

Screening Lesbian Relationships in Muslim Contexts Across the Global South

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the visual representation and narrative trajectory of female same-sex relationships on Pakistani screens, particularly in light of two recent screen texts: an episode called *Chewing Gum* (dir. Angeline Malik, 2017) from the Hum TV anthology series *Kitni Girhain Baaki Hain/How Many Knots Are Left to Untie*, and the web series *Churails/Witches* (dir. Asim Abbasi, 2020). It also engages with two other screen texts from the Global South that deal with lesbian representation: *Dedh Ishqiya/One and a Half Passionate* (dir. Abhishek Chaubey, 2014), a Bollywood film and *Sukkar Banat/Caramel* (dir. Nadine Labaki, 2007), a Lebanese film. By employing a comparative lens, this paper draws parallels between these screen texts as they are all set in predominantly Muslim contexts, that is, the location of the screen text is that of a Muslim-majority country (like Pakistan in the case of *Churails*), or the cultural setting of the screen text is based on Muslim or Islamic practices, historical traditions, or values (like the culture of Urdu poetry in the case of *Dedh Ishqiya*). They are also all heavily coded in their depiction of female same-sex relationships. This approach brings to light the ways in which Pakistani lesbian screen texts can be understood, given the lack of research regarding this subject from a Pakistani viewpoint. The selected screen texts employ subtle visual cues and coded elements to represent lesbian relationships. A closer examination finds that the line between homosexuality (romantic and/or sexual same-sex relationships) and homosociality (platonic same-sex relationships) becomes blurred in these texts. Finally, this paper argues that narratives which naturalize and normalize lesbianism by allowing it to co-exist within a fictional world without disruption to the main plot are just as empowering as those that radicalize lesbian relationships to actively disrupt patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Pakistani Cinema, Lebanese Cinema, Bollywood, Global South, Lesbian Cinema, Queer Film Studies, Homosociality, Homosexuality

Lighting: Darkness as an Opportunity to ‘Fill in the Gaps’

The manipulation of lighting plays a pivotal role in the construction of a romantic relationship between lesbian characters. In *Caramel*, Rima is a lesbian who works at a salon in Beirut where she shampoos the hair of a new customer, Siham, who quickly becomes a regular. The

shampooing station is a separate room in the salon, which gives them the opportunity to be alone. Due to power outages, the light often goes out when Rima is shampooing Siham's hair, but they enjoy this fact. This is evident in Rima's noticeable annoyance at the sound of her name being called as she is asked to turn on the generator. She does not want to leave the room; it would be an interruption of the intimacy they share in that moment of darkness, even if all they are doing is looking at each other's dimly lit faces. Darkness is something that forces them to focus on the things they cannot see physically: their feelings. There is a moment of mutual awareness of these unsaid feelings in these fragments of darkness.

Shadows are also employed in *Dedh Ishqiya* to hint at physical intimacy between the lesbian protagonists, Begum Para, the recently widowed wife of the Nawab (viceroy) of Mahmudabad, and Munniya, Para's handmaiden. In a scene where the two women are laughing together, the camera focuses on their shadows cast on a wall. The two shadow figures are standing at first, and then move closer until they fuse into one shadow when they hug. The fused shadow continues to move, which can be suggestive of a number of scenarios: they are hugging, they are kissing, they are simply embracing each other, and so on. The use of lighting thus creates a space of darkness where "lesbian viewers can imagine more erotic and heated scenes than the censored ones; their imagination and fantasy can fill in the gaps" (Balaa 444). In fact, sometimes cutting out explicit scenes leads to "blatant sexual symbolism or coy suggestiveness, often more vulgar than explicitness" (qtd. in Dickey). Sexual intimacy, then, does not have to be explicit and the use of shadows can help build suspense about what may be present (Bordwell and Thompson 125), as it creates an exhilarating aura of mystery.

In a similar fashion, darkness operates as a safe space for Pinky and Babli, the lesbian couple in *Churails*. They talk about their relationship briefly in a dimly lit scene where they sit in a car with three other women as part of a stakeout; the women plan to infiltrate the residence of a man that abuses his wife. The scene is shot at night, and the car is like a closed-off island where the couple feels secure enough to openly discuss their relationship (more on this in section 4). In another scene where the couple shares an intimate moment, Pinky embraces Babli in an attempt to comfort her. Again, very little light is used in this scene, creating a feeling of obscurity and thus, security.

