Politics of Representation: What are the Factors influencing the Choice of Themes Represented in Pakistani Independent Feature Films?

By

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to investigate and question the various themes being highlighted in the Independent Feature Films produced in Pakistan. The question is multi-faceted, and a sociological approach has been taken to the research. Pakistan’s geopolitical significance in today’s world is taken into account, and the impact of the West on the content of the independent films is examined. The relationship between the filmmaker’s economic, educational and social backgrounds, and the kind of stories they tell in their films is also highlighted. Furthermore, the dissertation looks at the relation between the audience and the content of a film.

In the current scenario, only a limited number of films are produced within Pakistan. It is thus, integral to take a critical view of these independent efforts of producing films within the country, to develop a better understanding them. This research has been conducted using two major research strategies: (1) qualitative data analysis of data collected by interviewing Pakistani filmmakers, film critics and academics and (2) analysis of three Pakistani independent feature films. After stating the problems of representation within the Pakistani independent films, the research goes on to suggest ways and trends that would lead to more a more holistic picture.
Acknowledgements

Abstract

Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>1-6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>7-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- History of Cinema in Pakistan</td>
<td>7-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Elitism in Representation</td>
<td>9-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Selling Stereotypes</td>
<td>12-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The 'Other' as a Teambuilding Tool</td>
<td>13-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- American Cinema Post-9/11</td>
<td>14-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cheaper Filmmaking Technologies</td>
<td>16-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
<td>18-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Observations</td>
<td>22-33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The Filmmaker behind the Camera</td>
<td>22-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- To Pakistan, Via the West</td>
<td>25-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Towards a More Holistic View</td>
<td>31-33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>34-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>36-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>38-78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>38-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>42-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3</td>
<td>45-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 4</td>
<td>50-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 5</td>
<td>53-56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 6</td>
<td>57-63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 7</td>
<td>64-67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 8</td>
<td>68-73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 9</td>
<td>74-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 10</td>
<td>77-78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

A letter, allegedly written by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, calling for more Muslims to become film makers is in possession of political activist Mohammad Masud, *The Express Tribune* reports.\(^1\) This letter is dated 1945, two years before the creation of Pakistan. Jinnah expresses that there is

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‘plenty of scope for them in the film industry.’\(^3\) It could be suggested that Jinnah wanted to encourage Muslim filmmakers so the ‘Muslim identity’ could be promoted.

Indeed film is a great medium for promoting, creating or even distorting the identity of a people. In this dissertation I will be looking at Pakistani independent feature films, the people who make said films, and the various factors that lead to the choice of storylines and issues highlighted in them.

In the scope of this dissertation, the term ‘independent films’ in Pakistan refers to films produced independent of Lollywood Film Studios or Pakistani TV Channels. Therefore, emphasis is given to including feature films funded independently. For example, the research has excluded films funded by relatively large media corporates like Geo Films and Evernew Studios etc.

More and more films about, and from Pakistan, are going to film festivals abroad. In 2012 Lamha (Seedlings), returned from the New York City International Film Festival, having won two awards.\(^4\) Another film Josh (Against the Grain), premiered at the 14\(^{th}\) Mumbai Film Festival.\(^5\) This trend of sending Pakistani independent films to festivals abroad brings up questions of representation and audience relevant to this dissertation.

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The Express Tribune reports Nadeem Mandviwala, owner of the Atrium Cinemas, ‘feels that instead of reviving it, Pakistan is in the process of rebuilding cinema.’ In the absence of mainstream cinema, it is important to look at the politics involved in the filmmaking process, and to speculate what the themes represented in these films say about the country. The need for critical discourse is further heightened by the fact that any film sent to an international film festival is a depiction of the place where the film is produced. As prominent in image 2, the first Pakistani film to be featured in an international film festival was produced by the Pakistan Government Ministry of Information, and promoted the country’s art and culture.

Fig 2.

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7 Defined as, ‘relations or conduct in a particular area of experience especially as seen or dealt with from a political point of view <office politics> <ethnic politics>,’ Merriam Webster. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics [Last accessed: 18th June 2013].
8 Photographer unknown, Pakistan Film for Cannes Prize, 1956. Scan of Newspaper, Dawn. Courtesy, Citizens Archive of Pakistan.
It is important to study this area, because films are most certainly a big part of the process of building an identity for a country. In today’s political global climate, where the international media takes a very myopic view of what Pakistan is all about, the responsibility of films and the arts to promote more all-encompassing views of Pakistan is further heightened.

I will be referring to various independent feature films in this dissertation; an example of such a film is *Slackistan*. The trailer of the movie starts with a proposition, ‘Think you know Pakistan? Think again!’, what follows is imagery showing the young elite of Islamabad, drinking and partying, with no future plans; the trailer goes on to give references to the Talibanization of the country. I remember watching the film at a private screening in Karachi, with not more than forty attendees. As I watched the film I remember thinking this film may be somewhat relatable to me, however, it represents a very small segment of the Pakistani society, and is certainly not enough to make people ‘rethink’ what the country is about.

As films like *Slackistan*, are screened abroad, an important question that arises is who is the intended target audience for them? The subject matter seems to speak about, and speak to, only the relatively economically affluent in Pakistan. Furthermore, based on the way the trailer is phrased it may suggested that the film may have been made for international audiences at film festival circuits. Indeed, many Pakistani independent films that are screened at festivals around the world are never screened in Pakistan.

While we have films like *Slackistan*, on one hand, that seem to be providing an alternative to the Western media’s representation of Pakistan; other Pakistani independent filmmakers focus on making films on the problems faced by individuals from the lower economic classes of Pakistan,

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often reinforcing the Western view of what Pakistan is all about. The film *Josh* attempts to address the issues of feudalism.\(^\text{10}\) While issues of feudalism are a pressing concern in Pakistan, and should certainly be addressed in cinema, the research will outline and question the factors leading to the film being screened internationally, before even being released in the country.

Additionally, these films are usually made by individuals from economically affluent backgrounds, many of whom have returned from film schools abroad. The biggest criticism for these films then becomes how could the filmmakers relate to the subjects they are representing in their films, since the lives that they have lead differ drastically from the lives of their subjects.

Furthermore, this dissertation will also be looking at Pakistan’s ‘post 9/11’ identity around the world, and if that has affected Pakistani independent films in anyway. The Pakistani government and policy is also of importance to the topic.

The research will additionally suggest how people from different backgrounds will be able to make films. It will attempt to question the impact of the cheaper digital filmmaking techniques on Pakistani cinema, and inquire if they will be able to facilitate filmmakers from different economic backgrounds to tell their stories through the medium. How far will local film education be able to aid these filmmakers? And finally it will be questioned as to what extent this will affect the content and themes highlighted within films.

The topic under discussion is a manifold matter, and this is apparent in my choice of research methodology. After consulting books and articles related to the topic, I moved to the primary research. This was carried out via interviews of independent filmmakers and individuals who have been involved in independent filmmaking in Pakistan.

Considering the current political and social climate of Pakistan, the fact that filmmakers still choose to explore the art form is a real testament to their love for the medium. In a time when cinemas are burnt in the name of love for the Prophet Mohammad,\textsuperscript{11} and mainstream cinema is close to non-existent, independent cinema is both important and relevant. Critical discourse of such films will help us acquire a better understanding of them, and hopefully, aid more holistic representation of Pakistan in future films.

Literature Review

History of Cinema in Pakistan

In the book ‘Third World Film Making and the West,’ author Roy Armes takes a western view of the development of cinema in the ‘third world’ countries and its social, cultural and economic implications. Armes observes, ‘Pre-1947 Indian Cinema had been essentially a Hindu Cinema.’

Referring to the then West Pakistan he adds, ‘apart from four small studios in Lahore, the state was without film making facilities.’ The conditions, in terms of lack of infrastructure today, seem to be similar to those in a young Pakistan. However Armes goes on to report, ‘production rose steadily from about half a dozen films a year to twenty features in 1955 and forty in 1964.’

Armes quotes Javed Jabbar, ‘the local cinema struggled to evolve its own identity. But, except for the substitution of Muslim character names in place of Hindi ones and occasional references to Hindu/Muslim rivalry and religious differences, any individual identity remained elusive.’

Jabbar’s observation is corroborated by Yaseen Goreja. In his book ‘Pakistan Ki Sou Shahkar Filmein’ (Pakistan’s Top 100 Films) Goreja starts with the 1949 film ‘Phairay’ (Circumambulations). The film featured Hindu characters as Pakistan would export films to India at this point; this was done to generate revenues. This resembles the current scenario where filmmakers may focus on story lines the West and the film festival circuit is interested in, from a business point of view.

13 Armes, Third World Film Making and the West, p128.
14 Armes, Third World Film Making and the West, p128.
However there is an observable difference in the storylines of the films from Lollywood and the independent films produced in Pakistan today. Comparison of the storylines of the films discussed within Goreja’s book illustrates an almost overarching theme in most films. In many of these films the two protagonists, from different economic sectors of the society, fall in love. The films would then showcase the problems they face before a union. An example of this is the 1954 film ‘Roohi,’ where Roohi a girl from a poverty stricken area, steals fruit from a wealthy man, Munawer, who in turn falls in love with her and decides to transform the standard of living in her area.\(^{17}\) After several similar examples, Goreja quotes the example of the 1998 film ‘Dupatta Jal Raha hai,’ (The Dupatta is Burning) where a millionaire boy falls in love with the daughter of a factory worker.\(^{18}\) These films had mass appeal as they acted as an escape, and provided viewers with the dream of a better future. Surely the idea of a ‘knight in shining armour’ saving a ‘damsel in distress’ is a part of film vocabulary globally.

As many independent filmmakers today apparently come from economically affluent backgrounds, their films, often based on their lives and experiences, seem to resonate only with a limited audience. Interestingly, television dramas seem to have adopted the themes and formula of these old Lollywood films. An example is the 2011 drama serial, ‘Humsafar’ (Companion), where the storyline portrays two individuals from different economic backgrounds getting married, and the problems that they face with their socio-economic differences being the core of their problems. The drama spoke to a larger audience and had mass appeal.

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Many of the earlier films Goreja cites successfully captured audience attention, and by 1965 film production rose to ‘eighty and then a hundred films a year, while the number of movie theatres in the region rose from 220 at independence to around 500,’\(^\text{19}\) reports Armes.

This progress however proved to be short lived, Susan Hayward in her book, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* describes Pakistani cinema in the nineties: ‘Poor equipment (dating from the 1960s), poorly produced films, stuck to predictable formulas, have alienated a diversified audience.’\(^\text{20}\)

‘The first half of the 1980s was a disastrous period for Pakistan cinema. Poor products (due to the all-pervasive censorship laws) met with declining audiences (especially among the elite classes),’\(^\text{21}\) Hayward observes. She further reports the 1979 film *Maula Jat* dealt with the ‘indifference of officials to the plight of the ordinary people,’\(^\text{22}\) and suggests it was banned because ‘clearly its reference was too close to the Bhutto story to be acceptable to the junta.’\(^\text{23}\)

This clearly demonstrates the power of cinema, and how the apt representations of Pakistan’s problems have threatened the status quo in the past. As Hayward reports, *Maula Jat* spoke about the and, to the common man,\(^\text{24}\) a stark difference from most independent films made today, that are screened at niche, private screenings for the intelligentsia and the economically affluent in society.

**Elitism in Representation**

In her article, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ for the journal *Marxisim and the Interpretation of

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\(^{19}\) Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West*, p129.


\(^{21}\) Hayward, *CINEMA STUDIES The Key Concepts*, p457.

\(^{22}\) Hayward, *CINEMA STUDIES The Key Concepts*, p457.

\(^{23}\) Hayward, *CINEMA STUDIES The Key Concepts*, p457.

