WHEN I WAS GROWING up in Pakistan in the 1980s, the combination of cultural censorship by the Islamic Republic and the ban on foreign imports stunted any prospects for global cinephile development. With cinemas shuttered, VHS bootlegging thrived but was largely focused on Bollywood’s tackiest melodramas. During any rare evening broadcast of an English-language film on state television, scenes deemed “non-halal” would abruptly transition into large pixelated forms instead of being spliced out altogether. Even in Jim Henson’s largely puppet-driven Labyrinth (1986): I learned only years later that David Bowie and Jennifer Connelly were engaged in a rather charged game of sexual politics and near-kisses while the music played. Among curious eight-year-old viewers like myself, rumors swirled that by holding the loose bottom edge of your kurta shirt over your eyes, the sloppy DIY pixilation process could be reversed. I don’t recall this procedure ever actually working, but my earliest memories of viewership are forever marked by my many failed attempts to see through the bans.

WHERE ART THOU, PAKISTANI NEW WAVE?

Over the past two decades, Pakistan has privatized its media and television industry. Business has boomed, censorship has eased, and the availability of high-speed internet has further revolutionized what plays in Pakistani homes. As I’ve returned to Pakistan to visit in recent years, it’s been evident that the global expansion of Netflix, pirated torrents, and VPNs have permitted discerning cinephiles to fully catch up with the latest binge-worthy phenomena from elsewhere.

On the local front, conversations about a Pakistani new wave have also been building for years, teasing with the possibility of turning the stories of this complicated, layered, and postcolonial society into a palpable and internationally viable filmmaking scene. Surely there are more stories to tell than just those of the war on terror or the country’s perpetual disorder—the only ones endlessly covered by international journalists? But despite the occasional independent critical and commercial success, this so-called new wave neither formed at home nor crashed onto any receptive foreign shores. Pakistan remains in the shadows of its much larger and more influential Indian film neighbors, even as global cinema itself has been upended by the explosion of streaming and “premium” television as its primary site of creative energy.

This void was fated to be filled during lockdown summer: one of the most exciting voices in the emerging Pakistani film industry released a ground-breaking episodic series. Remarkably, it was an uncensored, unrestrained, and undeniably brilliant series, shot entirely on location and focused exclusively on women’s rage.

Churails: The Witches, Unleashed

The term “churails” is Pakistan’s c-word, translated literally as “witches,” but more accurately understood as a loaded epithet for a demonic, unstable, uncontrollable species of woman, the so-called bitch/witch. Filmmaker Asim Abbasi’s über-stylish series embraces the insult, celebrating the difficult women of Pakistan and reveling in their power through ten hours of exceptional television. The four central women of Churails (Asim Abbasi, 2020–) are drawn from across social classes and life experiences but come together with a mission: to form a detective agency that hunts down the terrible men of Karachi. They work under cover, literally, as their front is a clothing business called Halal Designs, where they meet in a subterranean control room that looks straight out of The Avengers to plot their missions. In a kind of extrajudicial feminist fantasy, they
traverse the streets of Karachi in burkas, opening up basements and hidden corners of Pakistani homes in the dark of night, uncovering prostitution rings, secrets, and misogynistic murderers.

The four women at the center of the series are played by a brilliant cast of Pakistani actors drawn from the country’s theater and television industry. Sarwat Gilani leads the ensemble as Sara Khan, an English-speaking housewife whose manicured mansion echoes the *Parasite* house and whose debonair politician husband buries similarly brutal secrets in unseen corners. Her best friend, Jugnu, is a flippant and flask-swigging wedding planner played by poet Yasra Rizvi. Jugnu’s biting commentary on the city’s corrupt elite and their broken marriages accompanies a steady stream of vengeful women clients as she unpacks the dissolution of her own marriage. Another *churail* is the fearsome boxer Zubaida, played by Mehar Bano, who has run away from an abusive and poor family that sought to crush her love of fist-fighting in hopes of making her into more manageable and marriageable material. Lastly, Nimra Bucha plays Batool Jan, a woman who has recently been released from prison for murdering her sadistic husband after years of sexual and emotional abuse. She keeps the *churails* powered with righteous rage as she searches for her own lost daughter in the wilderness of contemporary Karachi.

