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Navigating the Forbidden: "Churails" and Queer Spatiality

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of queer identities within the Pakistani web series "Churails," set against the backdrop of the country's socio-cultural norms. Employing Halberstam's notion of Queer Spatiality as its analytical framework, the study delves into how "Churails" creates transient spaces that challenge heteronormative structures and narratives, offering a fresh perspective on queer resistance and identity formation. The findings reveal that the series employs these spaces to subtly critique and navigate the complexities of being queer in Pakistan. Further it highlights the significance of "Churails" in contributing to broader discourses on gender, sexuality, and media representation in Pakistan in particular and South Asia in general, highlighting its role in pushing the boundaries of what is publicly permissible and sparking dialogue around queer issues in conservative societies.

Introduction

In Pakistan, from the urban environments of Karachi and Lahore to rural areas, the reality for queer individuals is shaped by the complex interplay of legal, religious, and cultural factors. Section 377, a colonial legacy criminalizing same-sex intimacy, casts a long shadow over queer Pakistanis (Yahya, 2020; Afzal-Khan, 2023). This legal framework intertwines with societal norms to perpetuate discrimination, violence, and erasure (Khan, 2019). Elucidates the multifaceted challenges faced by queer communities navigating a socio-cultural landscape marked by defiance and tradition, restricting identity expression, and undermining fundamental human rights. Despite this, resilience and agency emerge as queer individuals carve out spaces of belonging and resistance within an often invisible society.

From this enforced silence arises a defiant narrative: "Churails," a web series that audaciously breaks the narrative silence. It unveils the

lives and desires of those on the fringes of Pakistani society, not just as representation but as a critical intervention challenging dominant discourses that marginalize and criminalize queer identities (Salam-Salmaoui, forthcoming). This series subverts established narratives, disrupting the heteronormative gaze and confronting viewers with queer realities in Pakistan. Its fantastical elements metaphorically represent the challenges and desires of queer individuals in a hostile environment, making "Churails" a powerful tool for challenging the status quo and increasing queer visibility and acceptance. This study thus explores the subversive representations of queer identities within "Churails," examining the intricacies of exclusion and marginalization woven into the dominant frameworks imposed on queer bodies in Pakistan. Utilizing Halberstam's (2017) theory of "Queer Spatiality," it addresses the question: How does "Churails" employ Queer Spatiality to present nontraditional narratives and spaces for queer identities, and what insights does this depiction offer regarding the challenges and possibilities for queer representation in Pakistan?

"Churails" critiques mere representation, serving as an act of resistance that challenges heteronormative narratives, reclaims marginalized spaces, and amplifies queer voices within a restrictive environment (Salam-Salmaoui, 2023). This localized understanding of queer experience enriches global discourse by showcasing diverse expressions of resistance challenging Western-centric queer theories (Palazzani, 2012). Globally, "Churails" demonstrates the transformative potential of media in influencing societal perceptions and advocating for acceptance of diverse sexualities and genders (GLAAD, 2022). This study theorizes media's role in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering social change within restrictive contexts, examining the interplay between media portrayals and localized resistance. It offers valuable insights into the dynamic construction of queer identities and spaces across cultural landscapes, filling a gap in queer representation scholarship and paving the way for future research on visibility, resistance, and identity in varied contexts (Lovaas, 2013). "Churails" serves as a springboard for exploring how cultural productions, resistance movements, and societal perceptions shape queer lives globally. Employing a localized lens, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of queer experiences and advances theoretical developments in queer media studies and global queer theory.

Defiance unveiled: Churails

Emerging from the restrictive landscape of Pakistan, "Churails" critiques entrenched gender stereotypes and societal norms, transforming into a critical intervention. This pioneering web series disrupts the status

quo, sparking potent discourse on gender equality within South Asian contexts. It centers on four women—Sara, Jugnu, Zubaida, and Batool—who defy expectations by forming the unconventional detective agency "Halal Designs," aiming to expose the infidelities of influential Pakistani men, subverting patriarchal control. These "Churails," or "witches," represent diverse female experiences. Sara, disillusioned by her husband's betrayal, defies the submissiveness expected of Pakistani wives (Jafar, 2005). Jugnu, with her flamboyance and outspokenness, challenges norms surrounding femininity and queer expression. Zubaida, a boxer seeking freedom, battles societal expectations of demure womanhood and her own internal demons. Batool, an ex-convict seeking redemption, embodies the resilience of marginalized women ostracized by society. Their individual struggles coalesce into a powerful collective voice, symbolizing the broader South Asian movement for women's emancipation and agency. "Churails" confronts uncomfortable truths, addressing taboo subjects like domestic abuse, forced marriages, queer identities, and sexual exploitation, shattering the historical silence surrounding these issues in public discourse. It becomes a visual and rhetorical manifesto for Pakistani feminism, highlighting pervasive violence and oppression faced by women across various social strata (Salam-Salmaoui, 2023). Moreover, "Churails" reclaims power by subversively re-appropriating cultural, visual, and religious symbols traditionally used to reinforce male dominance (Salam-Salmaoui, 2024). This act of inversion empowers the women, crafting a narrative of unequivocal disruption and self-assertion, echoing Butler's (1990) concept of performative subversion.

However, this defiance incurs a cost. The series has faced fierce controversy from conservative and religious groups, perceived as an attack on cultural and religious values. Its ban by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) underscores this conflict, highlighting the clash between progressive and conservative forces in Pakistani society. Critics object to the nonconformist roles and exploration of sensitive topics, accusing it of promoting vulgarity and targeting the female actors with threats and online abuse, reflecting systemic misogyny. Human rights activists denounce the ban as an attack on artistic expression and a blatant attempt to silence empowered women's voices, raising concerns about the shrinking space for dissent in Pakistan. "Churails" ignites a crucial conversation, challenging conventions, and demanding gender equality. Despite intense opposition, it stands as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the pursuit of justice and freedom. This story is about more than four women; it represents the collective defiance of a generation determined to rewrite the narrative and reclaim their rightful place in a changing world.