\(^{24}\) Hayward, *CINEMA STUDIES The Key Concepts*, p457.
Gayatri Spivak puts forward issues of representation very relevant to the question at hand.

Spivak’s reading talks largely about the Colonial times in India, and provides a historic perspective on the issues of representation. She points out that the history of India was dominated by elitism, ‘Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the other. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous,’ she argues. By pointing out the problems of the Indian elite speaking on behalf of the subaltern, Spivak brings to light the issues of inaccuracy in the historic accounts from India under the British Raj.

Spivak’s point bears resemblance to the research question; arguably, filmmakers making films about the suffering in Pakistan are also members of the elite acting as ‘informants’ for the first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the other, as Spivak puts it. Many of these individuals have not lived the life of the subject of their films, and the information is coming to them second hand.

One may question, however, does a person really have to be first hand part of a suffering, to speak about, or feel it? After all, filmmakers do their research before turning on the cameras. The question then becomes, if an individual or a group does not have the agency to speak for itself, who would speak for it? For example, the labour class of Pakistan, suffering at the hands of the

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economically affluent and powerful may not have a forum to voice their concerns. It could be suggested that these filmmakers are acting as the channel to voice the people’s concerns. These films may act as catalysts to dialogue and maybe even change. The solution then would not be to stop highlighting these issues.

Spivak does go on to acknowledge this fact, as she maintains, ‘the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation.’ Yet the problem of representation is far too complicated to be provided with any definite solutions.

The historic accounts that Spivak refers to were taken for people in the West, similarly many of the independent films go to film festivals in the West. As Spivak talks about the problem of imperialism with these historic accounts, we could also draw parallels to the content of the Pakistani films being produced for the festival circuit.

The Kara Film Festival, the biggest film festival in Pakistan, was deferred in 2010, and has not been conducted since. One reason for sending these films abroad and not screening them in Pakistan could be the lack of film festivals within the country screening such work. Yet, we cannot ignore the possibility of some filmmakers representing Pakistan in a certain light, to sell their film, and in the process perhaps being exploitative of the individuals they discuss in their films.

29 Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’: 27.
Selling Stereotypes


Shaheen presents a paper on the subject of negative stereotyping of the Arabs in Hollywood films, and the politics involved in such stereotyping. He maintains ‘seen through Hollywood’s distorted lenses, Arabs look different and threatening.’ Shaheen has analysed over 900 Hollywood films with Arabs, ‘the vast majority of which portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women, and children are really like.’

With the West’s cultural dominance over the world, the images of a people created by the West, through Hollywood and the Media, stay with the audience for years to come. It could be argued that it becomes difficult for these very people, to disassociate from this identity of theirs, and certain filmmakers could fall prey to adapting these stereotypical identities of their own people.

Shaheen discusses the meaning of the word Shiekh, and observes, ‘Instead of presenting sheikhs as elderly men of wisdom, screenwriters offer romantic melodramas portraying them as stooges-in-sheets, slovenly, hook-nosed potentates intent on capturing pale-faced blondes for their harems.’ I too find myself subconsciously transcribing to some of these stereotypes and such imagery comes to mind as I hear the word ‘Sheikh.’ While it could be argued that this identity is based in part on fact, it is propelled by the representation of Sheikhs in the movies.

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Shaheen further states, ‘convenient stereotypes make everyone’s job easier.’35 The convenience for the Pakistani filmmaker could be the comfort of knowing that there is an international audience for the social issues of Pakistan, encouraging them to highlight these issues within their films.

While looking at the reasoning for stereotyping in Hollywood, Shaheen identifies one as the fact that having an ‘other’36 unites people, ‘those viewers laughing at bumbling reel Arabs leave movie theatres with a sense of solidarity, united by their shared distance from these people of ridicule.’37

Shaheen’s criticism may have been reinforced by ideas of scholars and writers before him, such as those put forward by Edward Said in his influential book Orientalism. Said writes, ‘Underlying these categories is the rigidly binomial opposition of "ours" and "theirs," with the former always encroaching upon the latter (even to the point of making "theirs" exclusively a function of "ours").’38

The ‘Other’ as a Teambuilding Tool

The idea of the ‘others’ as a team building exercise is a popular practice. It is used to strengthen feelings of nationalism and even school spirit; however, the biggest criticism of this would be the ideas associated with the ‘other’ are ultimately reductionist.

Films like Slackistan, that produce representations of the Pakistani youth as one that is constantly partying, may be a reaction to these stereotypes associated with Pakistani’s as the ‘other.’ As we

are constantly bombarded with images of women in burkas, and news of bomb blasts from Pakistan, these filmmakers might not have agreed with that representation of Pakistan, and decided to counter it with their own version of what Pakistan is about.

Film has long been used as a tool for propaganda. While Shaheen discusses the vilification of the Arab people within his paper, a shift is prominent within the world today, with the changing landscape of international politics. Not far from the Arabs, the villain now is a Muslim, Arab or not. Several jokes are made at the expense of Pakistani’s in mainstream Hollywood. An example of this would be the following exchange from the satirical show *Family Guy* pointing out the international scenario:

Brian Griffin: No, Peter Iraq had nothing to do with this, it was a bunch of Saudi Arabians, Lebanese, and Egyptians financed by a Saudi Arabian guy living in Afghanistan and sheltered by Pakistanis.

Peter Griffin: So you’re saying we need to invade Iran? 39

**American Cinema Post-9/11**

While it could be argued that looking at things from a ‘post 9/11’ point of view is a very westernized view to take, we simply cannot deny the way perceptions about Pakistan have changed since the twin tower attacks. In his paper *Teaching film after 9/11*, Wheeler Winston Dixon looks at films in a ‘post-9/11’ world. Dixon speaks about a, ‘shift in the modes of perception, production, and audience reception in the wake of the events of 9/11.’ 40


paper was published three years post the attack, the trends he discusses still hold true today over a decade later.

Dixon maintains American cinema, ‘seems centred on a desire to replicate the idea of the “just war,” in which military reprisals, and the concomitant escalation of warfare are simultaneously inevitable and justified.’

He further asks, ‘How will these films shape the perception of other nations, to which cinema is now the dominant cultural export from the US.?‘ This is certainly an important question to ask, especially in the scope of this dissertation. The view the West takes and promotes of a country is particularly imposing and as discussed earlier, these stereotypes may be difficult to move past, even for the people being talked about.

Similarly, while discussing cinema post 9/11, B. Ruby Rich in her article ‘After the Fall: Cinema Studies Post-9/11’, reiterates, ‘The terrible flattening of complexity in the U.S. attitudes toward the rest of the world and its own history makes it imperative that teachers offer models of how to conduct analysis while the grounds shift underfoot…’ Like Dixon puts forward a question regarding the impact of the American views shaping perception about other nations, Rich observes a ‘flattening of complexity in attitudes.’ This makes for a dangerous combination, whereby arguably the most influential perception may often be extremely reductionist.

Cinema plays an integral role in the shaping of societies, identities and our perceptions of the world, and of ourselves. With a medium with so much power, what is of importance is discourse

regarding what the films are saying. As Rich points out there is the need to learn, ‘…how to think through film without sacrificing the subtlety of cinematic inflections, vernacular of formal.’\(^{45}\) The idea of thinking through film is an important one, not just for the filmmakers, but also the viewer’s consuming the content.

**Cheaper Filmmaking Technologies**

While moving away from these stereotypical representations is difficult, parallel representations of people are being created world over, thanks to the cheapening of digital filmmaking technologies allowing for people with different point of views to come forward and tell stories. Kurt Lancaster discusses this shift and the dynamics of the DSLR Cinema in his book, *DSLR Cinema: Crafting the Film Look with Video*.

In the book, Lancaster, besides giving advice to filmmakers ready to film with DSLRs, also gives an overview of the impact of the technology. He states, ‘Hybrid DSLRs started a cinematic revolution two years ago,’\(^{46}\) this is by no means an exaggeration. The biggest advantage of these DSLRs is that they give filmmakers the option of making high quality videos, with minimal investment, allowing people from different backgrounds to express themselves with the medium.

Lancaster goes on to quote Philip Bloom:

This “fad” is only just beginning. It's just going to get better and better. Yes, I cannot see “House” or other major players choosing to shoot on DSLRs if affordable (§10K is

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affordable to pro companies) cameras are out there that do the job much better. But for
the rest of us, DSLRs will be our main cameras for many years to come. 47

The impact of these cameras on Pakistani independent film and television production has been
significant. The lack of profits limits interest in financing Pakistani films. In such a situation,
DSLR filmmaking may prove to change the dynamics of independent filmmaking in Pakistan by
allowing filmmakers from different socio-economic backgrounds to emerge and tell diverse
stories from the region.

47 Philip Bloom, ‘The future of video DSLRs’, quoted in Lancaster, DSLR Cinema: Crafting the Film Look with
Video, p333.
Research Methodology

The research question is socio-political in nature. The question has to do not only with the film fraternity but also the construct of the Pakistani society and its place in the world at large.

While talking about the construct of identities, and a people’s place in the rest of the world, a text I discuss is *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Gayatri Spivak. In the reading Spivak takes a geopolitical approach, and discusses the problems of an outsider coming into a region, and intervening or trying to represent them. This very directly ties in with the question being discussed in this dissertation. Spivak criticizes the act of history being recorded by ‘native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other.’48 As I spoke about the content of Pakistani independent films, sent to the festival circuit abroad, I was able to draw parallels between the topics as the underlying themes were similar.

A problem with the selection of this text is that it was written in 1988. However, the text is relevant today, and provides a historic context. Spivak’s criticism has been the basis for much academic writing on the similar topics that followed.

In his paper, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Jack G. Shaheen also takes a sociological approach, by conducting an analysis and a ‘study of more than 900 films,’49 to see the representation of Arabs in Hollywood. As the Arabs are also from the Muslim world, I was able to compare their representations to that of Pakistanis. I was able to build on his ideas of stereotyping in context of stereotypes associated with Pakistan.

The drawback of using this text is that while there are commonalities between the Pakistanis and Arabs and their perception by people around the world, there are also considerable differences.

48 Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’: 66-104.
Shaheen discusses films that date back to 1896 considerably before the existence of Pakistan. As he observes that ‘From 1896 until today, filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as Public Enemy #1’50 thus drawing conclusions from Shaheen’s text would be potentially reductionist, as Shaheen’s claims are based on a long history of the misrepresentation of Arabs, while Pakistanis have only recently become more relevant in American popular culture.

My Primary Research will consist of qualitative data, while talking about representation quantitative data would be of little use. The question is not one with a single answer, or answers that lie within numbers; analysis was thus drawn out of a range of opinions of filmmakers based on their prior experiences. I conducted interviews of filmmakers from the various urban centres to ensure the sample is not just Karachi-centric. My research includes filmmakers from Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore; furthermore, filmmakers outside Pakistan, making films about Pakistan were also interviewed. Additionally, the sample included individuals associated with film education to give a view of the filmmakers to come, and how they might change the current trends.

Audience perception was gauged by taking into account comments of users on the trailers of films like Slackistan on YouTube. Furthermore, the filmmakers were also questioned about the audience, and the implications of the festival audience as opposed to a wide release in Pakistan.

Interviewees were asked questions based on observations of the trends of Pakistani Independent films, and aided further by the literature review and by researching their previous stance on similar topics.

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One interview was conducted in person. The interview was candid, and facilitated asking relevant follow up questions to the interviewee’s responses, that were not part of the original questionnaire prepared prior to the interview. This method also allowed elimination of questions, answers of which would overlap with answers the interviewee was giving. The interview was recorded using a voice recorder. As filmmakers are used to giving interviews, the recording was not a hindrance.