The Butch vs. Femme Lesbian

Given that "contemporary queer theory is a distinct Western phenomenon, ... LGBTQ identities in Pakistan can only be seen in neocolonial epistemic frames" (Masood and Alam 145) and thus need to be actively constructed through a Pakistani lens. *Chewing Gum* and *Churails* successfully execute this in their depiction of lesbian characters that do not look, in the Western sense, stereotypically lesbian. According to the Western narrative, which is the dominant narrative, lesbians have analogously looked to identify with gay men (on the grounds that they are also attracted to the same sex) or with straight men (on the grounds that they are also 'masculine' or also desire women) (Sedgwick 89). In other words, lesbians identify with men.

This creates a visually distinctive butch lesbian characterized by short hair, men's clothes, and masculine body language or mannerisms.

However, Pinky and Babli in *Churails* do not stand out as such; there is nothing queer, different, or delinquent about them, at least in relation to the existing stereotypes about what 'queer' women should look like. As feminine lesbians that wear regular traditional Pakistani clothing like dupattas and shalwar kameez, they are anomalies because they go against stereotypes of homosexuality in the Pakistani cultural imaginary, and thus are hard to recognize as queer (Masood and Alam 141). Likewise, Sanam from *Chewing Gum* is difficult to pinpoint as a lesbian because she does not wear culturally provocative clothes (that is, anything particularly revealing), her makeup is minimal and neutral in color, and she is very hospitable and soft-spoken—all features of the "Urdu-speaking humble housewife of a Pakistani home" (Masood and Alam 141). These characters do not carry the culturally defined Western lesbian look, as it does not necessarily apply to a Pakistani context.

This then contradicts the stereotype that a lesbian must look or act a certain way in order to be perceived as a lesbian. It specifically contradicts the Western butch lesbian stereotype and creates space for alternative and nuanced depictions of the Pakistani lesbian. This has the potential to be empowering in that it takes pressure off of the Pakistani lesbian community to act or dress in a certain way in order to be perceived as a 'legitimate' lesbian. It also reflects a sizeable portion of the community that do not necessarily conform to stereotypical notions of how lesbians ought to look or behave. This may be because they simply do not feel the need to perform their sexuality through dress, appearance, or comportment, but it could also be because conforming to norms of heterosexual femininity in clothes and behavior can protect them in a context where an admission of homosexuality could put them in real physical danger. The latter is perceived and implied in these screen texts as well, where the subtlety and suggestiveness itself of the lesbian relationships is a direct result of the fear of being 'outed'. The taboo that exists around homosexuality, as well as the religious condemnation surrounding it, means that it is safer to keep it hidden. Strangely enough, however, for lesbians in Pakistan, cultural norms may aid rather than suppress these relationships.

Homosociality vs. Homosexuality

The distinction between homosociality and homosexuality is fairly recent, as it did not really exist in Muslim cultures historically, especially in periods before colonization. Colonial rule impacted the way that sexuality was viewed in South Asia because the European tendency to label homosexual acts as unnatural and obscene led to the gradual criminalization of homosexuality. Europeans had not always treated sexuality with disgust; seventeenth century Europeans were fairly open and lax about sex, and sexual practices had little need for secrecy. It was the eighteenth century that saw a shift as the Victorian bourgeoisie moved sex into the home, where it was reduced to the serious function of reproduction (Foucault 3). Silence, condemnation, disgust, shame, and concealment overtook the subject of sex and sexuality. This attitude seeped into other cultures of countries that European travelers visited and wrote about. In Qajar Iran (1785-1925), for instance, *amradparasti* was fairly common among adult men and