The queer representation in media

While Western media has extensively explored queer desires, with significant works (see e.g., Herek, 2009; Smith, 2011; Edelman & Goldberg, 2019; Landau, 2009; Parker & Lumsden, 2002; Richards, 2016; White, 2019; Bennett, 1998; Alwood, 1996; GLAAD, 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2016; Magrath, 2019) pushing the boundaries of representation, this paper shifts focus to the unique landscape of queer representations in South Asia, specifically through Pakistani media. In South Asia, Indian cinema's engagement with queer representation is a multifaceted narrative of progress and persistent shortcomings. Scholarship critically appraises this evolution, identifying both advancements in visibility and critical gaps in portrayal. Early studies by Evelyn (2015) and Sabharwal and Sen (2012) recognize the growing presence of queer characters but critique the authenticity and respectfulness of these depictions. Researchers such as Chaudhary (2012) and Menon (2016) emphasize the negative impact of harmful stereotypes, while Kaur (2017) and Bhattacharjee (2004) call for a broader exploration of queer identities, especially within the transgender community. Despite these challenges, some filmmakers strive to subvert heteronormative narratives, with works like "Fire" (1996) challenging patriarchal norms and exploring female agency (Bhattacharyya, 2016; Morris, 2000). However, the struggle for genuine and sensitive representation persists, with concerns over stereotyping and oversimplification (Chatterjee, 2013; Sharma & Sundar, 2016). Comparative international research, such as those by Davie (2012) and Tagudina (2012), highlights global dissatisfaction with queer portrayal quality, reinforcing the call for positive representation (Caldwell, 2014). Recent scholarly contributions probe deeper into thematic nuances, such as consent in homosexual contexts (Rasheed & Kumar, 2021), the translation of queer narratives through visual and cultural lenses (Biju, 2021), and the integration of queer elements within mainstream frameworks (Jalarajan & Suresh, 2021). Post-Section 377 repeal studies, like those by Shastri (2021), investigate the socio-political impacts on queer discourse, while others critique harmful conflations in media representations (Sarkar, 2021) and explore the potential of digital platforms for innovative storytelling (Bhushan, 2021). This body of work illustrates a complex landscape of queer representation in Indian cinema, marked by a tension between increased visibility and the continued need for nuanced, respectful portrayals that transcend stereotypes and engage with the diverse realities of queer lives.

Pakistani electronic media, encompassing cinema and mainstream channels, presents a stark contrast to global narratives featuring queer identities. This discrepancy stems from deeply ingrained socio-cultural and religious norms, posing significant barriers to queer representation. Khan (2021)

pioneers exploration in this underexplored domain, analyzing nuanced portrayals of female same-sex relationships in "*Kitni Girhain Baaki Hain* (How Many Knots Are Left to Untie)", "*Chewing Gum*", "*Churails*", "*Dedh Ishqiya* (One and a Half Passionate)" and "*Sukkar Banat* (Caramel)" Through comparative analysis with works from other Muslim-majority contexts, Khan reveals how these narratives navigate complexities by employing subtle visual cues, often blurring the lines between romantic and platonic interactions. This cautious approach highlights the delicate balance between cultural sensitivities and the need for visibility. Masood (2019) adds another layer with his critical examination of "*Zibahkhana*", marking a bold departure from traditional portrayals. Through this indie slasher film, Masood explores the radical embodiment of queer agency and desire through Baby, a queer woman and cannibal, presented as a monstrous yet revolutionary figure. "Zibahkhana" disrupts heteronormativity with its depiction of queer aggression and anarchy, offering a transgressive vision of queer futures. This film not only revises Western slasher tropes but also pioneers incendiary representations within Pakistani media, sparking debate despite its significance to the discourse. The broader socio-political landscape, marked by historical and ongoing resistance to queer inclusivity due to religious conservatism, further complicates this narrative. Despite the global push for inclusivity, Pakistani media largely remains silent, mirroring the country's legal and societal stance. However, works like "Joyland," and "Poshida: Hidden LGBT Pakistan," showcase the emergence of precarious queer narratives navigating censorship and societal pressures to carve out spaces for marginalized voices.

While Western media has increased queer visibility, a broader exploration of queer narratives challenging heteronormative and patriarchal norms is urgently needed, especially in Pakistani media, which is heavily constrained by socio-cultural and religious norms. Pioneering works like "Churails" and "Zibahkhana" navigate these complexities, offering nuanced reflections and radical portrayals of queer agency. However, their limited visibility and acceptance underscore a significant gap exacerbated by legal and societal restrictions. This highlights the critical need for strategies to challenge and transform the prevailing heteronormative discourse within this highly conservative context. Importantly, examining "Churails" within the Pakistani media landscape advances the discourse on queer representations across global, South Asian, and particularly Pakistani contexts. This study's focus on "Churails" through Halberstam's (2017) lens critically surpasses Khan's (2021) analysis on subtle narrative portrayals by examining the series' innovative disruption and redefinition of queer spaces in Pakistan. It argues for "Churails" role in challenging and transforming heteronormative narratives, contributing distinctly to queer media studies, and signaling the media's capacity for societal change toward diverse

sexualities and gender acceptance. Existing research on queer representation often struggles with specific cultural nuances, especially in environments steeped in religious and societal conservatism. The proposed study of "Churails" is a crucial intervention, pushing beyond mere representation. It attempts to challenge the Western-centric narratives dominating the field. This study goes beyond critique, positioning "Churails" as a defiant act against the heteronormative grip on South Asian media, while navigating Pakistan's socio-cultural, legal, and religious realities. By illuminating the transformative power of media in restrictive environments, it compels a reevaluation of cultural productions' role in shaping and challenging queer realities globally.

