Negotiations of Identities in Seraiki Telefilms

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Abstract

This paper focuses on negotiation of identities in two Seraiki telefilms released in 2009 and 2010. These telefilms are independent productions shot in rural areas of Southern Punjab. They are distributed on DVDs and end up playing in local cinemas in South Punjab even though they are called "telefilms." Both telefilms became popular with their dialogue becoming gag lines of everyday life in Seraiki areas. Owing to its popular reception, this paper looks at characters' understanding of social values of Urdu, English, and Seraiki. These telefilms use non-diegetic music and sound effects from Indians films to create similarities between different narratives. Furthermore, comedy plays a central role in the progression of these narratives and attempts to subvert the popular narratives. In short, these telefilms from peripheral rural areas are trying to show resistance towards larger narratives by incorporating language debates, trans-regionalism, and comedy.

Keywords: Seraiki Telefilms, Southern Punjab, Seraiki Language, Trans-regionalism in South Asia

In Southern Punjab, Seraiki telefilms have been immensely popular for the last decade. *Khottay Sikkay* (dir. Ahsan Faridi, 2009) was the first telefilm to attract the audience's attention through word-of-mouth rather than advertising. It ended up setting the foundation for sequels and prequels. For instance, *Charsi Dhola* (dir. Ahsan Faridi, 2010) follows the story of one of the main characters from *Khottay Sikkay*. It has a different story line but ends dealing with the similar themes, namely class mobility and rural life in contemporary Southern Punjab. It garnered similar appreciation and popularity like its predecessor; and popularity and reception of these two telefilms have been important for initiating similar productions.

Through close reading of selected telefilms, this paper looks at negotiation of national, transnational, and subnational identities. Firstly, it looks at usages of English and Urdu languages to deconstruct their symbolic power in relation with Seraiki. According to Bourdieu, distinction of taste is created by ruling classes to legitimize their rule against which other values are measured. This distinction extends to the linguistic market where defined linguistic practices are considered legitimate (Bourdieu 1991). Through Bourdieu's framework of the linguistic market, this paper looks at different linguistic practices as perpetuated by ruling classes. Secondly, the directors' use of non-diegetic music from Indian films gives these telefilms a trans-regional identity and challenges state hegemony. They are speaking for their unique identity by going beyond geographical boundaries to create a film culture against dominant practices. Thirdly, main characters do not conform to societal standards, their non-conformity is expressed through comedy. In doing so, they attempt to subvert the societal roles, which itself is an act of resistance towards those who have internalized defined values. Bakhtin's carnivalesque, for example, looks at comedy and its criticism of established institutional values. Therefore, this paper is divided into three sections examining social values of languages, trans-regionalism, and carnivalesque to analyze resistance against mass narratives through regional cinema.

History of Seraiki Telefilms

Seraiki has been present on screen through different television shows on the state sponsored PTV (Pakistan Television). Most of these TV shows deal with the problems of rural life in Southern Punjab and their appropriation according to national narratives. In the 1990s, the exoticization of the Seraiki language was present in several television shows as evident in *Alpha Bravo Charlie* (dir. Shoaib Mansoor, 1998). In one particular scene, a soldier is singing Mansoor Malangi's (a Seraiki folk singer) song: *Ik phul motiye da mar k jaga sohniye*. In another scene, a soldier at the base camp turns on the radio and listens to Pathany Khan's rendition of verses of Khawaja Ghulam Farid, who is a symbol of identity of Seraiki people (Rahman 180). In the early 2000s, *Sassi: A Tear of Sand* (dir. M. Usman and Zulfikar Ali, 2002) captured the story of Seraiki people living in the Cholistan Desert. It dealt with themes of honor and love but used Urdu instead of Seraiki as the main language of the people living in these areas. In one of the scene, the female protagonist is eloping with a man and she reiterates, "*Sajawal hamen yahan se bhag jana chahiye, agar mere bhirawon ne pakar liya tou hamen mar daalen ge*" (Sajawal, we should run away from here, if my brothers catch us, they will kill us). She is speaking in Urdu with one Seraiki word in the whole sentence and this pattern is followed in the whole television series.