The series would be quite pulpy and darkly comic if the intentions of its screenwriter and director, Asim Abbasi, weren’t significantly more serious and culturally ambitious. Masked in genre trappings, the series uses the full freedom of streaming to expose the traumas of abuse, rape, repression, and silencing that the women seen in *Churails* have endured for generations. But instead of settling into a somber expose of Pakistani patriarchy, the show offers the pleasures that lie in seeing how these women turn trauma into a flourishing business, delivering vengeance with style—part *Kill Bill*, part *Big Little Lies*, part *I May Destroy You*.

### The Unveiled, Enraged Gaze

Abbasi’s *Churails* follows existing filmic tradition, but its site specificity, extraordinary attention to local detail, use of vernacular languages, and crafted sense of place provide a story of sisterhood unlike anything I’ve ever seen.

In one especially subversive sequence, an older uncle of one of the *churails* who is bent on crushing the detective agency says in a tone of misogynist mocking that “Pakistani women love their fucking TV.” The episode soon cuts to two of the central characters sitting on a couch staring coldly at a television screen. They are flipping through channels in a brilliantly edited montage that encapsulates the typical range of women’s portrayal in Pakistani television: raunchy dancing girls in Bollywood-style numbers, obedient housewives in soap operas, and smiling consumers in endless advertisements for beauty creams. Based on their perfectly calibrated expressions of condescension, the *churails* are not impressed.

Scholar Durriya Kazi has noted that “most young girls in South Asia are advised to avert their eyes from the prying male gaze and allow themselves to be observed without challenge or invitation.” In creating a stylized ensemble of empowered burka-clad avengers, *Churails* subverts the pervasive vocabulary of the demure Pakistani woman and upends contemporary stereotypes of visibly Muslim women. Its opening credits constitute an animated graphic novella set to the show’s theme song with a rapid-fire edit of a woman being adorned with expensive jewels, another’s eyes visible through a black niqab crying tears of blood, and . . . guns being brandished by a collective of veiled, enraged *churails*. As Abbasi explained to me: “In today’s era in digital and streaming you have to be ‘clutter breaking’ . . . the only way to do that is to be as honest as you can as a storyteller.” Certainly, it’s a stylish
and insider’s gaze on Pakistan that global audiences have almost never seen.

In 2018, Asim Abbasi’s directorial feature debut, *Cake*, became one of Pakistan’s first official entries in the Academy Awards. An intimate family drama focused on two adult sisters, it was accessible and slick enough to attract mainstream attention, while nuanced enough in its focus on buried family secrets and class prejudice to warrant critical praise. The film eventually made its way to Netflix, where it found a devoted following in neighboring India. Despite the volatile enmity between the neighboring states, their shared languages and cultures have created an unstoppable flow of stories to borderless audiences thirsty for South Asian content.

In their regional expansion, consequently, Netflix and Amazon have both poured money into local originals and established teams to recruit leading filmmakers, writers, and actors, setting off a creative arms race. In the same year that Abbasi’s *Cake* debuted to rave reviews, the Indian network Zee set up its own international streaming platform, Zee5, to take on the American streamers. Despite a de facto ban on Pakistani-Indian collaborations, the commissioning producer at Zee5 reached out to Asim Abbasi directly to invite him to pitch a full series based on the success of *Cake*. While Zee5 is technically an Indian offshoot, by operating on the internet, it wouldn’t be subjected to the restrictions on terrestrial broadcasting that specifically restrict Indian content in Pakistan.

The result of this partnership between web-streaming service and cross-border auteur was fully one of creative freedom and trust, according to Abbasi. He poured all his energy into writing ten hours of television without any creative interventions, then into assembling his dream creative team and cast to film the series in 2019. Abbasi describes the intoxicating freedom of having creative “khulee chuttee”—playful Urdu shorthand for complete freedom that translates literally as “open holiday.” *Churails* launched in August 2020 as a flagship Zee5 original in 190 markets, while debuting locally as a Pakistani series liberated from the country’s dated operating, editorial, and aesthetic standards. *Churails* earned rave reviews in both the Indian and Pakistani press, heralded for its fresh storytelling, strong central performances, and focus on gender justice in a region rife with sexual violence and steeped in patriarchy. As I began streaming the series in September 2020, Pakistani social media was ablaze after a young mother’s gang rape
in front of her children on the side of an interstate highway was met with a top police official blaming the victim for being out after dark alone. At the same time in neighboring India, activists were lambasting authorities following the gruesome gang rape and murder of a nineteen-year-old Dalit woman, who wasn’t even offered the dignity of a proper funeral as police cremated her body without first notifying the family.