Dismantling walls: analytical framework for "Churails"

Halberstam's (2017) theoretical framework offers a sophisticated lens for understanding queerness by challenging the neutrality of space and linear conceptions of time. His concept of queer spatiality reveals how spaces are socially constructed and imbued with power dynamics, while queer temporality reimagines temporal frameworks, resisting conventional life trajectories. By celebrating failure and anti-sociality as sites of resistance and creativity, Halberstam contests dominant norms and fosters new possibilities for queer communities. Additionally, his advocacy for low theory, which emphasizes everyday experiences and marginalized perspectives, broadens the understanding of queer lives beyond traditional academic confines. Engaging with Halberstam's multifaceted framework thus enriches the comprehension of queerness and contributes to a more inclusive body of knowledge.

In particular, we use Halberstam's (2017) concept of *Queer Spatiality* challenges the notion of space as neutral or objective, arguing instead that spaces are produced and imbued with meaning through social practices and power relations. Queer Spatiality examines how queer individuals and communities navigate, transform, and create spaces that challenge heteronormative norms and expectations. This involves not only the physical spaces they inhabit but also the social and cultural meanings attached to those spaces. Halberstam emphasizes that queer spaces can be both subversive and creative, offering sites of resistance, community building, and identity formation. Halberstam's (2017) concept of Queer Spatiality is indispensable for this study as it provides a critical framework for deconstructing "Churails" subversive potential and its challenge to heteronormative spatial control. By dismantling the rigid boundaries and exclusive ownership associated with heteronormativity, Queer Spatiality illuminates how the series' characters navigate and subvert these constraints, creating counter-public spheres in hidden cafes, hotels, and online platforms,

aligning with Puar's (2007) concept. Furthermore, the reclamation of traditionally "masculine" spaces in the series exemplifies Muñoz's (2009) "queer utopian performativity," highlighting the agency of marginalized communities in crafting spaces of resistance that challenge heteronormative spatial orders, as argued by Freeman (2002). Thus, Queer Spatiality not only unveils the multifaceted strategies employed by "Churails" to dismantle heteronormativity but also provides crucial insights into the mechanisms of resistance employed by marginalized communities in constrained contexts, positioning the series as a profound critique of the structures that marginalize and oppress them, and contributing significantly to the discourse on queer representation and resistance.

Data analysis

Utilizing a scene-specific analytical strategy, we examine the dynamic relationship between space, identity, and resistance within the series. This strategy facilitates a granular examination of how queer characters navigate and subvert heteronormative spaces. By focusing on individual scenes, the analysis uncovers the strategies of resistance and visibility employed by queer individuals, aligning with Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, and revealing the series' contribution to the discourse on queer visibility and resistance. Thus, a scene-specific approach is instrumental in capturing the multifaceted experiences of queer characters, showcasing "Churails" innovative engagement with queer identities and spaces within a culturally and politically charged environment. Significantly, engaging with queer representation in "Churails" demands an approach sensitive to the intricate socio-cultural and religious landscape of Pakistan. This series eschews the spectacle of explicit portrayal in favor of a more nuanced strategy, weaving threads of queer experience throughout its narrative fabric. While Episode 4 offers a more pronounced engagement with this theme, subtle references and coded messages permeate other episodes, inviting attentive viewers to piece together a multifaceted understanding of queer identities. Therefore, our analysis delves into both the overt and covert representations within the series, demonstrating how "Churails" navigates the complexities of visibility and resistance within a challenging context. The three most significant scenes are discussed as follows:

1. *Queer Intimacy in Transient Spaces and subversion of heteronormative gender norms*

In a significant yet subtle scene, *Pinky and Babli*, an allegedly lesbian couple in "Churails," share a fleeting moment of intimacy in a dimly lit car during one of their stakeouts. Surrounded by darkness, they feel secure

enough to discuss their relationship, using playful coded language under-stood only by their companions. This subtle exchange, met with knowing laughter, hints at their deeper connection without drawing unnecessary attention.

The seemingly ordinary car in "Churails" becomes a dynamic site of queer expression and intimacy. Traditionally, cars and driving symbolize freedom, autonomy, and even masculinity (Damiano, 2003), historically linked to male drivers. "Churails" subverts this by reclaiming the car for Pinky and Babli, two lesbian characters. The darkness enveloping the car becomes an instrument of subversion. Their playful dialogue, operating on multiple levels, exceeds mere conversation. The seemingly innocuous statement, "Hum donon ek doosre ke liye kaafi hain" ("We are enough for each other"), followed by Babli's suggestive "Sab kaam ke liye!" ("To do everything!"), holds a double entendre understood only by those aware of their queer identities. Their exchange draws on established discourses within queer studies (see e.g., Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990; Munoz, 2009; Ahmed, 2010). The knowing laughter shared among them signifies complicity and celebrates their connection. Significantly, the exchange avoids explicit language. By keeping their intimacy private and defined on their own terms, Pinky and Babli reclaim their agency. Additionally, the understanding laughter shared with their companions amplifies the subversive nature of the exchange. However, the scene avoids simply presenting their relationship as an anomaly or spectacle. Instead, it is woven into the narrative without unnecessary emphasis. Ahmed's (2020) notion of affective stickiness lingers even in the darkness. The car's confined space evokes a sense of entrapment, mirroring the characters' struggle against societal lim-itations despite their newfound mobility. Moreover, the darkness may not offer complete escape from the feeling queer (Ahmed, 2019) of navigating a restrictive context. The scene's seemingly lighthearted tone and casual mention of their relationship raise questions about the show's portrayal of visibility. Ultimately, the car scene in "Churails" exceeds a simplistic portrayal of queer space. It offers a fleeting glimpse of connection and liberation within the darkness, while simultaneously exposing the limitations of such temporary havens. Thus, the scene in the car, a confined yet transient space, becomes a site of queer spati-ality where Pinky and Babli can express their relationship openly, albeit momentarily. This space, while physically bounded by the car's interior, goes beyond its immediate confines through the shared understanding and laughter among the women present. Likewise, the dialogues between Pinky and Babli, particularly their assertion that they are "enough for each other" and capable of "doing everything" together, reflect a subversion of heteronormative temporality.