Seraiki telefilms, on the other hand, are different to previous portrayals of Seraiki language and culture as these are independent productions with hardly any sponsorship from state institutions. Since there is no history of these telefilms, this paper is the first attempt to chronicle the history of Seraiki telefilms. Although "telefilms" in popular understating are films intended for television, telefilms in Southern Punjab are distributed through DVDs on festive occasions, with some even ending up in cinemas. *Khottay Sikkay* was distributed on Eid (a religious festival of Muslims) in 2009 but by February 2010, for example, it was being screened in cinemas in Multan. This paper uses the term "telefilm" as used by respective filmmakers to discuss these narratives.

Rohi Di Rani (dir. Fazal Karim and M. Siddique Ujjan, 2006) was the first major film (it was labelled as a film), such as the ones being discussed in this paper. It was shot in different districts of Sindh (as mentioned in the credits) and Punjab, emphasizing the rural life. It tells the story of a girl living with her parents in Rohi (also known as the Cholistan Desert). Her beloved goes to work in a big city, and she is married off against her will. Her groom dies on the wedding day and she opts for the life of a widow refusing to go back to her parents' home. The feudal lord's son falls in love with her and ends up abducting her, and she is saved by her lover who kills the villain.

Rohi Di Rani borrows a number of tropes from Punjabi Cinema both in style and characterization in the form of close ups, long shots, dance sequences, and feudal lords. Maula Jatt (dir. Yunus Malik, 1977) shows its rebellious protagonist Maula Jatt solving village feuds and defying institutional authorities (Paracha). Despite sharing such similarities, Rohi Di Rani focuses on local identity using Seraiki folk songs with the background of the desert and discusses problems faced by people living in these areas. No other telefilm of that time, including one focusing on the partition of India, had the kind of impact Rohi Di Rani did, which set a benchmark for audiences and filmmakers. Other telefilms also used tropes of Punjabi Cinema as Punjabi films are popular in Southern Punjab. However, the use of the same tropes made these films redundant and limited their reception, and filmmakers ended up rejecting these tropes. Khottay Sikkay, on the other hand, not only set a landmark in terms of success but also introduced new trends for Seraiki telefilms. These telefilms often use the same actors and create a space for self-referentiality between the different narratives. Some of the actors are already popular comedians who perform at wedding ceremonies and have even been used in political campaigns by different politicians.

Additionally, songs which have been used in these telefilms were already popular in Southern Punjab for many years.

The distribution of these films has been through original DVDs, with the production logo of Thar Production Gold (TP Gold), but in the last few years actors have complained about a decline in DVD sales. A lot of these actors do not get paid during the shooting of these films because their pay depends upon the sales of DVDs. At the Seraiki cultural conference in Lahore in 2018, Akram Nizami, one of the leading actors of these telefilms, complained that people do not buy DVDs or watch uploaded versions of these telefilms on YouTube. Instead, they get these movies on their USBs from local shops to watch on their phones and PCs. Since getting these movies on a USB only benefits local stores, these actors and filmmakers have made YouTube channels directly uploading comedy sketches, movies, and shows to protect their work from piracy. Through this they are trying to reach a larger audience and trying to catch up with newer trends in viewership.

Although these telefilms have been popular in Southern Punjab their plot summaries can help in understanding their context. *Khottay Sikkay* is a family drama with an ensemble cast, including some actors already famous comedians through stage performances and who use their real names on screen. It is the story of three brother with big ambitions: Faizu, Shafu and Nizami. Faizu spends his time taking care of his rooster, Dilbar (which literally means "beloved"), to take part in a cockfight. In rural Punjab, cockfighting is still common and and a form of entertainment. Faiz sings songs for Dilar's victory, makes it eat almonds, and directs every conversation to Dilbar's victory. Even his beloved is envious and expresses how lucky Dilbar is, who gets to stay close to him.

Shafu is a wrester and spends his time in the arena. He proudly adds *pehlwan* (wrestler) to his name and makes up stories of his victories in different wrestling competitions. He prepares to compete for *Rustam-e-Pakistan* (a title given to the best wrestler) but ends up losing the first match. Nizami is an addict who is ready to steal anything to buy cigarettes and hash. He is caught while stealing and gets beaten by the mob towards the end of the film. Their sister suddenly falls ill, and the doctor suggest treatments, which would cost a lot of money. She dies and her brothers cry their hearts out, but then she wakes up, and reveals that her death was a plan to reform her family. She does succeed in her plan as everyone pledges to work hard in the future. In a traditional patriarchal setting, honorable men are supposed to work hard and earn for their families.