adolescent males. Amradparasti refers to the practice of desiring or gazing at *amrads*, who were young males that did not yet have a full beard (Najmabadi 15); they were the objects of desire of adult men. But Europeans saw these practices as a vice and reported them with disgust. As an English traveler named Thomas Herbert observed: “these Paederasts ... affect those painted, antick roab’d Youths or Catamites in a Sodomitic way...; *a vice so detestable, so damnable, so unnaturall* as forces hell to shew its ugliness before its season” (qtd. in Najmabadi 34; emphasis added). A distinction then had to be made between homosexuality and homosociality when Iranians tried to explain to European visitors that “men holding hands, embracing, and kissing each other in public, were not [necessarily homosexual]: the Europeans were misreading homosociality for homosexuality” (Najmabadi 38). While homosociality was devoid of sexuality or erotism, homosexuality comprised of both sexuality or erotism as well as homosocial conduct. This meant that a homosocial act like a kiss on the cheek could be read either as platonic or as romantic or sexual attraction. Of course, only the people involved in the act or the relationship are aware of what it truly means, but to any outsiders or viewers, meanings can vary. Thus, the ambiguity is what lends it power, and this ambiguity is utilized in the screen texts as well.

In Gayatri Gopinath’s analysis of the queer Indian film *Fire* (dir. Deepta Mehta, 1996), she describes two scenes where the lesbian protagonists, Radha and Sita, take advantage of the wavering divide between homosociality and homosexuality. In the first scene, Radha and Sita are giving each other a foot massage at a public park during a family picnic, “transforming a daily female homosocial activity into an intensely homoerotic one while the other family members unwittingly look on” (Gopinath 153). In the second scene, Radha oils Sita’s hair, and there is apparent arousal as the women take advantage of the slippages between homosociality and homoeroticism. Similarly, in the shampooing scenes of *Caramel*, the sexual tension between Rima and Siham is evident but simultaneously subtle to a lot of viewers. As one scholar writes:

Based on my discussions with my students and fellow colleagues, as well as watching the film with a live audience, not every viewer notices the lesbian connotations. A girl behind me at the movie theater exclaimed: ‘Why does she keep getting her hair washed?’ (Balaa 444)

In the Hum TV episode *Chewing Gum*, Qandeel is a woman who performs heterosexuality by seducing Mansoor, the husband of Sanam, in order to dismantle their marriage and claim Sanam, the woman she really wants. As in *Fire*, there are multiple scenes in the episode where Qandeel and Sanam engage in coded friendly activities such as cutting fruit together while reminiscing on school memories or painting each other’s toenails. On the outside, there is not much to be suspicious of, but the personal pleasure that they receive from such gestures cannot be denied, as is made evident through visual elements such as prolonged eye contact. Thus, even as Mansoor observes the two women, he is largely unaware of the homoerotic aspect of their relationship up until the end of the episode where Sanam reveals to him in a letter that she has chosen a romantic relationship with Qandeel over one with him. It is even more difficult for him to catch on to it given that Qandeel has convinced him that she is sexually interested in him, and not Sanam. Depending on the viewer, the lesbian connotations are either obvious or obscure. The subtlety and denial of explicitness is what allows filmmakers, writers and content creators to include scenes related to culturally taboo topics.

Female homosociality in Muslim cultures is something that is normally encouraged, partly because the interaction between men and women is discouraged, and partly because it promotes platonic bonds between females like sisterhood and friendship. The *zanaana*, for instance, is a place where closeness between women transpires. *Zanaana* refers to that part of the household that is boxed off, separated, or reserved for the women of the household. Since it was a space for women to visit each other on auspicious occasions, exchange food during festivals, socialize and chat (Kothari 292), an atmosphere of comfort and intimacy between females was created in the *zanaana* quarters. Although separate *zanaana* quarters no longer exist in most urban Pakistani homes, because of the long *zanaana* tradition women still often prefer to do activities with each other rather than with men (Kothari 292-293). Similarly, the bond of the *sakhi*, the North Indian platonic female bond of sisterhood, is a cultural custom that still shapes the way women form relationships with each other today. It is a bond that sometimes echoes the characteristics of a marital bond; the *sakhi* relationship is considered unique, deeply intimate, and entailing specific rules and obligations (Pintchman 57).