2. *The Duality of Home: Queer Resistance and Familial constraints in "Churails"*

In a pivotal scene set in the dimly lit dining room of Sara's mother-in-law's house, the family's seating arrangement subtly signifies the underlying power dynamics and gender roles. The matriarch presides at the head of the table, signaling her authority, while Sara and her husband flank the sides, reflecting traditional gender divisions. Their children, along with Sara's younger son Sameer and daughter Amal, are positioned to emphasize familial bonds and divisions. The conversation, initiated by the grandmother in English, pivots to Sameer's experiences at school. Sameer's admission of taking a Barbie to school and his brother's mocking remark "and he (Sameer) runs like a girl". Sara's firm defence of Sameer's interests, "Haan Sameer kay pas Barbie hai tou? (Yes, Sameer has a Barbie, so what?), and its not Amal's. Sameer likes dolls, a lot of boys do", challenges these traditional expectations, advocating for a broader acceptance of individual preferences beyond societal norms. The grandmother's suggestion to send the boys to boarding school like the kids' father and grandfather were sent, mirroring past familial decisions, underscores a generational reluctance to address or alter established gender biases.

The scene in "Churails" where Sameer reveals his affinity for a Barbie doll during a family dinner intricately illuminates the complexities of queer identity formation within domestic spaces. Sameer's tacit coming out aligns with scholarly discussions that view domestic spaces as both constraining and emancipatory for queer identities (Gorman-Murray & Dowling, 2007; Johnson, 2000). Queer homes serve as sanctuaries that challenge societal norms, allowing the performance of nonconforming gender and sexuality (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Warner, 1991). The dining room, a familial setting, becomes a battleground for negotiating queer identity, embodying the dual nature of safety and scrutiny (Elwood, 2000; Gorman-Murray & Dowling, 2007). The strategic placement of characters around the dining table, with the family's matriarch at its head, symbolizes traditional familial hierarchy and Foucault's notion of surveillance (1977). This placement seeks to regulate acceptable gender expressions and mirrors social power structures (Lefebvre, 1974). Sameer's choice to discuss Barbie subtly defies conventional gender norms, disrupting "compulsory heterosexuality" and showcasing the home's capacity to both constrain and liberate queer identities. By reclaiming the domestic sphere as a site of political contestation, Sameer's dialogue transforms the private space into a stage for identity exploration and resistance.

The ensuing dialogue—Sameer's admission, his brother's taunt, and their mother's support—highlights the nuanced negotiation of revealing and affirming queer identity within the family, reflecting the essential role of

domestic spaces in queer self-articulation and recognition (Johnson, 2000; Gorman-Murray & Dowling, 2007). It embeds Sameer's experience within a broader struggle for acceptance and visibility. Within the educational realm, Sameer's choice to bring a Barbie to school represents a significant disruption within a space governed by heteronormative scripts. This act embodies Halberstam's notion of "queer space" (2017), contesting normative boundaries and resonating with Muñoz's idea of "performance as a site of political intervention" (2013). The backlash Sameer faces from peers and his brother's derision highlights the rigid enforcement of gender norms as a form of social policing (Gillborn, 2015). This negative reception underscores societal mechanisms that maintain gender conformity, perpetuating stereotypes and "othering" individuals like Sameer who deviate from traditional masculinity (Hamilton, 2015). Despite this, Sameer's act symbolizes a broader contestation against heteronormative structures in educational settings (Fox, 2007; Jinright, 2019). Although it may not dismantle entrenched norms, it initiates conversations and encourages reevaluation of gender expectations within these institutions.

Furthermore, "Churails" compels examination of women's roles within patriarchy. The mother-in-law's suggestion of boarding school reflects Berlant's "cruel optimism" (2011), where the desire for acceptance perpetuates harmful norms, aligning with Kandiyoti's "patriarchal bargain" (2005). Sara's defense of Sameer's choice transcends mere advocacy, challenging the binary distribution of toys and confronting hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). This defiance highlights Halberstam's notion of 'queer failure' (2011), where resisting dominant narratives becomes a strategic resistance against binary gender norms. Sameer's engagement with a Barbie interrogates the performative nature of gender, suggesting a transformative potential that transcends binary gender conformity. Sara's attempt to normalize Sameer's actions navigates within the binary framework it seeks to contest. Her defense, resonating with Kandiyoti's "patriarchal bargain," goes beyond normalization, subtly disrupting the heteronormative script (Jagose, 1996). It demonstrates the negotiation of spatial control and autonomy within restrictive frameworks, reclaiming space for queer expression. The dining room becomes a battleground where gender norms are resisted, highlighting the series' engagement with spatial control, power dynamics, and resistance.

Ultimately, the scene with Sameer and the Barbie doll illustrates the negotiation with constructs of gender performativity and hegemonic masculinity. It illuminates the dynamics of resistance, normalization, and 'queer failure' as strategies against entrenched norms, contributing to the discourse on gender fluidity and the dismantling of binary categorizations within gender studies. "Churails" breaks stereotypical queer portrayals by offering a multifaceted exploration of queer identities through impactful dialogues.

Sameer's defiance challenges rigid gender binaries through action, embodying "tactical ambiguity" (Majumdar & Roy, 2016) and avoiding reinforcing stereotypes. This approach celebrates the fluidity of queer identities, prompting viewers to move beyond binaries and embrace a richer understanding of the queer experience.