Charsi Dhola is another iteration of Nizami from Khottay Sikkay in a different rural setting. He is socializing with other addicts and stealing on a bigger scale. He gets married to his cousin, but his marriage becomes a barrier for his addiction as his annoying father-in-law hardly lets him out of the house. Thus, he plans to kill his father-in-law and adds poison in the milk which his father-in-law is supposed to drink. Nizami's wife drinks the milk and dies. Nizami is shocked and dies in grief. These deaths seem unpredictable because the whole narrative preceding them is a comedy. The father-in-law has a monologue about the harm of drugs on a society and so the telefilm ends on a moral message. Nizami's friend happens to be at the death scene, he promises never to do drugs and to work hard in his life.

Social Value of Languages

Both telefilms end on promising notes, but the characters express anxiety over a lot of issues overtly and sometimes in nuanced ways. For instance, symbolic power of languages is being presented by the

characters as Faizu requests Chacha Rahiman, a tea seller, for a cup of tea. The tea seller refuses to comply and complains about his previous debts. Faizu brags about Dilbar's victory in village fair and the winning prize. He promises, "hik dafa Dilbar jit wanjay, ithan hotel na rahsi, 'Cold Drink' likhwaven, cold drink chalsen ithan" (once my Dilbar wins in village cockfighting, we will get 'Cold Drink' written on your tea hotel). In an argument with the same tea seller, Faizu uses the word "water" along with "canal, river, dam, and paani" (literally means water) to win an argument. In another scene, Faizu calls another man "fighter da putr" (son of a fighter) to keep him away from fighting.

Bourdieu asserts that linguistic practices take place in a social market of values. To speak a language like any linguistic is to accept the definition of a language by a political unit. For a unified linguistic market, certain conditions are created for the domination of language(s) (Bourdieu 45). State languages are compulsory on formal occasions and even provide a framework against which all other local languages are measured. State institutions and certain pressure groups reinforce the dominance of these languages (Bourdieu 50).

In Pakistan, English and Urdu are the official and national languages and therefore become the legitimate languages of Pakistan. Urdu and English are vernacular languages of Pakistan and offer economic and social opportunities. Legitimate languages offer symbolic and material profit in *Khottay Sikkay* because Faizu is linking "cold drink" written on a shop with prosperity as it offers symbolic significance. Urdu is another dominant language in Pakistan and holds a different type of symbolic power. In *Khottay Sikkay*, the brothers catch a thief who breaks into their house and put him under a huge basket. People from the neighborhood come to witness this outbreak and demand who really caught the thief. Faizu, taking the credit says, "*kal sawere akhbar ech khabar zarur avey k Faizu kukkur baaz ne chor ko gardun se jhap liya*" (I want this news to be published that Faizu grabbed the thief by neck). Shafu interrupts and claims credit, proudly saying, "*Shafu Pehlwan ne chor wathiye*" (Shafu Pehlwan caught the thief). Faizu and Shafu are mixing Seraiki while speaking Urdu for the newspapers.

One of the supporting characters sits at the tea seller's stall and instigates people by reading from the newspaper. Whenever Faizu is around tea seller's stall, he exclaims, "Oye hoye oye hoye! Badaam phandra sau rupee kilo" (Oh My God! Almonds are 1500 per kilogram). Faizu rebuffs him rejecting the news as almonds are given to roosters to train them for cockfighting. When Nizami is around, he talks about news of police raids to capture addicts and Nizami always gets scared. Urdu is the language of newspapers as implied by the earlier example of Faizu and Shafu mixing Seraiki with Urdu for the newspaper. The man who is reading from the newspaper is exercising the symbolic power of Urdu as no one is able to check the authenticity of the news he narrates. These different usages are not only there for power but also to create humor, giving them a subversive quality.

