." He said it was very good because they are promoting the burka. That is what he thought. So anyone can look on it like s/he wants. The thing is there is nothing in there that anybody can get offended by. Liberals love it because it is about women's empowerment. And conservatives love it because it is not showing anything negative. If you are an extremist, then it is wrong. Because it is showing the importance of education for girls and it is showing women's empowerment which an extremist would have issues with. But if you are just a conservative there is nothing in there that would be offensive, because for a normal conservative, it is part of their doctrine that education is important. It is written in the Koran that women and men should be educated. But extremists have a different point of view. ■



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Ill. 4: One of Burka Avenger's opponents: the evil magician Baba Bandoon (left)

* Aaron Haroon is a pop singer, composer, musician and producer based in Islamabad, Pakistan. He is the creator and director of the multi-award winning animated TV series Burka Avenger.