The movie *Dedh Ishqiya* is set in an environment and culture centered around Urdu poetry; Begum Para is searching for a new husband who must be a poet. She hosts a *mushaira* (traditional poetry recital) where the best poet will become her husband and the new Nawab of Mahmudabad. Munniya supports her in this venture and actively helps her in seeking out her new husband. It is revealed that this is simply a ploy in a bigger plan to run away with Para, as Munniya and Para are revealed to be lovers. Even though it is never explicitly stated that Munniya and Para in *Dedh Ishqiya* have tied the *sakhi* bond—that is, the bond is sealed through a ritualistic practice of exchanging food and taking an oath in the presence of a deity (Pintchman 58)—their relationship is still reflective of the characteristics of that bond. “The bond between *sakhis* is a sisterly, and often jealousy-ridden one” (Giles 9). The sisterly characteristic comes through as Munniya and Begum Para perform a common Punjabi dance move called *kikkli*, where they join hands together by crisscrossing their arms and spinning around in circles. In this scene, we see the two women enjoying the dance, happy to be in each other’s company.

There are also many scenes where Munniya comforts Para in times of emotional distress, by rubbing her hand on Para’s arm or kissing her on her forehead. This can be read as the sisterly bond of the *sakhi*, or it can insinuate romantic attraction. Likewise, in *Churails*, intimacy comes in the form of comfort. After a devastating incident in which Babli’s face is burned in a fire, Pinky attempts to comfort her by embracing her and as the scene proceeds, we see Babli eventually calm down and yield to her lover’s touch. Comforting someone in this way is not unique to and does not always suggest a queer relationship, but given that the audience is made aware of Pinky and Babli’s relationship before this scene, it contextualizes the physical intimacy between them. This can be contrasted to Munniya and Para’s intimate moments (before they are revealed to be lovers) which are more homoambiguous because the viewer is left wondering whether the physical gestures mean something more.

The tone of jealousy of the *sakhi* bond is apparent in a scene of *Dedh Ishqiya* where Para sits under a tree in the arms of her potential poet husband, Khalujaan, and Munniya watches them from a distance with an expression of joy that slowly turns into hurt. Munniya knows that Para is only being intimate with him as part of their plan, but she still feels jealous watching Para be

intimate with someone else. The line between homosociality and homosexuality becomes blurry. However, in Muslim and Hindu cultures both, it is very much possible that intimacy between women, even women married to men, was both homosocial and homosexual in nature, sometimes one more than the other. This argument has succinctly been summarized as such:

Were practices like vows of sisterhood ... a celebration of homosocial bonds of women's close friendships, or did they involve same-sex practices? ... Did "the sisters" engage in bodily acts that we now name lesbian? Perhaps they did. Did they desire, name, or perceive their vows as similar to what the later dynamic of distinguishing homosociality from homosexuality implies? Most likely not ... The denial of any overlap between the now separate domains of homosociality and homosexuality paradoxically provides a shelter, a masqueraded home, for homosexuality. We can continue to hold each other's hand in public because we have declared it to be a sign of homosociality that is void of sexuality. (Najmabadi 38)

And so for women, it is ironically the platonic female bonds encouraged in Muslim cultures that allows for such relationships to blossom.

Coded Dialogue

Apart from performance, language itself can be coded. In fact, language is the primary means through which it is revealed that Pinky and Babli are lovers in *Churails*. In a scene where Pinky, Babli, and three other women are sitting in a car, Pinky says about Babli and herself, "*Hum donon ek doosre ke liye kaafi hain*" ('We are enough for each other'), to which Babli adds, "*Sab kaam ke liye!*" ('To do everything!'). The women sitting in the backseat of the car start to laugh as they understand the implication. This brief moment reveals that Pinky and Babli are sexually involved with each other. Similarly, in *Dedh Ishqiya*, Begum Para says about Munniya, "*Woh humari dost bhi hai, behen bhi hai, aur jaan bhi hai*" ('She is my friend, my sister, and my soulmate/beloved').

This correlates smoothly with the conceptualization of homosociality and homosexuality discussed above, as Para refers to Munniya both platonically (friend, sister) and romantically (beloved). The use of the word *jaan* ('soulmate,' 'beloved') is also ambiguous enough that it implies both platonic and romantic love, as it is a word that can be used to refer to family members, friends, or lovers. We also once more see characteristics of the bond of the sakhi in these screen texts. The characters of Pinky, Babli, Para, and Munniya seem to have found their soulmate, and through these dialogues it is made evident that there is no one else who fulfills their needs and desires. As one woman in a sakhi bond describes, "Sakhi means that you should have true love" (Pintchman 59).