In Pakistan, Urdu is not only the national language, but also a symbol of Muslim unity (Rahman, 230). It has been the language of proto elite and urban middle class, and General Zia used Urdu along with Islam for Muslim unity during his rule (48). On the other hand, English, as the official language of Pakistan, can be traced back to the colonial era where English became the language of the ruling elite. State language(s) pose a threat to ethnic languages. Seraiki is the language of people living in Southern Punjab and it was called Seraiki to renounce associations of regional dialects (Rahman 1996). Within Pakistan, power struggles are among different languages with a history of regional language movements. In the 1970s, different literary forums were established for the propagation of the Seraiki movement to politicize the issues of economic and cultural underdevelopment in Seraiki speaking areas (180). Many scholars emphasized the division of provinces based on linguistic divides as Seraiki language hardly possesses any material benefit. In *Khottay Sikkay*, characters' understanding of social values of languages shows internalization of larger narratives as Seraiki does not have any other symbolic usage. Seraiki

nationalists have been struggling to establish authority for their own language because it gives them symbolic power which is missing from *Khottay Sikkay*.

Similar articulations of linguistic values can be found in Bollywood films such as *Andaz Apna Apna* (dir. Rajkumar Santoshi, 1992) where Amar, the protagonist, takes a 100 rupee note from his father's drawer. He spends it on a haircut from the Taj Mahal Hotel Saloon while his own father happens to be a barber. In South Asia, saloon is another word for barbershop but offers different connotation as evident in the scene. Amar's father gets shocked, "*Kya? Main 20 logon ke baal bana kar wo paise kamata hun aur tu Taj main ja kar dakhshana de aata hai, aur haircut bhi hui hai teri*" (What? I earn that money from 20 haircuts, and you gave it to the Taj, and it seems that you didn't even have a haircut). Amar replies proudly, "*Paise bhi kharch kiye hain aur baal bhi kataye hain, haircut bhi hai aur pata bhi nahi lagta. It's the latest French cut you see, Lacoupe force de hair*" (I did spend the money, had the haircut even though it does not appear. It's the latest French cut you see, *Lacoupe force de fair*). His father replies mocking him, "*Bari angrezi jhaar raha hai*" (Look who is speaking English!). Amar is using English and French but to his father both are the same. This scene is taking place in his father's shop and the discussion of a saloon contrasts his current position with his aspirations. He ends up selling his father's "ghattiya" (third class) saloon. Amar and Faizu share similar understanding of the symbolic power of English.

Another onscreen similarity is in *Billu* (dir. Priyadarshan, 2009) which is set in a rural area. It follows the journey of Billu who is a *hajjam* (Hindi word for barber) and his only struggle is to make enough for his family. He is rumored to be the friend of a superstar who is shooting a film in a nearby village. So, the whole village starts treating Billu well and unanimously decides to call him "barber." They do so because of his association with a celebrity and offer it as a title even though that title is a literal translation of his profession. The Saloon and Beauty Parlors Association filed a case to have the word "barber" removed from the original title of the film, which was *Billu Barber*, as they found it "insulting and derogatory" ("Barbers' Miffed with Film Title Billu Barber").

Trans-regionalism

Khottay Sikkay and Charsi Dhola also use sound effects and music from Bollywood and Tamil films, and these choices are conscious decisions by filmmakers. Narratives have different mechanisms, in this case music, which guide a viewer's observation (Kaplan 1997). These telefilms are creating similarities from Indian films by using sound effects and music from films like Judwaa (dir. David Dhawan, 1997), Phir Hera Pheri (dir. Neeraj Vora, 2006), and Telugu film Mass (dir. Raghava Lawrence, 2004). In some scenes, sound effects from Indian television shows have been used to create high octane dramatic effects. Trans-regionalism across different film cultures is common, such as the impact of Bollywood on Hausa (a language of Nigeria) viewers. It shows the largely ignored flow of film cultures in globalization and influence of non-western ideologies between third world countries (Larkin 407).

In Pakistan, Indian films have significant influence as the two were the same country before partition in 1947. After 1947, many filmmakers from Bombay and Calcutta migrated to Pakistan, while others moved to India. In Pakistan, the film industry was rebuilding after partition, but Indian films were still in demand. Protesting this, actors and producers from Pakistan called for a ban on Indian films which led to a partial ban in 1952 and a complete ban after the 1965 Indo-Pak war (Shackle). In 2005, Indian movies began to be released in Pakistani cinemas again, but as a result of heightened tensions and deteriorating relations between the neighbors, Indian films have been on and off local screens since 2016, until a complete self-imposed ban in 2019. Yet, even before the return of Indian films to Pakistani cinemas,

audiences were watching Indian movies through pirated copies (Treverton 32). As Islamization in the 1980s led to strict censorship policies and Urdu films became the targets of these changes, regional cinemas went under the radar. People preferred staying home instead of going to the cinema because of the introduction of the VCR in the 1970s, while Punjabi and Pashto films were not considered respectable enough and were labelled as "vulgar." Audiences began to rely on Indian films as their main source of entertainment, and Indian television networks were a major influence on viewership trends in Pakistan.

