

# **Pakistan Screen Studies: Widening the Frame**

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*Reel Pakistan* is a result of a conversation that began in the Fall of 2018 between two colleagues, both having recently joined the University. Despite coming from two very different corners of the wide spectrum of Pakistani screen studies, we found common ground in our frustration over the lack of academic work in the field, and the often-monolithic view of film and television in the country. Through our discussions on cinema, for instance, we came to the realization that there is no singular cinema in Pakistan, no demise or revival and no replacement of one group of artists by another. Instead we suggest that there are multiple Pakistani cinemas, all of which have their own unique practices and characteristics. In this way, *Reel Pakistan* was a selfish endeavor on our part, and fed into our desire to produce, encourage and disseminate diverse and quality research in screen studies and to build a community of fellow scholars.

From that conversation, we developed a research seminar course in screen studies, culminating in the Screen Studies Symposium where students present the research they have been working on over the term. Our first two batches comprised of juniors and seniors and a few sophomores, many of whom had never taken a film or media class before. In the first few weeks, we pushed them into uncharted territory, asking them to question everything they think they knew and believed about film and television, and challenged them to step out of their comfort zone; ultimately they exceeded our expectations. We are very proud of what they have produced, and of the recognition they have received when presenting their work. However, while their work speaks for itself, what you do not see, and what we would like to pay tribute to, is everything that goes on behind the scenes. Within these pages lie hours of research, hundreds of drafts, daunting to do lists, tears, breakdowns, joy and most importantly, at the heart of it, a commitment to produce work of quality, to engage with current global debates, highlight forgotten local heroes and bring Pakistani screen studies to the forefront. Our students have done just that.

One of the remarkable interventions made by these papers is their attention to the theme of gender. The ways the female body is presented on Pakistani screens have been productively analyzed by Esra Faisal Khan, Syeda Nida Hasan, Ayesha Mahboob and Sheherzade Noor Peerzada, whose work spans documentary films, Pashto cinema of the 90s, pre-Partition films and Urdu cinema of the 60s. Kulsoom Din Malik, Alina Pasha, Sheherzade Noor Peerzada, and Azka Syed also examine closely the contradictions in the ways women are characterized and their narratives are translated to film. Attention has also been paid to masculinity, notably in Aqeel Ahmad's exploration of Seraiki telefilms and in Zoha Batool Khan's discussion of cinematic depictions of the conflict in Kashmir. Finally, Minahill Khan explores cinematic representations of khwaja sira, probing Pakistani cinema's often problematic depictions of gender nonconforming people. While it is not surprising that gender would be a major theme of our students' work, we marvel at the breadth of texts under investigation and the nuance of their approaches.

Another key theme that has developed over the first two seminars is that of the nation; several of the papers ask how films deal with national identity and related questions of state, citizenship, and ethnicity. Essays by Kanza Hussan and Zoha Batool Khan explore the articulations of militarism and violence in both Pakistani and Indian cinemas, confronting questions of terrorism, Islamism, and nationalism in action and war films from both countries. Papers by Mohammad Azeem and Kulsoom Din Malik look at questions of citizenship and state, modernity and identity in unexpected places: romantic dramas and animated films. Aqeel Ahmad and Zohra Aslam highlight how ethnolinguistic tensions—specifically relating to Seraiki and Punjabi identity formations within the Pakistani state—are articulated, promoted, and questioned in films.

Finally, we believe this set of papers contributes a great deal to the literature on Pakistani screen cultures via its engagement with film production and reception. Abeeha Aamir Butt's interview data reveal surprising insights into the changes in cinema-going practices in Lahore over time and across class and gender boundaries, which complicates received notions of Pakistani cinema's historic trajectory. Esra Faisal Khan addresses not just the narratives of Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy's documentaries, but also touches upon the ways they are received by various audiences and the impacts they have had in the shaping of laws and policies around gender-based violence. Aiza Hussain puts a sensitive ethnographic lens on media viewing practices in informal settlements in Lahore, underscoring relationships between technology, infrastructure, precarity, and inequality in a rapidly growing city. Lastly, Zuraiz ur Rehman Niazi and Iman Nadeem Zoqi both worked closely with filmmakers themselves in their research, the former looking into the technoaesthetic history of Pakistani cinema—specifically how color film technologies came to be introduced in the 1960s—and the latter into questions of gender disparities in film production, and the struggles female filmmakers and technicians face even as women take on leadership roles in New Pakistani Cinema.

Though the articles are now ready (and their grades submitted), we hope that this is only the beginning for our young scholars. It is most definitely only the beginning for *Reel Pakistan*. Over time, we hope to encourage not just our students, but people from all over the country and beyond who are interested in Pakistani cinemas and television, and the multitude of topics and possibilities that exist, encompassing languages, regions, genres and the other arts, to share their work with us on this platform. At the same time, we also hope to encourage a variety of activities open to the larger community under our banner of the screen studies forum through our symposium, the film and speaker series, *Picture Ghar*, and our annual short film competition, which debuted in 2019.

None of this, however, would have been possible without the guidance, encouragement, and support of an entire host of people. The Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies' stream leader, Maryam Wasif Khan, has provided valuable feedback and unquestioning support not only in realizing this project but from the early days when we were brainstorming our seminar and planning our very first symposium of students' work. Our colleagues Ali Khan, Bilal Tanweer, Nida Kirmani, Zahid Hussain, Furrukh Khan, Kamran Ali, Abdul Aijaz, Saba Pirzada, Shayan Rajani, Hasan Karrar, Ali Raza, and Ali Usman Qasmi have contributed to the development of this journal through their encouragement and participation in our first and second symposia, which meant a great deal not only to us but also to our students. Aroosa Subhani, our stream coordinator,

has helped in nearly every way imaginable from graphic design to event management, handling all of our strange last-minute requests with a smile and a calm “*ho jayega.*” Ayesha Ahsan also made invaluable contributions over many long hours of sending emails and fixing references, and she and Azka Syed have assisted us immeasurably through their tireless work as our teaching assistants. Finally, any journal is just an empty vessel, a blank canvas, a dark screen. More than any effort of ours, it is the months of hard work by our students—their passion, enthusiasm, and curiosity—that has brought this project into being, and we want to thank them most of all.

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