But despite its political resonance and zeitgeisty urgency, Churails was dogged with its own controversies from the very beginning, as one explosive social media firestorm after another erupted. Certainly the outrage from conservatives, who took issue with the show’s vulgarity, sexual candor, and misbehaving women, could have been expected. But the show was also attacked by feminist critics who accused Abbasi of collapsing violence and feminism, shoehorning Western “wokeness” into a Pakistani story, and offering yet another example of a privileged male filmmaker appropriating women’s pain.

A few weeks after the initial release, the filmmaker was gratified that, along with the jibes from the loudest critics, he had received messages of solidarity and support: “I get a lot of private messages saying ‘Hey, we loved it,’ but public support seems to be less so . . . especially coming from anyone that’s Pakistani. A lot of people who . . . enjoyed it, they are scared that there’s some kind of backlash they will face. It’s a tricky situation for them, and I get it.” Abbasi took the noise and the silence in stride and embraced the conversations, however painful.

**Webs Smuggled across Borders**

It is important to stress just how much web series have defied the entrenched cultural order in postcolonial states like Pakistan, where government censorship and politically motivated media monitoring remain a national project. Shows from “outside” can stream in full HD anywhere unless increasingly easy countermeasures are taken to create geo-blocked systems of containment. As streaming extends its international profile, both platforms and local governments are successfully monitoring its expansion.

Despite the seemingly infinite freedom of streaming beyond traditional over-the-air national markets, series like Churails are being forced to face the music. After a short clip of a conversation about a hand job went viral, both authorities and media commentators attacked the show for its inappropriate and vulgar content. On October 7, 2020, Zee5 blocked the show in Pakistan with an official statement that it “was taken off the platform in Pakistan purely in compliance with a directive that we received.” After social media erupted in rage over the removal, the series was reinstated a few days later.

At the time of this column’s publication, the state had devised a new way to block the series by denying Pakistani viewers the ability to submit credit-card payments to Zee5 with the excuse that it is an “Indian company.” After the announcement was made, Asim Abbasi, who had once joyously stated that no one would be able to stop Churails, tweeted an excerpt from its screenplay with a tearful emoji, quoting the character Batool describing how women are forever resigned to living under men’s protection and machinations of power. Thus the veiled churails ironically ended up being sent underground in the very country where they started. Of course, savvy Pakistani audiences have found a way, as they’ve always done, to see the show despite the bans—but the stigma of not being allowed to stream and market the series commercially remains.

For Asim Abbasi, the show is already a success merely because it exists—a step forward that can never be reversed. “It’s out there,” he says. “It’s a show that’s available in 190 countries. It’s a show I am very proud of. You might like it or hate it or whatever [but] it’s unlike anything that’s been made in Pakistan. The fact that we got it made and it’s out there, that for me is a huge achievement.”

And what about viewers like me? My hope for the success of Pakistani stories like Churails is partly that I simply wish to see a more expansive geography of world cinema. But there is a more personal and perhaps selfish reason. I’ve always hoped that the absences and official erasures of stories that I experienced as a deprived young cinephile would become a thing of the past, that a new Pakistani generation would grow up to see films and television series that feel like their own. The ability to not have to project one’s sense of self, ambition, and rage always outward, to somewhere else, is also a kind of freedom.
Churails is a singular and urgent achievement, filled to the brim with observations and artistry that forward profoundly urgent questions about justice. Reflecting the concerns of contemporary Pakistani filmmaking, its travails and controversies prove that the members of this generation have extraordinary stories to tell and the filmmaking skills to tell them. Like me, they are also the children of a censorship-happy state, sometimes dubbed “Banistan.” In the rage-filled afterglow of Churails, let there be new avenues to see and be seen—through the bans, through the screens, at home and elsewhere.

Notes
2. Asim Abbasi, personal communication with author, October 29, 2020. This and all subsequent quotations from Abbasi are from this conversation, conducted via Zoom. The term “clutter-breaking” is derived from advertising to denote attention-grabbing content that can pierce the deluge of content to grab attention.
5. “Churails’ Was Taken Down in Compliance with Directives We Received: ZEE5,” Express Tribune, October 9, 2020, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2267665/churails-was-taken-down-in-compliance-with-directives-we-received-zee5.