Regional dubbed versions of Indian films are also common in Pakistan. Pashto versions of Hindi films are available on DVDs and on different streaming sites including YouTube. Sindhi dubbed versions of Hollywood and Bollywood films are also common across different areas of Sindh. Regional cinemas have had more creative freedom than Urdu films as regional censorship policies were not as strict. Regional TV channels have also introduced dubbed version of not only Bollywood movies but also of Hollywood films. For example, Waseeb TV is a Seraiki television channel and Seraiki versions of Indian television shows were telecast over the last few years. In Southern Punjab, Hindi dubbed versions of Tamil and Telugu films have been popular for the last decade. In *Charsi Dhola*, the background music for the girl's appearance is the same as for the female protagonist in Telugu film *Mass*.

Through use of music from Indian films, these telefilms hint towards a film culture which goes beyond geographical boundaries (Harootunian 2012, 7). Filmmakers are not only acknowledging the impact of Indian cinema but also directing audience reaction by creating technical similarities through sound effects. In a film landscape where Urdu stands alone as a marker of the Pakistani identity, films that borrow from across the border subvert ideas of hegemonic integration by transcending regional boundaries. *Main Hoon Shahid Afridi* (dir. Syed Ali Raza Usmani, 2013) is about a cricket team from a small town trying to win a cricket tournament at the national level and the team consists of people from different ethnicities and religions, including a Pathan and a Christian. It was an attempt to mobilize different identities into a single narrative with the help of a protagonist who is returning to cricket after decades. In new Pakistani cinema, newer trends have been acknowledged to bridge gaps between different communities for national integration, but Urdu is still a major tool for integration.

Carnivalesque

Despite the serious moral lessons espoused in these telefilms, both *Khottay Sikkay* and *Charsi Dhola* are comedies. The father in a domestic setting is supposed to be a patriarch but, in these telefilms, the sons have all the authority. In one scene, Nizami makes fun of his father and prays, "*Har kahin de sawere sawere elan sundun, falana mar gaye, falana mar gaye, pata nahi kehra khushnaseeb deh hosi jaddan appne piyu da elan sunsun*" (We wake up every morning to hear random announcements of death, we wait for the lucky day when we will hear about the death of our father). Faizu also reiterates this by saying, "*Rasheed da piyu mar gaya, Majeed da piyu mar gaya, Vassaye da piyu mar gaya, saare mede yar hin, main vich kalha sharminda vadan*" (Rasheed's father died, Majeed's father died, Vasaya's father also died, all are my friends, and I am disappointed because you are still alive). Their father has married a younger woman after the death of their mother, but they constantly make fun of their father and young mother. Faizu calls her "madam" to make fun of the authority she has over their father. In one scene, the three brothers catch their father dancing in the house with his young wife. Nizami says, "*Saakun bahron bhej k ghar amma da mujra krayi baithi*" (Our father sends us out just to make our mother dance). Faizu intervenes by saying, "*Kotha khol beh ghar vich, do chaar paise vi a waisen*" (Open a brothel in this house, that might give material benefit).

Reversal of hierarchies is an important aspect of carnivalesque and for a text to qualify as a carnivalesque, some reversal needs to exist. During carnival, a clown is proclaimed a king while fools are elected as archbishops (Bakhtin 82). Reversal is not only taking place in the father-son relationship but also through gender roles. In a rural setting, female figures are supposed to be subservient to men but that is not the case in these telefilms. Women are the ones pursuing their lovers by meeting them at different places and overtly expressing their desires. In *Charsi Dhola*, the female protagonist tells Nizami that she has been looking around for him only to find him at a place which is full of smell. In *Khottay Sikkay*, Faizu and Nizami are in love with Shamoo and Shaado who is the same girl telling them different names and meeting them at different places. She even admits that she is doing that for the sake of fun. In another scene, Faizu goes to buy vegetables from a vendor. The vendor refuses to give any debt but ends up complying. Faizu looks back and sees her sister smiling towards the vendor who reciprocates by agreeing to give vegetables. Faizu looks confused, mumbles, and leaves without doing anything, although by indulging in flirtation, his sister is going against a narrative of subservience.