Performative Heterosexuality

Another distinctive feature of these screen texts is the use of femininity and performative heteronormativity by the lesbian characters as tools to seduce or mislead men to pursue their end goal: the women. For instance, in *Dedh Ishqiya*, Munniya and Para plan a scheme in which Para will be ‘kidnapped’ on the day of her marriage to her new husband and taken to a location only Munniya knows about, so that they can elope together. In order for this plan to work out, Munniya must hire a kidnapper to get the job done. In a scene where she is negotiating prices with the kidnapper she plans to hire, she exposes some of her cleavage to him and requests him to give her more time to collect enough money to pay him the advance. In another scene, she sleeps with Babban (nephew of Khalujaan, one of Para’s potential suitors) so that she can convince him to join in on the plan, only to betray him towards the end by running away with Para. Thus, Munniya knowingly employs her femininity to seduce men and ensure that the plan unfolds itself smoothly. In a similar vein, Qandeel in *Chewing Gum* seduces Mansoor so that he cheats on Sanam, which is part of her plan to make Sanam realize that she is unhappy in her marriage and her husband is unfaithful. This finally leads to Sanam leaving Mansoor for Qandeel.

A powerful feature of this narrative trajectory is the employment of femininity. It is the femme rather than the butch lesbian that poses a threat to the stability of patriarchal structures. The butch lesbian “threatens the male viewer with the horrifying spectacle of the ‘uncastrated’ woman and challenges the straight female viewer because she refuses to participate in the conventional masquerade of hetero-femininity as weak, unskilled, and unthreatening” (Halberstam 95-96). However, in the case of *Chewing Gum* and *Dedh Ishqiya*, “being femme increases the threat they pose to heteronormativity since their femme identity enables them to infiltrate and consequently dismantle hegemonic structures more easily” (Masood and Alam 146). Hetero-femininity, then, does not necessarily have to be abandoned in order to empower the lesbian.

It could be argued that manipulating people for your own ends is unethical, but in both these screen texts, the manipulation is justified. Khalujaan was pretending to be the Nawab of Chandpur so that Begum Para would take an interest in him, and Babban (Khalujaan’s nephew and partner in crime) colluded in his uncle’s plan to trick and marry Para. Thus, Munniya and Para having a plan of their own is no more deceptive than that of Khalujaan and Babban. Likewise, Qandeel’s intervention in Sanam’s life simply reminded her of the perilous state of her unfulfilling marriage and convinced her to reevaluate how ‘happy’ she claimed to be. Manipulation or not, Qandeel only revealed Mansoor’s unfaithful nature and possibly saved Sanam from a bleak future with him. Despite the moral justifications in the texts, such manipulation also portrays queer women in a negative light. The manipulating, scheming, and planning that is associated with these characters paints them as cunning, immoral personalities. Moreover, their physical appearance and costumes will sometimes invoke an atmosphere of darkness and evil. Qandeel, for example, in contrast to Sanam, almost exclusively wears only dark colors. Throughout the episode, she wears black clothing and a dark shade of red lipstick—a lipstick shade culturally associated with prostitution, promiscuity, and a woman of questionable or loose morals. This is not to say that Pakistanis do not wear red lipstick; it is common to wear

it when dressing up for functions such as weddings. However, wearing it regularly or daily, in the way that Qandeel does, is somewhat frowned upon. Furthermore, character performances add to the tone of evil and manipulation; there are a number of scenes where Qandeel has a smug, victorious smile on her face as she continuously chews gum, with dramatic background music that invokes a feeling of anxiety, trepidation, and lack of sincerity. This aura of darkness and uneasiness that seems to follow Qandeel is very characteristic of that of a villain. Even though Qandeel and Sanam end up together, Qandeel's character as a threatening and disruptive force cannot be denied. Thus, it paints her as both a source of empowerment (positive) and a source of destruction (negative).