However, other filmmakers, busy with their shooting schedules and other commitments were unable to give interviews in person. To ensure that they do partake in the research despite their busy schedules, telephone interviews were suggested. Of the sample of interviews, one interview via was conducted via telephone, and was recorded using a recording device. The drawback of this was that as the phone had been placed towards the microphone of the recording device, it was slightly problematic to understand what the interviewee was saying during the interview. However, as the recording was clear the interview was later transcribed accurately.

This method too allowed for follow up questions to be asked and facilitated a conversation with the interviewee.

However considering the time difference for the interviewees abroad, and the various commitments the filmmakers had, six interviewees preferred email interviews, while two opted for Facebook interviews. The interviewees were emailed or Facebook messaged with a document containing all the interview questions for them. They then filled their responses and reverted back.
A drawback of this method was that it did not have room for conversation or for making changes. However, as each questionnaire contained questions based on the filmmaker’s previous interviews, experiences and expertise, this did not prove to be a problem.

However, this method required additional effort on part of the interviewee as they had to type out their responses. An interviewee Vasi Hasan expressed this by calling the interview, ‘almost like a 3 hour final Film Studies exam paper!’ To address this problem, the interviewees were not rushed into responding promptly, and reverted back at their own pace.

Lastly, I viewed and analysed films Slackistan and Zibakhana (Hell’s Ground) to use as examples during my discussion in the Analysis and Observation section. The film Josh’s, theme and marketing was also analysed and questioned. Talking about the works helped put the research in context.

51 Personal Facebook conversation with Vasi Hasan: dated 5th April 2013.
Analysis and Observations

The Filmmaker behind the Camera

Our perceptions are shaped by our experiences and backgrounds. While analysing the factors leading to the various themes that are highlighted in Pakistani independent films, the backgrounds of the people behind the camera are of great importance.

Many independent filmmakers in Pakistan appear to be from financially affluent backgrounds. When asked if this is true, actor and filmmaker, Ayeshah Alam Khan explains:

Film making is not cheap. It costs a lot of money. Along with money one needs to have the freedom to be able to go off and make those films and not worry about paying the bills at home. So independent filmmakers tend to come from economically affluent families by and large. 52

Khan’s comment makes it apparent that not only is filmmaking in Pakistan an expensive practice, but it is also one that does not frequently yield profits. Since the filmmakers are coming from economically affluent families, it is not surprising that films like Slackistan are being produced, where the lifestyle of individuals from the upper strata of society is the topic of discussion. Actor Osman Khalid Butt maintains, ‘The main characters of Slackistan belonged to affluent backgrounds; they drove nice cars, wore Western clothing, spoke in English peppered with Urdu, went to parties, had relationships... but that’s your urban youth right there.’53

These characters belonged to Islamabad; a portion of Islamabad’s population may be able to relate to them, but even if compared to the ‘urban youth’ of Karachi, these themes would not

52 Khan interviewed 29th – 30th March 2013.
53 Osman Khalid Butt interviewed 19th March – 19th April 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].
resonate with most of them. This disconnect is reflected in the responses by people on the YouTube trailer of the film, a user comments, ‘made by the rich and for the rich I guess... It portrays the high upper class of Pakistan which is hardly 2-3% of the masses.’\textsuperscript{54} Another user comments, ‘Either represent Pakistan as an underdeveloped shit hole that is a home for all of the terrorism or just try to act all cool by showing bars and pubs and our rich minority and their spoiled lifestyle! There is much much more to Pakistan!’\textsuperscript{55}

Many works of art, films and literature are based on the personal experiences of the individuals producing them. If due to the economics of filmmaking, and the lack of return on investment in Pakistani films, primarily the rich are producing films it should come as no surprise that their films are talking about a certain economic class of society. When asked whether the filmmaker’s background limits the kinds of stories they can tell, the responses varied.

Khan disagrees, ‘There is space for everyone and even people from affluent families have stories to tell. That really is a subjective thing and it all depends on the filmmakers themselves, their own experiences, their philosophies, their belief systems that will drive the kind of stories they want to tell.’\textsuperscript{56} Khan brings up a point that is certainly true, even within the upper strata of society there are several stories to tell. However, while in theory there may be space for everyone to tell their stories, people from lower classes do not have the opportunities or the agency to tell their stories with the medium of film.

Filmmakers Ali Kapadia states, ‘Such filmmakers are at risk of creating films that do not resonate with Pakistanis who haven’t lived such affluent lives, which frankly is the majority of

\textsuperscript{56} Khan interviewed 29\textsuperscript{th} – 30\textsuperscript{th} March 2013.
This is not to say that films about the middle and lower classes are not being produced, however, their stories are often being told by individuals from a different economic group which brings up issues of representation.

Kapadia adds, ‘There is a big difference between depicting situations after experiencing them, and depicting situations after looking at them from far. Ignoring this difference is equal to settling for mediocrity.’ Interestingly, Kapadia points towards issues of representation highlighted by Gayatri Spivak in her essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’

Many of these filmmakers also tend to come from film schools in the West. This time away from their country, seeing their homeland being constantly projected in a negative light may alter their view of Pakistan to some extent. Perhaps their feelings of patriotism and nationalism are further heightened by this contempt the international media shows towards Pakistan. This could be suggested as a reason for producing films that portray an ‘alternate’ image of Pakistan. Conversely, some of these filmmakers may accept the stereotypical assumptions about Pakistan as true, leading to films that focus on the negativity in the country to reiterate the stereotypical image of Pakistan.

‘Culture always plays a huge part in how you tell stories, or the kind of stories you’re attracted to. If somebody who has studied in the U.S makes a film, he/she is obviously going to be influenced by that culture and it would show in their story, or at least in the treatment’ observes filmmaker, Vasi Hasan. He further comments, ‘The more time you spend outside Pakistan, the

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58 Kapadia interviewed 29th March – 10th April 2013.

59 Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’: 66-104.

60 Vasi Hasan interviewed 3rd – 18th April 2013. [Interview was conducted via Facebook].
more you realize how much Pakistan sucks. Nothing works in our country, unfortunately...’

this kind of thought process would certainly be reflective in the way these individuals choose to represent Pakistan.

Ayeshah Alam Khan, on the other hand, questions, ‘Why should education abroad result in altering their view of Pakistan. If anything, it should open their minds to new ways of doing things, presenting things.’

She adds, ‘A film is never made by a film maker alone. It is a collaborative piece of work usually with all kinds of people on a team that help shape the film.’

While filmmaking is a collaborative medium, and not everyone working on a film would be from the same kind of background, it must be pointed out that there is a hierarchy in place. The entire crew is not involved in decisions regarding the way characters are represented, while they may be involved in the process of how the story is told, the decisions regarding what themes and stories the film would highlight still happen to be with the writers, directors and producers. The educational and economic backgrounds of these filmmakers is thus a factor in the choice of themes they chose to represent within their films.

To Pakistan, Via the West

When questioned about the statement, ‘If you think you know Pakistan, think again,’ Hammad Khan, the filmmaker behind Slackistan responds, ‘That was never a trailer intended for public consumption. Then, The Guardian ran an early piece and asked me to add some video teaser. So,

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61 Hasan interviewed 3rd – 18th April 2013.
63 Khan interviewed 29th – 30th March 2013.
64 Slackistan the film ‘Slackistan Trailer’, YouTube. (Posted: October 2009).
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gk1RsdfDzZk [Last accessed: 8th June 2013].
this became the online trailer and I never made one after that. I don’t think that caption should have been taken so seriously.'

A reason for The Guardian’s interest in Khan’s film could be that given Pakistan’s position in international politics, people from around the globe are interested in stories from the region. ‘It’s helped us in the sense that people now want to see more of Pakistan, and it has made Pakistan more sellable to a global audience – what doesn’t help, I suppose, is that they want terrorism related stories from Pakistan.’, observes Vasi Hasan.

Filmmaker Meenu Gaur while pointing towards the problems of making films based on Pakistan’s position in international politics states, ‘I think we will have better films from Pakistan when no one feels the need or pressure to tell stories limited to the geopolitical significance of Pakistan.’ Kapadia elaborates, ‘No it hasn’t helped the film industry at all. Yes there is interest in the subject of Pakistan, but there is quite a difference between what the Pakistani audience wants to see, and what the politically conscious international audience wants to see.’

Kapadia points out the difference between what the audiences in Pakistan would want to see, as opposed to what the ‘politically conscious’ audiences around the world would want to see. Audiences around the world, as pointed out by Hasan, want to watch stories of terrorism and Talibanization, from Pakistan. This may result in filmmakers working with these themes. However, Gaur disagrees, ‘I don’t think there are enough films being made in Pakistan yet to

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65 Hammad Khan interviewed 17th – 22nd April 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].
66 Hasan interviewed 3rd – 18th April 2013.
67 Meenu Gaur interviewed 2nd – 24th April 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].
68 Kapadia interviewed 29th March – 10th April 2013.
69 Kapadia interviewed 29th March – 10th April 2013.
make such an accusation! Not yet!' While Gaur aptly points out that Pakistan is producing limited films, these trends are visible within them. These films can be analyzed to suggestions about the thought process, be it conscious or subconscious, behind making them.

Even Pakistani films that appear to not be influenced by these factors on further inspection show signs of having worked with these themes; an example is the 2007 film Zibahkhana. Osman Khalid Butt describes it as ‘a bunch of delinquent teenagers with sex on their mind just like in the American Pie series, only with zombies and a veiled murderer!’ He refers to the film as, ‘very massy,’ and states ‘the characters belonged to practically every background/class; the situations familiar to anyone who’s heard cautionary tales from their grandmothers or seen any horror film.’ The film was certainly entertaining, with characters from various backgrounds. Furthermore, the films genre is such that it is perhaps not meant to be taken too seriously, but the veiled murderer referred to as ‘Burkaman’ raises concerns.

The film was well received internationally winning, ‘Best Film at the Fantaspoa film festival, Brazil, the Jury Award for Best Film of 2008 at the Riofan Film Festival, Brazil, and the Jury’s Special Award for Best Gore 2007 at the Fantastic Film Festival, Austin, Texas.’ However, in a political climate where the burka is seen with suspicion and often fear such a representation of the veil is problematic. The burka is often viewed as a means of oppression and of hiding something, a film with a serial killer who is a man wearing a burka to hide his identity is concerning. More recently, various countries have been looking to ban the burka, furthermore,
Muslims, beards and burkas seem to be the butt of many jokes cracked in American pop culture. Such representation of the burka may reinstate these negative stereotypes, and to be sending them to film festivals around the world raises further issues.

While Gaur states not enough films have been produced to deduce that filmmakers focus on certain themes while sending them to the West, examples like Zibakhana’s depiction of the burka pertain even within these films. Daniyal Khan further elaborates, “…an example is a recent documentary film that won an Oscar…. to attract attention and gain global presence you may come up with something tragic or sad, that’s very easy.”

Khan raises the point that showing Pakistani’s in a sad scenario or showing their suffering is something that is easier to sell in the world, possibly because that is how the country is perceived and represented in the media around the world.

Filmmaker Azfar Jafri on the other hand points out that no filmmaker makes films for film festivals in the West alone, ‘A lot of money is invested in the process and it needs to be recovered. Festivals don’t guarantee that. But if you get noticed there and you get to sign a project, it basically pays off everything you’ve spent.’