In *Charsi Dhola*, the female protagonist dresses as a male police officer to scare Nizami when he is smoking joints with his friends in a buffalo pen. She reveals her identity after bullying Nizami and his friends while Nizami tells his friend "*Iman naal police wala sohna wada he*" (By God, policeman is very handsome). Through these comments, there is a play on normative heterosexuality which reinforces heterosexual norms. The audience is also in on the joke through dramatic irony as they know the real identity of the policeman. Comedy is being emphasized through laugh tracks, but the moment girl's identity is revealed, the background music from *Mass* is again used which is specified for the female protagonist.

In another scene, Nizami's beloved asks him to tell her how he feels about her. So, he closes his eyes to express his feeling to his beloved, but the girl's father arrives and sits down in his daughter's place. Nizami, meanwhile, starts by touching the girl's hands and getting surprised, says, "Masaat a kya, pehle hath koolay honday han, aaj kya vattay padhi wado" (You used to soft hands but looks like you have tied stones with your hands). He starts caressing her body and face and notices the presence of a moustache. His first touch is accompanied by a romantic background score and till his last touch the background sound turns into a laugh track giving audience a clue for subversion. He gets beaten by the girl's father as he tries his best to run away. This scene also gives relative power to the audience as they know the fate of Nizami and this power dynamic adds humor to the scene. Nizami caressing the girl's father plays with the norms of heterosexuality. Both telefilms are shifting gender dynamics pointing towards a new "social image" (Bakhtin 88).

A new social image is also being presented through subtle criticism of religious values which is also part of carnivalesque. Nizami steals from a shop when the shop owner goes to offer his prayers but gets caught. Nizami apologizes, "Ghar alen akhiye saman ghin a, main akhiyam tu namaz te hayen te hali chati vedan baad vich a k khaatey wich likhwa desan" (My family members told me to buy these things from you, but you had gone to offer Namaz. I thought it would be better if I took things myself and payed you afterwards). He uses religion to protect himself at multiple occasions. In another scene, when he is caught making joints, he pretends that he was there to offer his prayers. He gets caught while stealing shoes from the mosque and gets beaten by the mob. He makes fun of people who beat him and proceeds to steal again from mosques. His humorous remarks are backed by laugh tracks, which also suggest the filmmaker's intent to add subversive qualities through these comments.

Carnivalesque provides a limited space which lets abundance of freedom in that space (Robinson). It implies a social change and gives new possibilities which are like a mirage as nothing gets subverted in the end. Characters in these telefilms are conforming to social values as they fail in their adventures and

get nothing. In *Khottay Sikkay*, the brothers and sisters not only accept the authority of their father but also apologize to their stepmother. She also pledges to prove to be like a real mother and the brothers promise to work hard in their lives. Through carnivalesque, they are commenting on gender codes and heterosexuality which have been normalized by state and religious institutions. Subversion is not only through language but technical elements in the form of music, which guide a viewer in finding those ironies.

Conclusion

In these telefilms, Seraiki is a language for informal occasions because English and Urdu are specified for formal ceremonies, and people only know Seraiki which automatically makes their struggle harder in Pakistan where English and Urdu are languages of elite. These stereotypical portrayals are there to create humor as well as to emphasize the loss these people will go through as they must conform to social values. Telefilms makers are incorporating technical elements in the form of music from Indian films, aspiring towards a global identity by crossing regional boundaries. They are also showing those hybrid spaces which, though discouraged by state narratives, have always been present through multiple ways. However, in the conclusion of these telefilms, these characters are ready to start honestly from the lower stratum of the society. They are accepting national narratives and in doing so, parts of their ethnic identity are being subjugated. In *Great Expectations*, Pip lies to Joe about his visit to Miss Havisham's house and confesses the next day. Joe advises him not to lie and tells him that in order to be uncommon, one has to be common. Characters in these telefilms are doing the same as they are not only struggling to be part of a larger narrative but are also discarding parts of their identity which go against state narratives.

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Filmography

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