3. *Professor's Home & Hotel in "Churails": A Battleground of Reality and Desires*

Episode 4 stands out as a pivotal moment for the explicit portrayal of queer identities. It opens with a woman seeking assistance from the Churails at their Halal designs agency, suspecting her husband's infidelity after two decades of marriage. This exchange occurs in a setting reminiscent of confessional spaces within religious institutions, with Sara and the woman engaged in dialogue. The woman shares intimate details about her marital discord, including financial discrepancies and her husband's unexplained absences. Following her departure, Sara disseminates information about the husband, Professor Ehtisham, to the Churails. Concurrently, the professor is depicted as a respected figure lecturing at a university, displaying no overt signs of infidelity in his public persona. Subsequently, the Churails conduct surveillance on the professor, leading to a crucial encounter at a hotel. Here, the professor's wife is confronted with her husband's infidelity, witnessing him engaged in a romantic encounter with another man in their hotel room. This revelation elicits a visceral reaction from her, challenging her perception of their marriage and prompting a profound emotional response. Ultimately, overwhelmed by the betrayal, the wife hysterically demands access to Wi-Fi to contact her children, while her husband's partner hastily dresses in the background, further intensifying the scene's emotional impact. In a shocking turn of events, the wife responds to her husband's infidelity by committing an extreme act of violence. Overwhelmed by betrayal and rage, she brutally murders her husband, slicing his throat before dismembering his body and cooking it. This grisly act serves as a chilling manifestation of her emotional turmoil and a drastic response to the profound betrayal she has endured.

Significantly, in this episode, the **Professor's residence and hotel room** emerge as critical spaces for the exploration of his sexual identities, yet the narrative pivot is his wife's act of vengeance. This act transcends its narrative function as the climax, offering a lens to examine betrayal, identity, and the limits of human response within Pakistan's socio-cultural and religious context. This analysis not only examines the wife's revenge but also reconceptualizes the home and hotel as essential queer spaces, integral to the narrative's exploration of the Professor's identity. It broadens the discourse to include the treatment of queer identities, their negotiation

within these spaces, and their relation to broader themes of betrayal and societal norms. Thus, the episode serves as a complex critique of identity, space, and socio-cultural dynamics simultaneously.

The Professor's home in "Churails" is not just a physical entity but a complex battleground of societal expectations, hidden desires, and the pervasive influence of heteronormativity. It represents a conventional space where heteronormative gender norms are meticulously preserved, highlighting the challenges queer individuals face in navigating environments dominated by traditional societal expectations. Halberstam's (2017) concept of "queer spatiality" invites a critical examination of the home's usage and interactions, showcasing the performative nature of domestic roles and the emotional labor required to maintain the heteronormative façade. The Professor's "normal" life, marked by marriage and fatherhood without disclosing his queer identity, reflects societal pressures to adhere to normative roles, illuminating the complexities of queer existence within conservative societies like Pakistan. This scenario exemplifies the broader challenges queer individuals endure, compelled to navigate their identities within strict societal norms. The Professor's reluctance to perform his gay identity at home is emblematic of the potent forces of surveillance and societal judgment, suggesting that the home serves more as a stage for normative roles than a sanctuary for authentic self-expression. This dynamic underscores the pervasive influence of heteronormativity on private spaces, compelling individuals to prioritize conformity over authenticity (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1990). The home's role as a heteronormative space is further illuminated by its adherence to reprosexuality, intertwining heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity, highlighting the home as the quintessential site of traditional family values (Warner, 1991). This oppressive structure excludes those who do not conform to heterosexual norms, emphasizing the exclusionary nature of traditional domestic spaces for queer individuals. The division of household labor and the performance of gender roles within the domestic sphere reproduce and reinforce heteronormative values (Berk, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The Professor's concealment of his queer identity and performance of a heteronormative family life align with Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, wherein gender and sexual identities are socially constructed and performed. Liminality, as articulated by Abes and Kasch (2007), suggests that the Professor's home is a liminal space where his identity fluctuates between visibility and concealment, heteronormativity, and queerness. This transitional state underscores identity fluidity and challenges binary distinctions between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The home, therefore, is both a compliance with and a subtle subversion of heteronormative norms, embodying the "radically unstable" nature of queer identities (Morris, 2000). Foucault's (1978) analysis of normative

discourses and Butler's (1990) theory of performativity provide a framework for understanding the Professor's actions. His engagement in heteronormative behaviors highlights the unstable and constructed nature of sexual and gender identities, making the home an active participant in constructing and negotiating queer identities.

The hotel room in "Churails" becomes a potent symbol of queer exploration, contrasting with the Professor's home, which embodies heteronormative performances and concealed desires. This juxtaposition aligns with Halberstam's (2017) understanding of "queer space" as fluid and contested, challenging rigid binaries. The hotel room, as a temporary, non-domestic space, allows for the exploration of alternative self-expressions and connections, resonating with Jagose's (1996) critique of fixed categorization and Halberstam's (2018) notion of "nomadic subjectivity." It becomes a site for connection and community, fostering solidarity and belonging among marginalized groups (Edelman, 2019). The encounter in the hotel room illustrates the performative nature of gender and sexual identities, echoing Butler's (1990) assertion that these identities are socially constructed and performed. This moment disrupts the presumed stability of the Professor's heteronormative identity, unveiling the fluidity and multiplicity of queer identities that challenge rigid societal norms. The hotel room, as a quintessential "queer space" (Betsky, 1997), offers a temporary escape from societal scrutiny, aligning with Morris's (2000) description of queer identities as radically unstable. The shock and disbelief experienced by the Professor's wife upon discovering his queer identity highlight the societal challenges and stigmatization faced by queer individuals, particularly in conservative societies like Pakistan (Foucault, 1978; Warner, 1991). The wife's discovery in a hotel room underscores the pervasiveness of societal scrutiny, even in temporary escapes. Her emotional response reflects deeply ingrained societal narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals, reinforcing the ongoing struggle for visibility and acceptance (Sedgwick, 1990). Her violent reaction, driven by internalized heteronormative expectations, illustrates the complex dynamics at play in negotiating queer identities within domestic spaces (Butler, 1990; Ahmed, 2004). The hotel room scene transcends mere shock value, becoming a microcosm of the ongoing negotiation of queer existence within heteronormative societies. It exposes the power dynamics of surveillance, the challenges of achieving visibility and acceptance, and the complex emotional landscape encountered by both LGBTQ+ individuals and those around them.