Since there is limited interest in financing films with in Pakistan, the route many independent filmmakers seem to take is send the film to an international film festival, generate some hype about it in Pakistan, and then look for distribution in Pakistan. As Butt explains:

…it’s sheer strategy: filmmakers opt for international festivals because of the buzz it generates locally. From our media to sponsors to distributors to the audience, when


66 Daniyal Ali Khan interviewed 2nd April 2013. [Interview was conducted in person, and was recorded and transcribed].

77 Azfar Jafri interviewed 22nd – 23rd March 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].
people see that the film’s been screened abroad and received that international… *thappa*, (stamp of approval) let’s call it, it generates that much more curiosity to see the film.78

The film *Josh*’s Facebook page declares ‘*JOSH* takes a sneak peek inside Pakistan today- the way you didn't know it.’79 When director Iram Parveen Bilal is asked who the statement is addressed to she responds, ‘That is a statement for people outside of Pakistan because it shows the modern, technologically driven youth side by side to the age old feudal society. It shows Pakistan to a foreign audience in a way that is different from what they see on the news.’80

The film deals with the issue of feudalism in Pakistan, which is an extremely relevant concern in the country. On making a film about feudalism that was meant to go to international film festivals Bilal responds, ‘I was even more conscious to make sure that the film wasn’t too harsh and negative on some realities that can be negative because I wanted a slice of the spectrum that was positive as well.’81 Bilal’s comment indicates that an international festival audience impacted the way in which she chose to represent the issues, and was not ‘too harsh and negative on some realities.’82

While these films are often criticized for highlighting a negative aspect of Pakistan, the fact is that these issues are prevalent in our society. Ali Kapadia observes:

…the recent generations of Pakistanis have grown up in a country with mounting problems. These problems are at times embarrassing internationally and every Pakistani tries to figure ways to deal with being associated to them. Some deal with it by

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80 Iram Parveen Bilal interviewed 25th – 29th March 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].
highlighting the issues themselves, some deal with it by disregarding the issues altogether.\textsuperscript{83}

However, the question is not whether or not these issues should be highlighted; it is almost a responsibility of an artist in a society to respond to the societal problems around them. But making films about issues in Pakistan and sending them to international film festivals, while potentially not showing them in Pakistan is problematic.

Explaining the thought process of many filmmakers while choosing there subject Daniyal Ali Khan suggests:\textsuperscript{84}

\textit{Hum samjhte hain kay hum agar koi serious film baneinge to} (we think that if we make a serious film) we might get a response from the rest of the world. If you even look at the \textit{Maula Jat} films, they had a lot of entertainment value. \textit{Usmein jab masses dekhne jati thi tou} (when the masses went to watch them) they would feel satisfied. You need to vent out \textit{aur jis halaat se hum guzar rahe hain} (and the conditions we live in) all the more reason.

Khan suggests the filmmakers look at the entertainment value, rather than trying to tackle ‘serious’ issues to gain global recognition. As discussed previously, the West only wants stories that reiterate their views of Pakistan. When filmmakers stop making films to meet these expectations of the West, the story lines in their film would be more diverse in genre and in content.

Khan further emphasizes the need for a ‘Pakistani style’ of making films.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{83} Kapadia interviewed 29\textsuperscript{th} March – 10\textsuperscript{th} April 2013.
\textsuperscript{84} Khan interviewed 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013.
\textsuperscript{85} Khan interviewed 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013.
You need that touch, what I call an ‘idiom.’ Where is that Pakistani idiom? The story, the actors, the film, should all look Pakistani. *Humari seventies ki jo film thi Waheed Muraad ki usmain Pakistani touch zaroor tha* (Our films from the seventies, featuring Waheed Muraad, definitely had a Pakistani touch). Pakistani independent films may be experimental in nature, and some experiments fail, but Khan sees this experimentation as a healthy step towards finding this ‘*Pakistaniat* (Pakistani touch).’

**Towards a More Holistic View**

There is a need for individuals from different backgrounds to take up filmmaking, only then will we get a more holistic view of Pakistan in the films. Perhaps with DSLR filmmaking and with filmmaking processes getting relatively less expensive, people from different classes can take up the practice? After all, Lancaster does comment on the transformation in the filmmaking process going as far as saying ‘*Hybrid DSLRs started a cinematic revolution…*’

Iram Parveen Bilal agrees, but shares her reservations, ‘…it also creates a certain kind of noise where everyone who owns a camera thinks they are a filmmaker. Story telling is more than pretty shots.’

Filmmaker Adnan Malik elaborates that the current DSLR films are “not really made for cinema per say, they’re more experimental.” He further adds:

> Now there’s quite a few more independent new films, like Jami’s working on a couple of them, and then there’s one called *The Extortionist* that Summer Nicks has made. These

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86 Khan interviewed 2nd April 2013. [Interview was conducted in person, and was recorded and transcribed].
87 Lancaster, *DSLR Cinema: Crafting the Film Look with Video*, p332.
89 Adnan Malik interviewed 29th March 2013. [Interview was conducted via telephone, and was recorded and transcribed].
are a couple of films with a proper business plan, there’s a proper producer, a proper
distribution plan. These films are independent, but they have a proper marketing budget.
That’s the new kind of cinema that’s coming in.  

While DSLRs may have brought about a revolution in terms of filmmaking technologies, to
bring about a cinematic revolution in Pakistan there is need for training and the need for
filmmaking to be seen as a business. Due to the lack of film schools in Pakistan, students usually
need to go to the West to get film education and training, and this process to a large extent self-
selects individuals who can afford such education.

Meenu Gaur emphasizes, “…we will only see a revival of cinema in Pakistan when film
education is made accessible to people across different economic backgrounds.”

Daniyal Ali Khan cites the example of the French New Wave, “French New Wave were film graduates from
film schools in the 60’s and 70’s in France… they shook big time filmmakers” he further adds,
“if you know your craft, you know your tools, you have your knowledge, nothing can stop
you.”

Government policy will also play a role in allowing Pakistani filmmakers from various
backgrounds to come into the industry. Expressing his disarray for the government policy
Hammad Khan states, “They have aided and abetted the slow death of cinema in Pakistan.”
Gaur elaborates, “This can only happen when the Government invests in Film Departments in

90 Malik interviewed 29th March 2013.
91 Gaur interviewed 2nd – 24th April 2013.
92 Khan interviewed 2nd April 2013.
93 Khan interviewed 2nd April 2013.
94 Khan interviewed 17th – 22nd April 2013.
Universities, institutes scholarships, encourages film festivals. Karachi university has some of the brightest film students but absolutely no facilities or equipment- which is such a shame. “

With support from the Government and as filmmakers arise from different economic backgrounds, more varied issues and stories will get featured within the films. As the films would talk about the stories relevant to a wider group of people, the audiences will also be more varied. Gaur agrees, “Not only must filmmakers be from varied economic backgrounds but also the film public i.e audiences should be from varied economic backgrounds.”

Gaur interviewed 2nd – 24th April 2013.
Conclusion

As the study shows, factors including the educational and economic backgrounds of filmmakers, lack of effective business and distribution models for Pakistani cinema, and ample opportunities of screening films in the festival circuit in the West, all impact the choice of themes represented within Pakistani independent feature films.

Until filmmakers start making distribution plans for their films, one of the only avenues for exhibiting their films will continue to be sending their films to film festivals in the West. The dissertation quotes examples of such independent features that were never released in Pakistan after being screened internationally. As previously discussed, this arguably impacts the stories told within these films and the manner in which Pakistan is represented in them. The need is for filmmaking to be seen as more than mere artist expression, and also as a business. ‘Real cinema will come when it’s properly marketed…’ 97

It can be suggested that with support of the government, film education will become more approachable for people from different stratum of society. With this and with the cheapening of digital filmmaking techniques, filmmakers from varied economic backgrounds will come to the forefront.

It is indeed every filmmaker’s right to feature the stories they want to tell within their films, and any film cannot be expected to single-handedly take the ‘responsibility to tell the story of a country’ as Malik puts it. 98 However, as filmmakers come from various economic and social

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97 Malik interviewed 29th March 2013.
98 Malik interviewed 29th March 2013.
backgrounds, and cinema becomes more ‘democratic,’ the themes highlighted within the range of these films will be inclusive and representative of a larger number of people.

Somewhat unexpectedly, this research indicates that while the current state of the Pakistani cinema may have many drawbacks, it may also serve as an opportunity in disguise for independent filmmakers. As Khan suggests, in the absence of a contemporary ‘Pakistani style’ of making films, this experimentation with themes and form, may result in the formulation of a unique Pakistani style of telling stories through the medium of film. Soon out of this experimentation a film may come out that will make audiences think, ‘wow! Iss film ka intezaar tha.’ (Wow! This is the film that we were waiting for). Then the financiers will get interested, it’ll open more opportunities.

While this will certainly be a long process, when/if film schools within Pakistan develop, and the film industry matures enough to start yielding profits, financiers will also start to fund Pakistani independent films. This would then lead a larger number of films produced within Pakistan, by filmmakers from diverse backgrounds, for the audiences within Pakistan and internationally. Inevitably these films will cover a larger number of themes and provide a more diverse view of Pakistan within Pakistani independent films.

99 Malik interviewed 29th March 2013.
100 Khan interviewed 2nd April 2013.
101 Khan interviewed 2nd April 2013.
Bibliography


Appendices

Interview 1:

Azfar Jafri – Director of the film Siyaah.

Interviewed 22nd – 23rd March 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].

Why do you think many Pakistani independent films are premiered at International Film Festivals instead of in Pakistan these days?

This is because of a huge void between the distributors and filmmakers. The growth of cinemas in Pakistan is creating great opportunities for film business and the distributors are playing it safe by purchasing Bollywood and Hollywood films. Since Lollywood has not been producing anything worth watching for over the past two decades, the upcoming indie films are alleged to be waste of time as well. Hence, the filmmakers look towards the international film market, which begins with festivals.

Often when these films are shown in Pakistan, they are screened for select audiences; what are the factors that lead to these private screenings?

One cannot show his/her movie to masses without having permission from the film ministry and censor board. Hence the private screenings!

Do you think these films are targeted towards the Pakistani audiences, or are they made primarily for festivals around the world?

Films are made for people. Whether it is played in a festival or theatre, it must have an audience. I don't think any filmmaker targets the festivals only. A lot of money is invested in the process and it needs to be recovered. Festivals don't guarantee that. But if you get noticed there and you
get to sign a project, it basically pays off everything you've spent. So I believe, the indie films currently in Pakistan are meant for the Pakistani audience but unfortunately they end up in a festival abroad.

**To what extent do you think the target audience of a film affects its content?**

Like I said, film is made for people. If film is water then audience is the glass. You fill the glass with water, the water takes the shape of the glass. It's simple as that.

**What lead to the decision to release ‘Siyaah’ in cinemas nationwide?**

The producer of the film started off with the vision of making a film and then releasing it nationwide. I just took control of the technical aspects and gave him a sellable product.

As per a status on Siyaah’s Facebook page, ‘With a very limited marketing campaign still running HOUSE FULL for a week on most of the Cinemas in Pakistan, even then some of the Cinemas have stopped showing 'Siyaah' the movie because of the "PRESSURE" from certain "lobby's" that doesn't want to promote Pakistani Films.’ Could you elaborate on what lobbies are being referred to and why they are trying to hinder Pakistani films?

Professional jealousies!

**Does it discourage you as a filmmaker to have your movie removed from cinemas, despite doing good business?**

Yes to some extent, but then I have a very supportive team and family. We won’t go quiet that easily :)}
Would you agree that horror films like ‘Siyah’ highlight the fears of the Pakistani people and on some level, act as commentary on our society?

(I'll speak for Siyah only) Yes! Siyah is for the people, by the people.

Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped the Pakistani film industry?

I guess not! Nothing in this world is helping the Pakistani film industry. It has helped the media but not the film industry. It's people like us who are trying to help the industry.

Do you think when making films about Pakistan for international film festivals, filmmakers may tend to represent Pakistan in a certain way? Please elaborate.

Yes of course. Usually films cover issues/culture from the region it's produced in. It's up to the filmmaker how well he/she does it. Some of them project a completely opposite picture, some project the truth and some don't even care.