Even narratives that do not necessarily radicalize lesbian relationships find a way to disturb heteronormative ways of being. *Churails* makes it a point to not draw too much attention towards Pinky and Babli's relationship. It is brought up in conversation casually with other women in the car scene as mentioned previously in this paper, and there is a light-hearted tone to it which paints the relationship as a non-threat. The lesbians are allowed to co-exist in the fictional world of *Churails*, which has a normalizing effect. In the same way, in *Caramel*, Rima's friends do not question her sexuality or discriminate against her at any point, and even encourage her romantic developments. Rima's friends suggestively look at her when Siham (the woman she is interested in) walks into their salon. It is the same suggestive look that, for instance, a girl gives to her best friend when she approves of her best friend's budding romance. Not much is said about the lesbian relationships in *Churails* and *Caramel*, but that is precisely the point: silent approval.

Censorship

The international screen texts, *Dedh Ishqiya* and *Caramel*, did not experience issues with censorship regarding the depiction of lesbian relationships. A probable reason for this is that despite all of the potential lesbian themes, the lesbian connotations are just that: connotations. They are never explicit, and the particularly suggestive scenes can still pass off as friendship or sisterly love between two women. Director of *Caramel*, Nadine Labaki, says in a personal interview, "With Rima and her lover, there is nothing to say ... but at the same time you understand everything about what's happening between them. But the censorship cannot tell me 'this is a scene you must remove'" (qtd. in Mourad 133). In contrast, the Pakistani screen texts, *Churails* and *Chewing Gum* encountered issues with censorship. *Churails* was problematized by the Pakistani state for its depiction of not just homosexual relationships, but also of women who smoke, swear, and are overall 'obscene'. *Chewing Gum* may be the screen text with the most subtle display of lesbian affections, but even that was unacceptable to the censor board. With that said, the censorship cases for *Churails* and *Chewing Gum* developed in distinct ways.

The difference in the reception of *Churails* and *Chewing Gum* can be explained by the different platforms on which they were released. *Chewing Gum* was released on Hum TV, a widely viewed channel for Urdu serials in Pakistan. Since Hum TV is one of Pakistan's biggest entertainment networks, this means it has a large reach in Pakistan and the audience can include anyone that has access to cable and television. *Churails*, on the other hand, was released on

Zee5, an Indian streaming platform. The audience of Zee5 consists of a different demographic; anyone with a subscription to Zee5 can access *Churails*. This audience is more exclusive because the amount of people that can afford technology like laptops or phones and pay for subscriptions to streaming services is limited. That said, the audience is also much broader because streaming platforms tend to have more global subscribers as well.

Asim Abbasi, the director of *Churails*, explains why this decision was made: “It was certainly not going to get past the censors, there was no way to air this on a Pakistani channel” (qtd. in Hashim). Even so, *Churails* did end up briefly being taken off of the streaming platform for audiences in Pakistan, but it was brought back after two days due to criticism and social media pressure calling out the hypocritical nature of the Pakistani state and its censorship patterns. For instance, Pakistani actress Sanam Saeed tweeted: “Banning dancing ads, outspoken films and web series will not end rape if that’s the agenda. Why are we riddled with such hypocrisy? Buss bandh darvaazon kay peechnay ho sub (‘All of you are just hiding behind closed doors’)” (@sanammodysaeed). Zee5 later explained the reason for banning *Churails* to begin with: “The show was taken off the platform in Pakistan purely in compliance with a directive that we received” (qtd. in Abbasi). They were ambiguous about who gave that directive, and it is also unclear what exactly the directive was. Regardless, the ban was lifted and *Churails* was put back on Zee5. Despite this reversal, payments from the Pakistani audience to the Zee5 network have now been banned via the State Bank of Pakistan (“Moral Policing”), so new subscribers in Pakistan cannot get access to Indian platforms like Zee5. The case is a bit different for *Chewing Gum*, which received backlash that led to Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) fining Hum TV with Rs. 1 million for airing objectionable content (Ahmed). “PEMRA warned the channel to be vigilant about selecting the themes for its soaps and dramas ... [and that] they should keep in mind the socio-cultural norms and values of Pakistan” (Ahmed).