The dialogues from "Churails" Episode 4 offer profound insight into the plight of queer individuals in societies like Pakistan, revealing the complex interplay of queer identities, societal expectations, and personal struggles. The wife's initial description of her marital relationship

encapsulates traditional expectations placed upon women in heteronorma-tive marriages, highlighting the performative aspects of heteronormative relationships (Butler, 1990). The transgender member's commentary on the lack of freedom to love openly within "your world" points to the systemic exclusion and marginalization of LGBTQ individuals in societies governed by rigid heteronormative and cisnormative standards (Foucault, 1978). The Professor's declaration of love for his wife situates their rela-tionship within the traditional framework of heteronormative affection, complicated by his acknowledgment of feelings that challenge this frame-work. This juxtaposition reflects Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, where the Professor's identity is constituted through performances that align with, yet resist, normative expectations. His desire to love freely highlights the core of queer theory, interrogating societal norms that reg-ulate and restrict expressions of identity and affection (Sedgwick, 1990). The phrase "the thing and feelings that I have inside of me" signifies the internal conflict of navigating a queer identity within a conformist society, emblematic of the broader struggle faced by queer individuals (Halberstam, 2017). The wife's seemingly innocuous reference to cooking in response to these dialogues carries immense weight through Butler's performativity lens (1990). It becomes a metaphor for the exhaustive efforts required to maintain the facade of a heteronormative marriage, highlighting the per-formative nature of gender roles and societal expectations placed upon women (Ahmed, 2004). The scene's culmination, with its sarcastic dialogue and subsequent violence, resonates as a tragic symphony, highlighting the plight of queer individuals in conservative societies where heteronormativity acts as a suffocating force.

The Professor's partner's lamentation after his murder underscores the deep-seated alienation and vulnerability experienced by LGBTQ+ individ-uals. The phrase "tie you up in the bed" evokes a chilling image of physical restraint and control, aligning with Halberstam's (2017) notion of "queer negativity," where marginalized individuals are objectified and denied humanity. The derogatory term "kanjar" (Scoundrel) further dehumanizes the partner, reducing him to a stereotype associated with negativity and immorality. His lamentation and the repeated demand for "more" empha-size the insatiable nature of the objectifying gaze, highlighting the partner's invisibility as an individual with his own emotional needs and desires. The partner's yearning for genuine connection and emotional validation subverts the heteronormative script, highlighting the emotional costs of existing outside its boundaries. His words serve as a powerful indictment of a society that dehumanizes, objectifies, and erases the desires and experiences of queer individuals. It becomes a rallying cry for recognizing the inherent humanity and right to connection of all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Discussion

This study utilized Halberstam's (2017) notion of Queer Spatiality to unravel how "Churails" navigates traditional narratives and spaces associated with homosexuality in Pakistani society. "Churails" employs queer spatiality to present a multifaceted exploration of homosexuality, significantly diverging from traditional narratives prevalent in Pakistani media. In "Churails," the interplay of domestic and non-domestic spaces, such as the car, the hotel room, the dining room, and the schoolyard, serves as a dynamic platform for challenging and redefining heteronormative norms. For instance, while the car, traditionally a symbol of masculine freedom (Damiano, 2003), becomes a temporary haven for Pinky and Babli's queer expression and coded conversations, subverting conventional associations (Valentine & Skelton, 2003; Halberstam, 2017; Oswin, 2014), it remains ensnared within the broader societal pressures that necessitate such covert expressions of intimacy. Similarly, Sameer's playful defiance with a Barbie doll in both domestic and educational spaces disrupts "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990), becoming a political act (Muñoz, 2013) that challenges deeply ingrained gender binaries (Brown et al., 2020). His actions highlight the complexities of domesticity for queer individuals (Gorman-Murray & Dowling, 2007; Johnson, 2000), while the negative reception underscores societal mechanisms enforcing conformity (Gillborn, 2015; Hamilton, 2015). Despite this, his defiance symbolizes a broader contestation against heteronormative structures (Fox, 2007; Jinright, 2019) and sparks a discourse on the fluidity of gender identity, critiquing societal constructs of masculinity and femininity (Parker & Lumsden, 2002) within heteronormative Pakistani society. Sara's defense of Sameer's choice, although inadvertently reinforcing binary categorizations (Butler, 1997), confronts hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and aligns with Halberstam's (2011) notion of "queer failure" as resistance. The dining room, where gender norms are contested, becomes a battleground for negotiating spatial control and autonomy within restrictive frameworks (Kandiyoti, 1988; Nazneen et al., 2019; Jagose, 2010). Significantly, The hotel room, contrasting with the heteronormative home where the professor conceals his queerness, emerges as a liminal space (Abes & Kasch, 2007) of self-expression and exploration, echoing Halberstam's (2017) notion of "queer space" where normative boundaries are contested. Here, the professor engages in performances that deviate from the heteronormative script (Muñoz, 2013), transcending binary labels (Halberstam, 2018) and offering a glimpse into alternative modes of social interaction and belonging (Edelman, 2004). The wife's shock and violence upon discovering the professor's queerness in the hotel room reflect deeply ingrained societal narratives and the oppressive power of heteronormativity (Warner, 1991;

Foucault, 1978), while the partner's lament underscores the alienation and objectification experienced by LGBTQ individuals in conservative societies (Halberstam, 2017; Ahmed, 2004). These instances collectively illustrate the multifaceted ways in which "Churails" utilizes diverse spaces to navigate, challenge, and redefine the boundaries of queer identity within a heteronormative society, highlighting the ongoing struggle for visibility, acceptance, and the reclamation of agency. The professor's narrative unfolds across the contrasting spaces of his home and the hotel, mirroring Foucault's (1978) and Butler's (1990) concepts of surveillance and performativity. His public heteronormative persona, juxtaposed against his private exploration of queer desire, highlights the tension between societal pressures and individual desires. This duality resonates with Khan's (2021) analysis of the subtle nuances in portraying same-sex relationships in Pakistani media. However, "Churails" takes a bolder step, utilizing queer spaces as tools for resistance, akin to Masood's (2019) analysis of "Zibahkhana," where queer agency and desire find transgressive expression.