Do you think when played internationally, Pakistani independent films help show an alternate image of Pakistan?

Yes and no. Really depends on the film and filmmaker. But in any case, the film does leave an impression.

Is it true that many independent filmmakers in Pakistan belong to relatively economically affluent families? If so, do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?
No. Not all filmmakers are from rich families. I think choosing good/bad story for a film comes with experience.

**Would you agree with the statement: Independent Cinema is meant to be ‘parallel cinema’ and should not be confused with films made for the masses?**

I don't agree. Cinema caters masses. The day masses demand indie films, the commercial films business will die eventually. The parallel cinema will become mainstream cinema and the commercial films will be categorized as parallel cinema.

**Do you think Pakistani independent films would be more accessible for Pakistani audiences if there were more film festivals within Pakistan?**

Oh yes. Film festivals always help the industry grow!
Interview 2

Iram Parveen Bilal – Director of the film *Josh*.

Interviewed 25<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> March 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].

**Recently many Pakistani films, including Josh, have premiered at International Film Festivals instead of in Pakistan. What are some of the factors that lead to this decision?**

Firstly, there are no film festivals in Pakistan where these films could premiere. Also, premiering at good prestigious film festivals make the road to pitch to distributors easy. It is always like a bandwagon in filmmaking, when one party jumps on it, everyone else wants to as well.

**Often when these films are shown in Pakistan, they are screened for select audiences; what are the factors that lead to these exclusive private screenings?**

Again, a lack of distribution offers. This is not a filmmaker’s intent. If they get a theatrical deal, they would screen it in cinemas. We works with very small budgets and cannot launch full on self distribution screenings. We need proper distribution deals to show in the country.

**As per your film Josh’s Facebook page, ‘JOSH takes a sneak peek inside Pakistan today-the way you didn't know it.’ Is this film, to some extent, a reaction to the Media’s silence on the issue of feudalism?**

The media doesn’t seem silent on feudalism at all. That is a statement for people outside of Pakistan because it shows the modern, technologically driven youth side by side to the age old feudal society. It shows Pakistan to a foreign audience in a way that is different from what they see on the news. You can see quotes on www.thefilmjosh.com that show us that indeed, people were pleasantly surprised to see a different side of Pakistan. :o)
The films teaser invites the viewers to ‘join the movement’; could you elaborate on how the film is a movement?

We have social action tasks that include donating to Khana Ghar amongst other socially conscious topics we want our audiences to engage in, like feudal retribution crime.

Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped the Pakistani film industry?

It has certainly helped in terms of international festival attention. However given the fact that Pakistani actors are not well known abroad, it doesn’t make the distribution decisions easier since they are not “sellable, established faces” to foreign distributors.

Do you think when making films about Pakistan for international film festivals, filmmakers may tend to represent Pakistan in a certain way? Please elaborate.

I can speak for myself. I was even more conscious to make sure that the film wasn’t too harsh and negative on some realities that can be negative because I wanted a slice of the spectrum that was positive as well. Other than that, I tried to keep it as authentic as possible.

In your experience, does seeing a Pakistani female filmmaker, present an alternate image of the Pakistani woman internationally?

It certainly does. People are shocked that I am a woman in Pakistan and making films. It is a good way to break the stereotype because most Pakistani filmmakers are actually women.

Is it true that many independent filmmakers in Pakistan belong to relatively economically affluent families? If so, do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?

It is generally true since you need a lot of resources I think. In my case, I come from a non-
media, middle class family where I was fortunate to go to good schools because my mother was a teacher and because I got good grades. Of course, one’s socio-economic class affects the kind of films one makes but filmmaking is a business where you need resources and so, sad but true, it self selects people who either have them or have the resilience to go get them and make films. It is also a good filtering mechanism (that you need to have the resilience, for the non rich ones amongst you) because filmmaking is tough and you should only get into it if you want it badly enough to make it happen.

**Do you think with newer, cheaper filmmaking technologies such as DSLRs, people from different classes of Pakistan will be able to tell a wider range of stories?**

They are doing that. So yes. But it also creates a certain kind of noise where everyone who owns a camera thinks they are a filmmaker. Story telling is more than pretty shots.

**Would you agree with the statement, “Independent Cinema is meant to be ‘parallel cinema’ and should not be confused with films made for the masses”?**

No. I find that personally offensive. Yes there are commercial films and non-commercial films but the definition of what is commercial keeps changing with tastes and the time. A good film will find its audience. It just needs the patience of distributors and the audiences.

**Do you think Pakistani independent films would be more accessible for Pakistani audiences if there were more film festivals within Pakistan?**

Yes. But more than film festivals. Filmmakers need a model to recoup the investment in films so a distribution model would be more necessary. And it is coming. Stay tuned for an announcement about JOSH soon insha’Allah. :-o)
Interview 3

Adnan Malik – TV and Film Director, Producer and Actor.

Interviewed 29th March 2013. [Interview was conducted via telephone, and was recorded and transcribed].

What are some of the factors that lead to Pakistani films being premiered internationally?

The major issue is there’s no distribution for smaller films in Pakistan yet. Nadeem Mandviwala the atrium and stuff says he’s going to churn up an initiative where at least digital and low budget films get some kind of screening time and are played at the cinemas. As more cinemas open here there will be more space given, right now because everything is economically driven you only see the big films, which are marketed really well. While these smaller films don’t really have a marketing budget so cinemas don’t end up screening these movies.

That being said there’s a film Siyaah which aired at Atrium, or even ZibahKhana back in the day played in this theatre. But its not easy, there’s no one-stop shop for independent films.

Do you think the limited cinemas are why, even as these films are screened they’re screened for niche audiences?

It’s not easy for a cinema owners to play these films, so what you need is more of an organized initiative because these films are not going to make a lot of money. What ends up happening is that you have a couple of screenings at like a private venue, because it doesn’t make business sense for the cinema owners to play these films.

It also comes down to marketing again. When a film plays at T2F, T2F has its own email newsletter, so they’ll send it out and a hundred people are going to show up, _abhi tak_
independent film culture bhi nahin bana (an ‘independent film culture’ has also not yet been formulated). You can’t really have an independent film culture, without having a mainstream film culture.

In the absence of a ‘mainstream’ cinema, should these independent films be focusing on films made for the masses, rather than niche audiences and the festival circuit?

There’s a couple of ways to make a film. One is that a bunch of students get up, pick up their DSLRs and decide that they’re going to make something. Which is how films like Slackistan or Gol Chakar were made. They’re not really made for cinema per say, they’re more experimental. Filmmakers here don’t really have a plan from the start that this is how we’ll make the film, this is where we’ll get the funds. I think its more about the experience of making the film. But the thing is that when you make films you have to make your money back, because you’re spending a lot of money.

Now there’s quite a few more independent new films, like Jami’s working on a couple of them, and then there’s one called The Extortionist that Summer Nicks has made. These are a couple of films with a proper business plan, there’s a proper producer, a proper distribution plan. So these films are independent, but they have a proper marketing budget. So that’s the new kind of cinema that’s coming in. I think that to make a film you also have to have a plan of how you’re going to release and distribute it, ultimately cinema is a business.

Many independent filmmakers have studied in the West, do you think this ‘Western Influence’ is reflective in the kinds of films they chose to make about Pakistan?

But like which films?
Films like Slackistan, for example.

The problem is that there’s not enough of them coming out, so when a film does come out people are like ‘oh this isn’t about my class, and this isn’t about my background,’ and that’s fine, I mean not every film should have to take on that responsibility to tell the story of a country, that’s an unnecessary expectation.

But sure, when people who live abroad they have a different view, because they’re not here in the day to day. And a lot of it is what is the perception of the Western Media and how is it portraying Pakistan. We’re worried about the ‘image’ of Pakistan but that only matters to people like you and I, people from the upper-middle class who are connected to the outside world. Ninety percent of Pakistani’s are interested in you know job security and education, perhaps, they’re not worried about how the world outside perceives them.

Cinema is becoming more democratic because of the cheaper methods of technology and like DSLRs letting you make films on a lower budget, but still it’s not a purely democratic medium where everyone can get up and express themselves through it.

I’m hoping I the next five to ten years, because there are more colleges are focusing on film and media education and it becomes a part of not just private school curriculums, still not in the public level, you’re going to see more and more interesting stories coming out in the medium of television. But Cinema is not there yet, cinema right now has a long way to go, in terms of becoming a proper sustainable model.

Do you think that with cheaper means of making films people from different socio economic backgrounds will be able to make films? And will this result in a larger range of stories being told?
I feel like some of the questions that you’re asking are sort of disconnected from the reality. There’s television and there’s cinema right. Cinema is actually paying money to go somewhere to see something, television is a very different business model. For so long we’ve watched films on television right, cinema’s a very different experience. Actually cinemas really young here, it actually doesn’t even really exist at this point.

Even though it’s controversial what Indian films have done in Pakistan, what they’ve done is that they’ve brought people back to the cinema houses. Race 2 recently just made ten crores, which is about a million dollars, which means Pakistan is a big market now, not a huge market but a sizeable market. What this does is that suddenly people want to distribute more films here, Pindi main koi dou cinema khul rahe hain, yahan bhi koi aath cinema khul rahe hain, Lahore main cinema khul rahe hain (two cinemas are opening in Pindi, eight are opening here [in Karachi], cinemas are opening in Lahore). You know there’s about fifteen to twenty cinemas opening all across Pakistan. One cinema has the potential to bring in like a crore rupees for one film, so twenty cinemas would mean twenty crores; once you say your film has a twenty crore market then it’ll be safe for people to invest in Pakistani films. That kind of model will only take place once more cinemas open. It’s all economics so; I think in two to three years, as more cinemas increase, we’re going to see more mainstream films coming out. Once that happens then there will be space for smaller independent films also.

Last year there were four films made in Urdu, that’s not a cinema industry, all these independent films are small films that right now will not see the light of day. Now coming to television, that’s the kind of business model where you see diversity, people telling more diverse stories, its maturing. DSLRs and these technologies are still more relevant to television, cinema is still relatively expensive, like if you want to make a film you’ll have to make a DCP which is a
Digital Cinema Projection, most of these cinemas are 2K, which is like high-resolution. You need to have that process, people don’t know enough about how cinema works.

Some of these questions are still kind of premature, until the mainstream industry develops, until the mainstream market falls into place. Right now it’s only going to be the kids who come back from abroad, don’t have jobs, don’t have to get a job because their parents are wealthy enough, so they’ll make a film on the side. Real cinema will come when its properly marketed, even if its independent cinema.

Story telling is still an art form, you still need to somewhat understand it, you don’t have to study it. But I think we’re still not that media literate, I’m sure you’ve made some of the films that people at Indus have made and Szabist have made, and they don’t really have it yet. I think $badle ga lekin paanch saal lageinge$ (things will change, but it’ll take about five years), and when that happens you’ll have stories coming from more diverse backgrounds.

Do you think if there are more film festivals within Pakistan these films would have avenues to screen within Pakistan and not be screened exclusively abroad?

Absolutely, and I think that’s a really valid point, I think film festivals are places where you can show independent cinema in a much more supportive manner. I think if a festival like Kara was around right now all these films would play there. I think that’ll be the first step towards facilitating independent cinema in Pakistan.
Interview 4

Ayeshah Alam Khan – Television Actor, Filmmaker and Blogger.

Interviewed 29th – 30th March 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].

What do you think are some of the factors that result in Pakistani filmmakers choosing to premiere their (feature) films at Film Festivals abroad rather than in Pakistan?

Look to one needs to understand what film festivals are for… it is to showcase one’s films..hopefully get a distributor and if one is really lucky ..sign on to make another film. Film festivals are where you hope to wow the audience and start to build a name for yourself.. so showcasing one’s films at festivals is a good way for producers and directors to go. Some of the festivals prefer to have films be shown for the first time at their events which may be why many prefer to premiere their films at these festivals. So what? If in the long run it helps the film makers then why not? Specially since that kind of infrastructure and support is hard to come by in Pakistan.

Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped Pakistani filmmakers and artists?

Well if there is an interest then naturally stories that come out of Pakistan have a potential viewership. Again, that’s a good thing. Some film makers are there for the love of film, some are there because they want their stories told, some want to make it big and become rich and famous and some all of the above. None of those reasons are the wrong reasons, if they are good story tellers and there is a willing audience… supply and demand…
Do you think when making films about Pakistan for international film festivals, some filmmakers choose to work with themes that tend to be well received in the West? If so, please elaborate.

In order to get acceptance in the west for one’s films.. some film makers do pander to the crowd. They tell the stories they know the audience wants to hear. They get the right “ingredients” or the formula and make a film .. voila presto.. It takes a bold and skillful film maker to produce something engaging and yet find an audience that is willing to see a different story from the one they expect. Again, both have a market… neither is wrong.. film makers will make films.. that is their job

Filmmakers like Sharmeen Obaid Chinnoy have been criticized for further promoting a negative image of Pakistan abroad. Do you think this is a fair criticism?

No I don’t think that is a fair criticism. She is a film maker. She is not the President of Pakistan. She is not a diplomat. Her job is to tell stories that interest her and she feels would have an audience. Her stories have an audience. Instead of blaming the story, perhaps we would do well to listen to those stories, learn from them and if as a nation we don’t like it… make the changes necessary so that the story becomes irrelevant.

Is it true that many independent filmmakers in Pakistan belong to relatively economically affluent families? If so, do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?

Film making is not cheap. It costs a lot of money. Along with money one needs to have the freedom to be able to go off and make those films and not worry about paying the bills at home. So independent film makers tend to come from economically affluent families by and large.
Does it limit the stories they tell? I don’t think so. There is space for everyone and even people from affluent families have stories to tell. That really is subjective thing and it all depends on the film maker themselves.. their own experiences, their philosophies, their belief systems that will drive the kind of stories they want to tell

Many new independent filmmakers have received their education abroad. Do you think this could result in altering their view of Pakistan, and if so is this reflective in their films?

Why should education abroad result in altering their view of Pakistan. If anything, it should open their minds to new ways of doing things, presenting things. It all comes back to the story. A film is never make by a film maker alone. It is a collaborative piece of work usually with all kinds of people on a team that help shape the film. A good film maker will take everyone on board and knit a story that is only made richer by the different complexities of the story as much as by the people working on them. At the end of the day, a film maker is a story teller. And he or she has the right to tell his or her own stories. Whether people like them or not… is their choice. That’s what makes film making such an art
Interview 5

Daniyal Ali Khan – Filmmaker, Film Critic and Ex-Dean of the South Asian Academy of Motion Arts and Television

Interviewed 2\textsuperscript{nd} April 2013. [Interview was conducted in person, and was recorded and transcribed].

As per my research many Pakistani filmmakers send their films to film festivals in hopes of getting media attention and distribution, why do you think most of the films are still not getting distribution and getting released here?

We don’t follow the formula of making movies, we have some really great talent, some young filmmakers have now come in and are experimenting. But *hum yeh chez nahi samjhe rahe hain ke hum film cinema ko revive kar rahe hain ya hum apne survival ki baat kar rahe hain* (what we’re not understanding is that are we reviving film cinema or are we talking about our survival), there is a difference.

Either your film industry was established, and you had went through twenty years or thirty years of learning process, and then you’d understand *ke film banti kaisay hain* (how films are made). Because at the end of the day we’re looking for audience response, because that’s how you make money and [10 seconds] the revenue actually pops in through the box office. You pay the ticket and then you watch the film.

*Hum yeh kar rahe hain ke hum buhut serious subjects ko dekh rahe hain, chahey woh documentaries hoon ya feature length film ho.* (What we’re doing is that we we’re looking at very serious subjects, be it in our documentaries or feature length films). India has acquired the craft and art of telling stories, *kuch usmein asey bhi hai jo ke educated loth hai, jo key film
school graduates hain (some of them are from the educated loth, who are film school graduates), India has about thirty plus film schools. Now the young loth is also coming into the industry and are experimenting, *aur woh experimental films apko buhut nazar ati hain, kyunke India ke pass itna room hai ke woh experimental film bhi banarahe hain* (and you see a lot of those experimental films, because India has enough room for even making experimental films). Look at *Kahani*, Amir Khan’s *Talaash*, that’s not a studio film, it’s an independent film, Amir Khan is a private limited company. They can do that, *humein yeh hai ke* (the thing with us is that) we need to sort of reflect. *Entertainment mangti hai public, aur apne film banani kiske liyeh hai? Masses ke liyeh.* (The public demands entertainment, and who are you to make films for? For the masses). You can’t narrow down your audience and say this is for the intellectuals, for the learned, pseudos, maybe, *unke liyeh film banaonga, nahin yaar* (I’ll make films for them, no buddy). We fail to understand film is primarily business. *Hum samjhte hain kay hum agar koi serious film baneinge to* (we think that if we make a serious film) we might get a response from the rest of the world. If you even look at the *Maula Jutt* films, they had a lot of entertainment value. *Usmein jab masses dekhne jati thi tou* (when the masses went to watch them) they would feel satisfied. You need to vent out *aur jis halaat se hum guzar rahe hain* (and the conditions we live in) all the more reason.

Everyone has a story to tell, you have a story, I have quite a few stories. *Ap aik chokidaar ke pass bhi chale jaen,* (Even if you go up to a watchman,) he’ll have a story to tell. But you can’t tell them through film without studying ‘film form.’ You’ll first need to regain your audiences trust, they have lost trust and faith in you.

**When making films to send to film festivals abroad, do you think filmmakers tend to focus on certain themes?**
I think an example is a recent documentary that won an Oscar, *film aik aesa medium hai jismein funding is required, humein government ki taraf se to koi help nahin mili, na mujhe lagta hai ke milegi. Na koi financial institutions aese hain jokey loans provide karain to filmmakers* (film is the type of medium that requires funding, we have gotten no help from the government, and I doubt we’ll get any support in the future. There are no such financial institutions that would provide loans to filmmakers). To be able to attract attention, to gain global presence, you may come up with something tragic or sad, that’s very easy.

**How can Pakistani cinema set itself apart from cinemas of other countries?**

*Apki film main Pakistaniat zarori hai, yeh nahin ke apne India ki film copy karli, jo ke buhut hua hai* (Your film needs that Pakistani touch, you can’t copy an Indian film, which has happened a lot in the past). An Irani film would look Irani, an Indian film would look Indian, no matter what they do, even if they try to copy a Pakistani film, people will say “it looks Indian.”

You need that touch, what I call an ‘idiom.’ Where is that Pakistani idiom? The story, the actors, the film, should all look Pakistani. *Humari seventies ki jo film thi Waheed Muraad ki usmain Pakistani touch zaroor tha* (Our films from the seventies, featuring Waheed Muraad, definitely had a Pakistani touch). It’s good; the experimentation that’s going on is great. Soon a film will come out of these that will make us go, “*wow! Iss film ka intezaar tha.*” (Wow! This is the film that we were waiting for). Then the financiers will get interested, it’ll open more opportunity.

**Do you think when film students in film schools like SAAMPT will be able to bring about a change in the way that things are running?**

Oh definitely, yes. When they go into the market they’ll be a force to reckon with. This is how the French New Wave came. French New Wave were film graduates, from film schools, in the
sixties and seventies in France. They came and they started writing magazines on film *aur woh film critics bangae* (and they became film critics). *Baray baray filmmakers hil gae they* (Big time filmmakers shook), that’s how these students got in.

If you know your craft, you know your tools, you have the knowledge, nothing can stop you.
Interview 6

Ali Kapadia – Filmmaker.

Interviewed 29th March – 10th April 2013. [Interview was conducted via Facebook].

What do you think are some of the factors that result in Pakistani filmmakers choosing to premiere their (feature) films at Film Festivals abroad rather than in Pakistan?

Film festivals in Pakistan have not really gained as much traction. The film festival going audience is usually a sector of your general cinema going audience. Simply put, they enjoy films more than others and demand more varieties. It’s kind of like how if we are hungry, we would be open to going to a certain known restaurants as general consumers, but only a select few of us will go to a food festival geared towards exploring new cuisines, not because we’re hungry but because we want to explore other varieties of foods for the sake of the experience itself.

Sometimes, the supply can make its own demand. This was somewhat the case with Kara Film Festival. Kara chose to supply the sort of films that appealed to a certain sector of the masses and they were still generating some level of attention, especially with the youth. However, Kara isn’t there anymore.

Taking all of the above in to account, I do not think the filmmakers deliberately choose the festivals abroad over festivals in Pakistan. They simply do not have the kind of opportunities they need to get enough exposure within Pakistan. If Kara was still around, I believe these

filmmakers would be applying to Kara before any other festival abroad. They work hard on their films, I think its fair for them to try to get exposure wherever they can.

**Often when these films are shown in Pakistan, they are screened for select audiences; what are the factors that lead to these private screenings?**

These private screenings for select audiences are not done as a preferred option. They usually happen because that’s the best the filmmaker can do at that point. A filmmaker is not a film exhibitor. They don’t own cinemas, and until their film is picked up by a film exhibitor with a marketing budget, they really don’t have much of an option but to put in the effort to find a venue, arrange a projector and a sound system, announce an event over social media and screen the film to the audience they can cater. Of course they also want their film to remain exclusive and not over-watched, so that it still has its charm for the cinemas and film exhibitors, since every filmmaker dreams of screening their film in cinemas.

**Do you think these films are targeted towards the Pakistani audiences, or are they made primarily for festivals around the world?**

In my opinion, there is often a disconnect between what independent filmmakers want to make and what the Pakistani audience wants to see. If you were to ask the filmmakers, they will usually tell you that their films are targeted towards the Pakistani masses.

I have talked a lot in the past about what I believe the Pakistani audience wants. I have strongly emphasized on understanding the films from 60s-70s to understand who the Pakistani audience really is. Sure it has transformed since the 70s, but the fundamentals are still the same.
International audiences are curious about Pakistan, so even if a Pakistani film does not resonate with Pakistanis, it can still have a good chance with international festivals.

**Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped the Pakistani film industry?**

No it hasn’t helped the film industry at all. Yes there is interest in the subject of Pakistan, but there is quite a difference between what the Pakistani audience wants to see, and what the politically conscious international audience wants to see.

**Do you think when making films about Pakistan for international film festivals, some filmmakers choose to work with themes that tend to be well received in the West? If so, please elaborate.**

If the filmmaker is aiming for international festivals, sure it makes sense for them to pick themes that resonate well with that audience. I do not see much wrong with it unless of course the theme pushes some heinous agenda or tells lies. Sure, it helps if the filmmaker is tasteful in picking the subject.

**Filmmakers like Sharmeen Obaid Chinnoy have been criticized for further promoting a negative image of Pakistan abroad. Do you think this is a fair criticism?**

Let’s start by accepting the fact that none of the issues highlighted in her documentary were fabricated. They’re all real, so no wrongdoing was done on that part. The only part that remains is the choice of the subject, which the filmmaker has every right to. She chose a subject she felt strongly about. Criticizing her for it sends out the wrong message to filmmakers who want to
work on other issues in Pakistan. It’s like asking reporters to not report issues because they’re negative.

I think what’s really going on here is that the recent generations of Pakistanis have grown up in a country with mounting problems. These problems are at times embarrassing internationally and every Pakistani tries to figure ways to deal with being associated to them. Some deal with it by highlighting the issues themselves, some deal with it by disregarding the issues altogether. The disregard may render as denial, mentioning some other country with worse issues, over-emphasizing other positives to outweigh the negatives, or just blaming foreign agents.