The difference in the gravity of censorship between these two screen texts is also reflected on social media. In the case of *Churails*, Twitter erupted with criticism after the announcement of the ban, where people tweeted about their outrage over the incident. For example, Pakistani actor Osman Khalid Butt tweeted: “Oh, you got Churails banned? Congratufuckinglations. Now please focus your outrage on the fact that police have failed to arrest the prime accused in the motorway rape incident” (@aClockworkObi). Tweets surrounding the ban echoed the same sentiment of disappointment regarding the tendency of the Pakistani state to shut down projects like *Churails* that simply expose the realities and hypocrisies of Pakistani society, with a call for justice for incidents like rape cases that the state has consistently neglected. On the other hand, there was not much activity on social media regarding PEMRA fining Hum TV for *Chewing Gum*. There is no official statement by Hum TV regarding the ban, and there is also lack of evidence of similar progressive tweets that were posted about *Churails*. In fact, in the comment section of an article that simply reports this censorship incident, there is moralistic discussion by users who are disgusted by the episode and support the issuance of the fine. For instance, one comment made by a user reflects his homophobic stance on the episode:

I watched that episode. I was just sitting with my family that day and TV was running. I understood what was going on. It was all about lesbian relationship

between two woman. But my mother and sister who are simple women did not understand the story and asked what was it all about. I just kept quiet because it was not appropriate to talk about lesbian relationship in front of my whole family. I say ban Hum TV for few days. That's the real punishment. 1 million is nothing for these behemoths. (Talal)

A possible explanation for the lack of media attention regarding the Hum TV fine is the timing of the incident. *Chewing Gum* was aired in 2017 while *Churails* came out in 2020; the time in between saw a rise in bans targeted towards films like *Zindagi Tamasha* that deal with religious themes, ads like a Gala biscuit ad that depicted women dancing, or social media platforms like TikTok that are said to promote 'indecent' content. The practice of such bans in Pakistan has increased as of late, and as a result, criticism and outrage concerning these bans has increased, too. This is perhaps why the 2020 web series *Churails* garnered a significant amount of media attention when it was briefly banned, while the case of the 2017 episode *Chewing Gum* did not have the same impact. Additionally, *Chewing Gum* did not face a ban but rather a fine targeted towards Hum TV, which merely had to be paid off since the episode had already aired on national television and there was no possible way to undo the airing of the episode. *Churails*, in comparison, is a web series designed to be streamed on demand, and thus a ban was deemed more appropriate in order to prevent audiences from ever having access to it in the first place. The difference in the types of responses and media attention between the cases of *Churails* and *Chewing Gum* makes clear that while lesbianism is a taboo subject in Pakistan in general, it is less so in circles of privilege; that is, the audience of *Churails*, who are more likely to own a technological device, to afford a subscription to a streaming service, and to make the decision to stream a progressive web series like *Churails*. This further reinforces the harsh reality that being queer or being able to express queerness comes with a certain degree of privilege that is afforded to an already miniscule portion of the Pakistani population; if there is a space for queer women to be queer without consequences, then it is small and exclusive.

Conclusion

These four screen texts are able to convey female same-sex relationships by employing subtle and suggestive techniques that allow some degree of space for the representation of culturally taboo relationships on screen in Muslim-dominant cultures. They also take advantage of the female homosociality that is already embedded in these cultures, and the slippages between homosociality and homosexuality in order to depict the latter. The only two Pakistani screen texts dealing with lesbian themes have both received some backlash and have encountered issues with censorship, but this is exactly what makes them influential. This has been proven by the quick and enraged responses to the recent *Churails* ban as discussed above; discontentment with the Pakistani state and its groundless justifications for censoring queer content is only rising. These screen texts dismantle widely held norms, and such dismantling normally makes way for dialogue around culturally taboo topics. With the advent of technologies like social media and the growing culture of telling alternative love stories, it is even likely that queer stories on-screen, or stories filled with the possibility of queerness, will only grow in number.

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Churails/Witches (dir. Asim Abbasi, 2020)

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Fire (dir. Deepta Mehta, 1996)

Sukkar Banat/Caramel (dir. Nadine Labaki, 2007)