Despite its progressive elements, "Churails" occasionally conforms to traditional patriarchal structures, as the female protagonists' empowerment remains mediated by conventional roles and relationships. The violent reaction of the professor's wife to his queerness, furthermore, underscores the deep-seated societal norms against homosexuality, potentially reinforcing the very norms the series aims to challenge. Similarly, while characters like Sameer disrupt gender norms, the narrative often reverts to binary categorizations, as seen in Sara's defense of his choices, thus highlighting the complex and often contradictory nature of the series' engagement with gender and sexuality. This complexity extends to the portrayal of female agency, where characters are shown as powerful agents of change, yet constrained by traditional moral boundaries. Additionally, while the series introduces a transgender character as part of the Churails team, this character remains underdeveloped and operates largely within the confines of the patriarchal structures the series aims to critique, thus limiting the show's potential for a more comprehensive exploration of gender diversity and fluidity.

Nonetheless, it is argued here that "Churails" emerges as a landmark moment in the media landscape of Pakistan, sparking critical discourse on the role of online streaming platforms in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering social change in restrictive contexts. "Churails" leverages the relative freedom of online platforms to navigate the sensitive terrain of queer representation. Unlike mainstream media heavily constrained by censorship and social norms, the series boldly explores diverse queer experiences, resonating with Papacharissi (2015) who highlights the potential of digital spaces to challenge dominant narratives. Furthermore, "Churails" fosters localized expressions of resistance through its online

platform. Its engagement with audience commentary and discussions creates a unique space for dialogue and community building, aligning with Couldry (2010) who argues that digital media empowers audiences to actively participate in meaning-making. This contrasts sharply with the limited engagement and passive consumption afforded by mainstream media. "Churails" audience actively engages with the themes, contributing to a collective discourse that challenges heteronormative narratives and fosters solidarity within the queer community, reflecting the findings of scholars like Sen and Alexander (2014) on the potential of online media for collective action. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the limitations of online media, even in cases like "Churails." The series primarily targets an urban, internet-savvy audience, potentially excluding significant portions of the Pakistani population, as highlighted by Srinivasan (2015) in his critique of the digital divide. Additionally, concerns around online censorship and harassment persist, necessitating continued advocacy for safe and inclusive digital spaces for marginalized voices.

Within the conservative context of Pakistani media, "Churails" represents a radical exploration of queer narratives through its nuanced portrayal of queer diversity (Edelman & Goldberg, 2019). The series engages in a delicate negotiation with the visibility of queer identities amidst the stringent societal and religious confines prevalent in Pakistan. This approach marks a significant, albeit gradual, advancement in queer representation, necessitating a reevaluation of its achievements against Pakistan's unique cultural and religious landscape. The silence surrounding queer themes in Pakistani media contrasts with the narrative strategies employed in the Global South, where the battle for authenticity and the challenge against patriarchal norms are more openly depicted (Landau, 2009; Bhattacharyya, 2016). Khan (2021) delves into this silence, attributing it to deeply rooted societal norms that necessitate subtlety in queer storytelling, exemplified by narratives like "Kitni Girhain Baaki Hain." This strategic narrative approach highlights the ongoing struggle between cultural sensitivities and the pressing need for queer visibility, mirroring Sabharwal and Sen (2012) critique of queer portrayals in Indian cinema. In navigating this complex landscape, "Churails" emerges as a critical intervention, articulating the tensions between individual queer expressions and societal expectations within the Pakistani context. The significance of "Churails" lies not in presenting a utopian vision of unfettered representation but in its hesitant yet crucial step forward. It reflects an emerging discourse on visibility and acceptance within South Asia (Evelyn, 2015; Sabharwal & Sen, 2012). By offering diverse queer experiences and sparking dialogue, "Churails" contributes to breaking down societal taboos, albeit cautiously. This cautiousness signifies a growing willingness within Pakistani media to engage with queer narratives. This engagement, as emphasized by Menon (2016),

resonates with a global conversation on visibility and acceptance, paving the way for future dialogues and challenging traditional narratives within the Pakistani context.

However, celebrating "Churails" uncritically would be disingenuous. Legal and social hurdles persist, and mainstream media in Pakistan continues to be cautious. The challenge lies in navigating these complexities while advocating for more inclusive narratives. As Bhushan (2021) highlights, even digital platforms face unique challenges in representing marginalized voices. This necessitates continued critical engagement to ensure the diverse realities of the queer community are accurately and empathetically reflected, both within "Churails" and beyond. Thus, it is argued here that "Churails" stands as a significant intervention within a global context still grappling with the visibility and acceptance of queer identities. The series' nuanced portrayal intersects with and expands upon themes of resistance, visibility, and the transformative potential of media as advocated by scholars like Butler (1990), Sedgwick (1990), and Muñoz (2013). Through its subversive narrative and spatial strategies, "Churails" contributes to ongoing debates within queer theory regarding the performativity of gender, the politics of visibility, and the construction of queer temporalities and spatialities.