I absolutely do not mean to ignore the fact that there is discomfort that comes to Pakistanis with the international visibility on the issues in Pakistan due to that film. That doesn’t mean that it is the film that is to be criticized. It’s the issue that needs to be criticized. After all, to highlight it was the purpose of the film. Sure, one can argue that she could have chosen to highlight a positive subject, but it’s sad to see no one notice the positive she has been doing through her other documentary series.

Secondly, most of the criticizers are unaware of the fact that SOC’s documentary, at the end, actually praises the Pakistani system. It has an uplifting ending, where the Pakistani parliament does take a harsh stance on the issue, hence promoting a positive and growingly responsible image of the country. Again, I see no one mention this.

This brings me to why we see such excessive criticisms in the first place. I think the underlying problem that gives birth to such criticisms is really an overall “hero deficit” in the Pakistani media content. The country is craving for more role models to counter the tremendous despair. The heroes we have right now are just not enough. Abdul Sattar Edhi and Imran Khan are not
enough. We crave stories of people who do amazing things, who make you want to be like them, who motivate you to lead your life by their examples. No matter what Maula Jutt did to the Pakistani film industry, it is important to understand why he was so popular. At a time when a common Pakistani feels crushed by poverty, at a time when a poor man feels helpless to oppression, terror, guns and bullets, here was a common man... and bullets didn’t stop him. No matter how many times you shot him, he just, wouldn’t, die! Now that… is a Pakistani hero.

**Is it true that many independent filmmakers in Pakistan belong to relatively economically affluent families? If so, do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?**

That is true. It is also true that it is limiting the kinds of stories that can be told. This is really the elephant in the room.

Film unfortunately is still an expensive form of art. Adding to that, it doesn’t pay. Filmmakers from affluent families manage to survive better. Such filmmakers are at risk of creating films that do not resonate with Pakistanis who haven’t lived such affluent lives.. which frankly is the majority of Pakistan.

I have talked extensively in the past about why it is important to not lose focus on your audience. To please your audience is your final and absolute goal as a filmmaker, to get lost in solely pleasing the artist within you, is not just selfish, but also disrespectful to the time and money your audience spends on your film. Here, the filmmaker needs to strike a fine balance. Yes, it is important to express yourself, but it is equally important to understand why people take the time of their day to come to the cinema when they can be entertained at home.
There is a big difference between depicting situations after experiencing them, and depicting situations after looking at them from far. Ignoring this difference is equal to settling for mediocrity. This brings me back to emphasizing the importance of understanding successful Pakistani films from the 60s and 70s. I mean Aina from 1977 did a Quadruple Diamond Jubilee (400 Weeks in Theaters). You just don’t hit those numbers without doing something right with your audience. There is a lot to be learned from that era that new filmmakers often find boring.

**Do you think with newer, cheaper filmmaking technologies such as DSLRs coming up, people from different classes of Pakistan will be able to tell a wider range of stories?**

I agree. This certainly will help. I have no doubt that we are going to see some amazing things come out of the Pakistani film scene. At this point, it’s just a matter of time.

**Many new independent filmmakers have received their education abroad. Do you think this could result in altering their view of Pakistan, and if so is this reflective in their films?**

Everyone is different. It is hard to say how much each person gets influenced by being abroad or learning in an international institution. I never studied abroad. I can’t comment much on that.

**Would you agree with the statement, “Independent Cinema is meant to be ‘parallel cinema’ and should not be confused with films made for the masses”?**

To some degree, yes, but the line is blurring. The term “independent” refers to cheaper films, made for a selective audience. There is much that can be done cheaply today. I believe that you can make a film “independently” for the masses and still get away with it in small industry such as Pakistan.
Do you think Pakistani independent films would be more accessible for Pakistani audiences if there were more film festivals within Pakistan?

Yes, they would be. Like I’ve mentioned before, it’s really the content that needs to resonate with the audience first. If you supply what the audience demands, they will come themselves.
Interview 7

Vasi Hasan – TV and Film Director, Producer and DOP, Visiting Lecturer at Beaconhouse National University, Lahore.

Interviewed 3rd – 18th April 2013. [Interview was conducted via Facebook].

While trying to find out why Pakistani filmmakers premiere their films at film festivals abroad instead of within Pakistan, I find many filmmakers saying they do this in hopes of getting distribution for their films. Why do you think these films still do not end up getting distribution?

Too put it simply, they don’t get distribution because they aren’t good enough. The City of God was a ‘non-english’ film, it never had problems finding a buyer or getting distributed because it was a brilliant film.

If a brilliant film comes out of Pakistan that hits all the right emotional notes, it would get picked up by distributors and be shown around the world.

Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped Pakistani filmmakers and artists?

It’s helped us in the sense that people now want to see more of Pakistan, and it has made Pakistan more sellable to a global audience – what doesn’t help, I suppose, is that they want terrorism related stories from Pakistan.

Do you think when making films about Pakistan for international film festivals, some filmmakers choose to work with themes that tend to be well received in the West? If so, please elaborate.
There haven’t been enough mainstream films made in Pakistan for me to answer this question correctly.

Filmmakers like Sharmeen Obaid Chinnoy have been criticized for further promoting a negative image of Pakistan abroad. Do you think this is a fair criticism?

I haven’t seen enough of her work to comment on that. Please note that Sharmeen’s Oscar awarded film was produced by an American production house, who’ve been nominated twice before for the award.

Many new independent filmmakers have received their education abroad. Do you think the time they spend abroad could result in altering their view of Pakistan, and if so is this reflective in their films?

The more time you spend outside Pakistan, the more you realize how much Pakistan sucks. Nothing works in our country, unfortunately. And that is exactly the reason why there are 3 U.S film graduates in Pakistan currently working in the industry, with a combined count of 0 (Zero) films that they’ve made, so far.

Indian writer and philosopher Gayatri Spivak has long spoken regarding the problems of an outsider speaking on behalf of a group which doesn’t have the means to speak for itself. Pakistani Filmmakers often chose to tell stories about classes lower than their own, how do you respond to this criticism as a filmmaker?

Which filmmakers? I don’t even know any Pakistani filmmakers who are making films for distribution. If films do get made in Pakistan, and they are about the lower socio-economic class,
it’s probably because they represent 90% of our population, and that’s more likely to sell in the developed world then ‘Slakistan’ – which wasn’t bought by any distributor.

Since film is an expensive medium, many independent filmmakers in Pakistan seem to come from relatively economically affluent families. Do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?

Culture always plays a huge part in how you tell stories, or the kind of stories you’re attracted to. If somebody who has studied in the U.S makes a film, he/she is obviously going to be influenced by that culture and it would show in their story, or at least in the treatment.

Do you think with newer, cheaper filmmaking technologies such as DSLRs coming up people from different classes of Pakistan will be able to tell a wider range of stories?

Yes, technology is getting cheaper so people who previously couldn’t afford a film camera can now tell a story with a mobile phone. However, it’s the distribution that plays a bigger role in this. There aren’t any films being made in Pakistan not because technology is expensive to shoot a film, but because distributors feel safer buying Indian films rather than banking on a local production.

Would you agree with the statement, “Independent Cinema is meant to be ‘parallel cinema’ and should not be confused with films made for the masses”?

Independent Cinema is a U.S term which basically means a film that hasn’t been funded by one of the big studios – any independently funded film is an independent film, regardless of subject matter. Parallel cinema is an Indian term, referring to pretty much the same thing.
Do you think Pakistani independent films would be more accessible for Pakistani audiences if there were more film festivals within Pakistan?

People don’t watch films in festivals, they watch them in cinemas, and that’s what Pakistan lacks. Festivals are places where distributors go to buy films that the major studios aren’t producing themselves. The Pakistani distributors (all 4 of them) feel that spending 75 to 90 lac on an Indian big budget film is a safer bet than spending at least 1 crore on a Pakistani feature – which is how much it would cost to make a ‘masala film’. I’d tend to agree with them. I would think that TV should probably play a larger part in promoting Pakistani cinema, until more cinema screens are built and it becomes a bit more cost effective.
Interview 8

Osman Khalid Butt – Theatre-Director, Writer of the film Siyaah, Actor of the films Zibahkhana and Slackistan.

Interviewed 19th March – 19th April 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].

Why do you think many independent films including ‘Zibahkhana’ and ‘Slackistan’ were premiered at International Film Festivals instead of in Pakistan?

In my opinion, it’s sheer strategy: filmmakers opt for international festivals because of the buzz it generates locally. From our media to sponsors to distributors to the audience, when people see that the film’s been screened abroad and received that international… thappa, let’s call it, it generates that much more curiosity to see the film. There’s a general apathy regarding locally produced films; our industry is still recuperating from its flat-lining in the 80s, and it’s not like producers or the government for that matter are being generous to upcoming talent. There’s no grants, little monetary support, a lack of technical facilities, and a general lack of interest, especially for the indie film scene. The public still associates our cinema with the gandaasa-culture seen in Punjabi films; ‘Lollywood’ is more punch-line than a respected industry.

Often when these films are shown in Pakistan, they are screened for select audiences; what are the factors that lead to these private screenings?

Unless you’re talking premieres, I disagree. Premieres obviously cater to the who’s who of the industry, as well as the media for promotional purposes. However, Zibahkhana was screened in cinemas for the general public, and Omar Ali Khan [the director] went one step further; he had premieres in educational institutions, like LUMS in Lahore. It really depends on the content and your target market. A Chooriyan [Syed Noor] and a Zibahkhana cater to different audiences.
Slackistan unfortunately found itself banned because while erotic gyrations on a *manji* are acceptable for our censor board, talking about the Taliban and using the word ‘lesbian’ [all in context and not for shock value] is where they draw the line. Slackistan did have a private screening in Islamabad, but that was because there was an audience that wanted to see the film despite the ban, especially because the city itself was a prominent character in the film. I’m sure Hammad Khan [the director of Slackistan] would have preferred an open screening.

**Do you think these films are targeted towards the Pakistani audiences, or are they made primarily for festivals around the world?**

With Slackistan, I believe the fault lied in its marketing; people were expecting a buddy-comedy in the vein of India’s *Dil Chahta Hai*, because its trailer seemed to indicate as such. What it *actually* was was something a bit more muted, a bit more serious. It was hard to accept the languid pace, the focus on characters more than plot, and the fact that it was an indie film in every sense of the word. We’re used to our films being a bit louder, colorful, melodramatic. But Slackistan was very Pakistani at heart. I mean, yes, its voice was urban and perhaps not massy, but that was the writer-director’s *choice*. I suppose the real question is: who is your Pakistani audience? It could be someone who frowns upon the Bollywood kitsch and adores a *Black Swan*, or it could be a die-hard action lover, or someone who only subscribes to Shoaib Mansoor’s brand of cinema. Unfortunately we only produce what two or three films a year, so when a film like Slackistan comes out it’s branded as being myopic and niche. Were we a full-fledged industry that welcomed different genres [much like Bollywood: for every Rowdy Rathore there’s a *Barfi* or a *Kahaani*], Slackistan would probably have been embraced more.
Zibahkhana, on the other hand, was very massy, at least in my opinion. Sure, it was camp horror, but the characters belonged to practically every background/class; the situations familiar to anyone who’s heard cautionary tales from their grandmothers or seen any horror film.

I don’t think both filmmakers set out to only appease an international market.

**To what extent do you think the target audience of a film affects its content?**

I suppose every screenwriter pens a script keeping in mind a specific audience. Language, setting, characterization, movement of plot – it all depends on exactly who you’re targeting. Of course, there are some stories that are universal, but overall that’s why we have genre classifications. A sci-fi buff might not be interested in the latest Jennifer Aniston rom-com; viewers who swear by *The Notebook* might not want to watch the latest Michael Bay film.