Significantly, emerging from the intricate socio-cultural weave of Pakistan, "Churails" transcends the mere representation of queer identities, delving into the intricate realities of queer Muslims at the crossroads of faith and sexuality. This engagement is of paramount importance in a context where dialogues concerning sexuality, particularly queerness, are systematically marginalized or silenced. The pervasive silence is rooted in the conservative fabric of Pakistani society, where religious orthodoxy and stringent societal norms converge to suppress discussions on queer identities. This series, therefore, not only challenges the societal taboos surrounding queer narratives but also serves as a critical intervention into the dominant discourse that seeks to erase the presence and complexities of queer lives in Pakistan. Through its depiction, "Churails" confronts the hegemonic structures that regulate sexuality and gender, offering a counter-narrative that insists on visibility and acknowledgment of queer experiences within the contours of Islamic faith and Pakistani culture. Particularly, the series with its depiction of queer identities critically engages with the discourse on "The Place of Sexual Diversity in Islamic 'Otherness,'" navigating the intricate battleground where Islamic tradition and queer realities intersect. Churails not only challenges but radically upends Huntington's (1993 &1996) "clash of civilizations" thesis by presenting queer Muslim identities not as anomalies but as testimonies to the complex, fluid nature of identity within the Islamic cultural context. This defiance is rooted in the reality that Islamic and Western civilizations, contrary to Huntington's binary opposition, are not monolithic entities but

are composed of myriad, overlapping narratives and experiences, particularly in the realm of gender and sexuality. Similarly, the portrayal of queer identities in "Churails" provocatively contests Lewis's (1990, 2002) assertions that the emancipation of women—and by extension, sexual minorities—is a hallmark of Westernization, inherently alien to Islamic values. By weaving the stories of queer Muslims, "Churails" illuminates the fallacy in Lewis's reductionist view, highlighting the existence of queer agency within Islamic societies and challenging the notion that gender equality and sexual diversity are exclusively Western domains. Likewise, Razack's (2008) critique of the global policing of Muslim communities under the guise of promoting gender equality resonates deeply with "Churails" narrative, which refuses to cast queer Muslims as the imperiled others within their own societies. Instead, the series amplifies voices that have been historically marginalized, echoing the concerns raised by scholars like Okin (1998) and Fekete (2006) regarding the simplistic framing of Muslim culture as antithetical to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. Furthermore, "Churails" embarks on a critical examination of the nexus between sexuality, faith, and cultural identity, navigating the contentious space identified by Modood and Ahmad (2007). The series actively engages with the complexities of being queer and Muslim, challenging the purported mutual exclusivity of these identities and offering a counter-narrative to the pervasive cultural and political rhetoric that seeks to marginalize queer individuals in Islamic societies. This series highlights the imperative for a more inclusive discourse that recognizes the plurality and diversity of Muslim societies, thereby contributing to a broader, more inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality beyond the confines of Western-centric perspectives. In sum, "Churails" exemplifies the intersectional challenge to the binary oppositions of Eastern and Western cultures, particularly regarding sexual diversity and Islamic 'otherness.' It underpins the urgency of reevaluating the discourse on queer identities within Islamic contexts, advocating for a recognition of the complex, interwoven fabric of cultural, religious, and sexual identities that defy simplistic categorizations. Through its portrayal of queer Muslim Pakistani lives, "Churails" not only contests the essentialist narratives but also catalyzes a critical conversation about the inclusivity and diversity within Islamic societies, paving the way for a more nuanced, intersectional understanding of identity that transcends the binary oppositions of traditional discourses.

Conclusion

The investigation into "Churails" and its use of Queer Spatiality within the Pakistani context presents a critical juncture in the ongoing discourse on queer identities, particularly within the contexts of the Global South

and Pakistan. This analysis not only illuminates the series' capacity to challenge heteronormative narratives but also articulates its nuanced portrayal of queer existence within a framework of legal, religious, and cultural constraints. By foregrounding Queer Spatiality, "Churails" crafts an intricate critique of both the limitations and potentials for queer identities in Pakistani society, thereby contributing a pivotal perspective to academic discussions in queer theory and gender studies. This work situates "Churails" as a case study for exploring the interplay between space, identity, and resistance, especially in societies where socio-cultural and religious norms significantly shape the contours of queer lives. Furthermore, this study enriches the global understanding of queer representation, highlighting the significance of context-specific resistances and the media's instrumental role in catalyzing societal transformation. By highlighting the localized expressions of defiance within "Churails," it challenges Western-centric narratives and models, advocating for a more inclusive and comprehensive analysis of queer experiences across diverse socio-cultural landscapes. This study emphasizes the imperative of examining queer narratives within their specific socio-cultural and religious contexts, thereby advancing a nuanced comprehension of queer identities in the Global South, with a focused lens on Pakistan.

Looking toward future research directions, it becomes imperative to explore the broader impacts of media portrayals like "Churails" on societal perceptions of queer identities across different cultures, with a particular focus on Muslim-majority countries. An in-depth investigation into the audience reception of such narratives and their influence on public attitudes toward queer communities in restrictive environments could offer invaluable insights. Additionally, examining the role of digital platforms in enhancing the visibility and acceptance of queer narratives and their interplay with traditional societal norms could further enrich our understanding. Such future inquiries will not only build upon this study's foundations but also broaden the scope of exploration into the dynamics of queer representation and resistance across varied cultural contexts. This study, therefore, stands as a potentially significant contribution to the discourse on queer representation and resistance, particularly within restrictive cultural contexts like Pakistan. It transcends mere critique, positioning "Churails" as an act of defiance against the heteronormative stronghold on South Asian media, and navigates the complex socio-cultural, legal, and religious realities of Pakistan, thereby opening new avenues for queer discourse and understanding.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Rauha Salam-Salmaoui holds a PhD in English Linguistics from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her doctoral dissertation, titled "Constructing Gender Identities Multimodally: Young, middle-class Pakistanis on Facebook," investigates the ways in which young, middle-class Pakistani individuals utilize visual and linguistic resources to shape their gender identities in Facebook posts. Dr. Salam-Salmaoui's research focuses on various areas, including gender identities, Islam, representation of women in textbooks, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, feminism, and social and mainstream media. She is committed to exploring the intersections of language, gender, and identity, particularly in the context of Pakistan. Her work contributes to the growing field of research on gender and communication, shedding light on the complex ways individuals navigate and negotiate their identities in digital spaces.

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