**What lead to the decision to release ‘Siyaah’ in cinemas nationwide?**

Imran Raza Kazmi, the producer of *Siyaah*, always wanted a nationwide release for his film. He chose a familiar concept because he felt audiences could relate to it.

**Would you agree that horror films like ‘Siyaah’ highlight the fears of the Pakistani people and on some level, act as commentary on our society?**

Absolutely. There were several nods to superstitious beliefs, latching on to charlatan *Pirs* and the irrational belief that their hocus pocus will magically solve your problems, tests of faith and the like.

**Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped the Pakistani film industry?**
I won’t deny the fact that there’s an intense curiosity factor about Pack-is-tan [how foreigners pronounce our country’s name], and it has put whatever we produce in the spotlight, but our problems right now aren’t with a lack of international exposure. They’re much more basic: equipments, resources, lack of motivation, politics, the risk factor involved, etc.

**To what extent would you say ‘Slackistan’ was a reaction to Pakistan’s image around the world?**

To no extent. The main characters of *Slackistan* belonged to affluent backgrounds; they drove nice cars, wore Western clothing, spoke in English peppered with Urdu, went to parties, had relationships... but that’s your urban youth right there. Those were the characters the director chose to highlight – and that wasn’t out of any pressure to showcase a different, more liberal side of Pakistan to the world, it was because his protagonist was an aspiring filmmaker who lacked motivation and was facing a severe disconnect with the realities of his country. All that’s in the film but somehow all people seem to think is that it’s our answer to *Girls Gone Wild*.  

**Do you think films such as ‘Zibakhhana’ help show an alternate image of Pakistan when screened abroad?**

Oh, most definitely. And it’s not strictly about showing an ‘alternate’ image, it’s about showcasing creativity. I suppose, for example, a lot of hue and cry was made locally over the scenes depicting substance abuse in both *Zibakhhana* and *Slackistan*, but the reason those films were made was not to proclaim in bold to an international audience: look, we’re just like you! Here: a bunch of delinquent teenagers with sex on their mind just like in the *American Pie* series, only with zombies and a veiled murderer! *Zibakhana*, with all its horror-movie tropes [the virgin who lives till the end credits, the stoner who kicks the bucket in the initial reels] showcased a
unique villain [‘Burqaman’] who made his place amongst the Freddy Kruegers and the Jasons of horror cinema. *Slackistan* was a slice-of-life, coming-of-age movie that had emotions people the world over could relate to: indecisiveness, aimlessness, the inability to move beyond a bubble; to throw away that safety blanket, so to speak. Both were stories that the writer-directors wanted to share with the world. And they were embraced, and how: *Zibahkhana* won Best Film at the Fantaspoa film festival, Brazil, the Jury Award for Best Film of 2008 at the Riofan Film Festival, Brazil, and the Jury’s Special Award for Best Gore 2007 at the Fantastic Film Festival, Austin, Texas. *Slackistan* played at the Cannes, amongst other prestigious film festivals. Did they show an alternate image of Pakistan, beyond the ‘terrorist’ tag we’re unfortunately stuck with? Of course. But more importantly, they showcased that our country has interesting storytellers, and that love for cinema is a universal emotion.

**Is it true that many independent filmmakers in Pakistan belong to relatively economically affluent families? If so, do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?**

I can’t speak for the entire fraternity, but that’s not an indicator of someone’s storytelling abilities or their idea of the perfect film. You had a Mehreen Jabbar who directed *Ramchand Pakistani*; Shoaib Mansoor highlights societal issues in his films. Both are not exactly what you’d call in an economical red zone, and that’s putting it mildly. What limits the kind of stories you tell only depends on how limited your vision is.

**Would you agree with the statement, “Independent Cinema is meant to be ‘parallel cinema’ and should not be confused with films made for the masses”?**
At this point, I believe we should be shedding the labels and uniting for a common cause: rebuilding an all-but-dead industry from scratch. I don’t consider *Khuda Ke Liye* or *Bol* to be very mass-oriented films [not in terms of theme but in terms of entertainment value] but their content struck a chord with both masses and classes alike; both were monster hits.

**Do you think Pakistani independent films would be more accessible for Pakistani audiences if there were more film festivals within Pakistan?**

Definitely. Film festivals with lineups that merge the established with the upcoming [filmmakers], that encourage diversity in content and promote your product to the fullest – the more there are festivals and such opportunities, the more films you’ll see… and the more your audiences will be able to trust our cinema again.
Interview 9

Hammad Khan – Filmmaker of the film Slackistan.

Interviewed 17th – 22nd April 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].

Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped Pakistani filmmakers and artists?

Not really. The interest in Pakistan is in the news media and mainly to do with the Taliban and extremism. Film financiers, festival programmers and distributors are a different story. It is always a struggle.

Do you think when making films about Pakistan for international film festivals, some filmmakers choose to work with themes that tend to be well received in the West? If so, please elaborate.

I don’t think so. But I cannot speak for other people’s inner minds. I don’t know why I make the films I make except it is a compulsion.

Filmmakers like Sharmeen Obaid Chinnoy have been criticized for further promoting a negative image of Pakistan abroad. Do you think this is a fair criticism?

I don’t like Pakistan’s obsession with positive and negative images, holding everything up against this test. It is one of the things that truly irritates me, as an artist. If Sharmeen is criticized for her work, it should be with better quality of critique than this.

Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy is a social rights campaigner first, an ambassador second and a broadcast journalist third. I don’t really regard her as a filmmaker. I mean that in the nicest way.

Would you agree that many independent filmmakers come from financially affluent backgrounds? And if so, do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?
No. I don’t come from an affluent financial background. I borrowed some money to make Slackistan, which I still owe. Anyone is free to be that crazy if they like. There are hardly any films so I don’t know what limits you are talking about. When there are fifty films a year, maybe you can start talking about such trends.

Your film Slackistan’s trailer states, ‘If you think you know Pakistan, think again’, could you elaborate on who you wanted to re-evaluate Pakistan, and if this statement was primarily a reaction to Pakistan’s image in the International Media?

That was never a trailer intended for public consumption. Then, The Guardian ran an early piece and asked me to add some video teaser. So, this became the online trailer and I never made one after that.

I don’t think that caption should have been taken so seriously. It is open ended. It is whatever you want it to be. Actually, I don’t even remember exactly what I meant at the time.

Was there a difference in the way the film was perceived by audiences at film festivals abroad, and audiences in Pakistan?

The diaspora South Asian audiences seem to respond strongly, in places like New York and especially Abu Dhabi. I don’t think too many Westerners saw the film though. But I did sell it to The Sundance Channel, so now it plays on TV in places like France and Poland.

In Pakistan, it didn’t release properly because of the censor issues. I don’t know what the exact feeling was with people as there was no communal experience to judge. I know a lot of people have seen the film through torrents and pirated DVDs.

Do you think the ban on the film locally may have helped it get even more attention internationally?
It got some instant press around the world, yes. But the attention is always fleeting. I had a three city cinema deal for release in Pakistan with Cinepax, so the film lost money as a result of the censor board controversy.

The women in *Slackistan* are the opposite of the stereotypical burka-clad women portrayed in the West. How was this alternative depiction of the Pakistani women perceived at film festivals internationally?

I imagine it was mostly disappointment amongst Westerners and maybe mixed feelings amongst South Asian audiences. Most people in the West still love to see a Burka-clad Pakistani woman on the big screen and horrible men with beards abusing her.

How do the Pakistani government policies affect the films being produced in Pakistan?

They have aided and abetted the slow death of cinema in Pakistan.
Interview 10

Meenu Gaur – Writer and Director of the film *Zinda Bhaag* and Film Academic.

Interviewed 2nd – 24th April 2013. [Interview was conducted by email].

I’ve been speaking with certain filmmakers and they’ve been saying that they send their films to film festivals to get distribution for their films. Why do you think these films still do not end up getting distribution?

Actually the relationship you are making here between film festivals and distribution is erroneous. Some very big film festivals like Cannes, Berlinale, Pusan, Goa- have something called ‘Film Markets’. Here the distributors and producers from the world over come to buy and sell films. These are highly competitive markets and getting into them is itself not very easy.

Generally speaking film festivals give you a visibility, publicity (if you win accolades), they are spaces keenly watched by the film fraternity so for a filmmaker it is important to be recognized in these spaces. Also it is important to understand that there are now countless film festivals around the world. Unless your film wins recognition in one of the really big film festivals or ends up in an equally big film market, there will be little impact on distribution.

Given the world’s political scenario, people from around the world are more interested in stories from Pakistan. Has this in anyway helped Pakistani filmmakers and artists?

I think we will have better films from Pakistan when no one feels the need or pressure to tell stories limited to the geopolitical significance of Pakistan.

Do you think when making films about Pakistan for international film festivals, some filmmakers choose to work with themes that tend to be well received in the West? If so, please elaborate.

I don’t think there are enough films being made in Pakistan yet to make such an accusation! Not yet!

Filmmakers like Sharmeen Obaid Chinnoy have been criticized for further promoting a negative image of Pakistan abroad. Do you think this is a fair criticism?

I have never understood what ‘negative’ image means. The world over filmmakers make films on the reality surrounding them.

Many new independent filmmakers have received their education abroad. Do you think the time they spend abroad could result in altering their view of Pakistan, and if so is this reflective in their films?

This is surprising phenomenon and usually doesn’t happen elsewhere. I think we will only see a revival of cinema in Pakistan when film education is made accessible to people across different economic backgrounds. This can only happen when the Government invests in Film
Departments in Universities, institutes scholarships, encourages film festivals. Karachi university has some of the brightest film students but absolutely no facilities or equipment- which is such a shame. Not only must filmmakers be from varied economic backgrounds but also the film public i.e audiences should be from varied economic backgrounds. I don’t think we can talk about a revolution, revival, reconstruction of the Pakistan film industry till that happens. The Pakistan film industry i.e Lollywood and the present day TV industry have engaged people from across social and economic classes. Which is why both have had success. I know that Lollywood has collapsed but that is because of tremendous apathy. But it was a very successful industry for decades prior to its collapse.

**Is it true that many independent filmmakers in Pakistan belong to relatively economically affluent families? If so, do you think this limits the kind of stories they chose to tell within their films?**

Same as above.

**Indian writer and philosopher Gayatri Spivak has long spoken against the problems of an outsider speaking on behalf of a group, which doesn’t have the means to speak for itself. Filmmakers often chose to tell stories about classes lower than their own, how do you respond to this criticism as a filmmaker?**

I don’t think you can deploy that essay so literally. It doesn’t mean that essentially one MUST only speak for oneself. In fiction that would be an impossibility. When Spivak speaks of the space occupied by the ‘subaltern’ subject and in particular women she is opening up the long ‘silences’ of history. She is speaking of the ‘muting’ of certain marginalized voices. It’s a very important essay as it very radically calls attention to the relationship between knowledge production and power. I think artists or writers who are privileged have to be constantly critically aware of their privilege when thinking, writing or involved in any other form of artistic endeavor.

**Do you think with newer, cheaper filmmaking technologies such as DSLRs coming up, people from different classes of Pakistan will be able to tell a wider range of stories?**

Yes, I think there will be more and varied films. But will they be able to cut through distribution and will people be able to see them except on social media- I’m not so sure. While technology has become accessible, the business of film, or the market of film remains as inaccessible.

**Would you agree with the statement, “Independent Cinema is meant to be ‘parallel cinema’ and should not be confused with films made for the masses”?**

No I don’t agree.

**Do you think Pakistani independent films would be more accessible for Pakistani audiences if there were more film festivals within Pakistan?**

Yes.