Interview: Asim Abbasi
Usman Ghafoor

After my first film, the medium became less important to me than the stories

If UK-based Pakistani filmmaker Asim Abbasi had his way, he would only let his work do all the talking for him. He appears shy, and almost reclusive, when you meet him for the first time. "I think I'm just a little introvert," he explains, when prompted. "I don't like being in the limelight too much. I believe that the work should speak for itself."
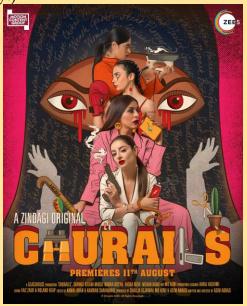
To his credit, his repertoire, which includes the critically acclaimed web series *Churails*, a Zee5 Original, speaks volumes for this 40-year-old film wizard. His debut feature, *Cake* (2018), won him accolades at festivals and from across the border, long before the film made it famously to Netflix, from noted Bollywood directors like Anurag Kashyap. Interestingly, Kashyap's ex-wife, Aarti Bajaj, had worked on the film as editor.

It won't be hyperbole to state that *Cake* contributed to the changing course of Pakistani cinema — it shunned all possible norms of a conventional, largely Bollywood-inspired 'pot-boiler' — and steered it in the direction of neo-realism. The film clearly belonged in the league of Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani* (2003), Mehreen Jabbar's *Ramchand Pakistani* (2007), Shoaib Mansoor's *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007) and Meenu-Farjad's *Zinda Bhaag* (2013), to name a few. Despite a non-star cast (strictly in terms of box-office draw), and a simple story told most faithfully, minus any embellishments, it turned out to be a sleeper hit. A great word of mouth had done the needful. Its overseas business, particularly in the UK, exceeded all expectations of trade pundits.

Among the many reasons why *Cake* was loved, were its modern sensibility and sensitive performances by lead actors Aamina Sheikh, Sanam Saeed, Adnan Malik, Beo Rana Zafar and Syed Mohammad Ahmed. The film also got good mentions for its 10-minute-long climactic sequence which Abbasi had shot in a single take. Later, the director achieved another first for Pakistani cinema when he released the backstory episodes of one of the film's two female protagonists, Zara (played by Saeed), on the web. These mini episodes reignited the audience interest in the movie.

Eventually, *Cake* became Pakistan's official entry for Oscars' consideration. Two years on, Abbasi is part of the country's illustrious Oscar Selection Committee itself. (The committee is led by the two-time Academy Award winning documentary filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy.)

Excerpts from an interview which was taken ahead of the digital release of *Churails* follow:

How do you process so much praise and move on to your next project without a 'hangover'?

Asim Abbasi: I don't think I let it go to my head. In the case of *Cake*, in particular, praise was unexpected to some degree. All I had done was to set up an honest film; as honest as I could possibly make it. There were lots of pressures — to change the title, put in a lip-sync, cast those actors who had the most followers on Instagram etc; a lot of stuff that goes into distributing it. But I stuck to my guns. Eventually, whatever praise I got, I got it for my work and not anything else.

As for the hangover, luckily, I directed *Churails* which allowed me to do something which was creatively very new. After *Cake*, I was worried as to how

many cakes could I make. In this market, how many times can you get private investors to fund you? Everyone wants to make super-duper hits, so financial success becomes very important. But those are the kind of films that don't attract me.

Words of appreciation from Bollywood director Anurag Kashyap and other filmmakers from across the border must have meant a lot.

AA: Yes, it gives you a boost. When you are starting out, all filmmakers experience self-doubt, because film is a subjective art form and there's no science that could predict the audience's feedback.

How did Aarti Bajaj become involved in *Cake*'s editing department?

AA: I was basically looking for a good editor. Very bluntly, I hadn't seen any well edited Pakistani films, so I was scared of using someone from Pakistan. I wanted someone with international exposure. In the UK, the problem was that everyone was struggling with the language. There weren't many South Asian editors to be found. So, I spammed 10 editors in India. I had selected them from the films I really liked, and I reached out to them on LinkedIn and Facebook and wherever. And, Aarti responded. She said, "Let me read the script." She read the script and liked it. Eventually, she flew over to the UK to edit. This was in the end of 2017.

Releasing the backstory of Zara [one of the two female protagonists in *Cake*] online, weeks after the film had opened in theatres, was an interesting gimmick. This especially appealed to the audiences who had seen the movie, because most of them were left wondering about Zara's husband/their story.

AA: There was one flashback that Sanam's character [Zara] has on the plane. It was supposed to be minute long. But

when we were shooting it, [cinematographer] Mo Azmi and my production designer were also in town, and so was Sanam. And we were getting the equipment for two days anyway, so we said we'll just shoot. I quickly wrote the prologues then, just to flesh out the backstory. When we saw it in the edit, it looked too jarring. If you notice it, it was shot very differently; it's all handheld. In the film, we have no hand-held shots except for the childhood memories. So, we decided to release it separately. The concept of 'kill your darlings', you know!

The backstory was mostly improv. We were working with only two characters — Zara and her British husband — so we told Sanam and Gianbruno Spena what it was all about and then let them do whatever. We wanted to capture moments. On the other hand, in the movie, everything was shot-designed. There was a lot of precision.

Why the need to shoot the backstory differently?

AA: It's just a matter of rhythm. Had we shot it the same way [as the rest of the film], it would've looked something that belonged in the same light, which was not the purpose; because it didn't belong in the same light; it belonged to a character's life separately.

Tell us how you pulled off the famous 10-minute one-take shot.

AA: It's complicated, because you obviously have to choose which actor is getting precedence. You have to pre-plan everything and block every movement. Then there were other issues to take care of. For instance, the electricity kept going off, so candles had to be lit. We'd go into a bedroom, and the whole art department would go into the hallway and light everything, and then go back. All this needed to be choreographed.

For me, in that sequence, time had kind of stopped for the characters in the script, but I wanted to capture it in a way that time wouldn't stop for the audiences. This meant that there should be no cuts. As the saying goes, the edits in a film match the blink of the eye, I didn't want the audiences to blink in those 10 minutes!

It was hard to pull off. We had 3 to 4 days of rehearsal prior; then we had two days of rehearsal on set, and finally we shot for two consecutive nights. We had three or four takes, and then I had to pick the one that I thought was overall good for everyone.

It must've been hard for the actors to sustain the same emotional pitch for the entire length of the sequence, for multiple times.

AA: Yeah, and it was the only time they hated me! (*laughs*)

Do you feel compelled to write your own films?

AA: No. I think it happened by chance. In fact, I am hoping to direct other people's works, or working with other directors with my script.

Would you call yourself an auteur?

AA: It would be very pretentious of me to say that. But I can definitely say that I enjoy writing. I don't write because someone forced me to. I really, really enjoy the process. It's the polar opposite of directing. When you're writing, you are

locked in your room, with no one around; it's just you. And when you are on set, you have, like, 200 people with you.

Does a screenplay writer need to essentially sit down with the director?

AA: No, that's a very Pakistani thing. Usually, the producer introduces the idea, the screenplay writer works on it, and then the director comes in. The writer writes very lean, the director takes it and embellishes it and brings his own thing to it. So, if my script is a bit more detailed, that's because I'm going to direct it myself. You can say that I write 'directorially'.

Tell us about the directors who've influenced you.

AA: As a kid, I was exposed to a lot of Bollywood at home. But as I grew up and my taste developed, I understood the importance of cinema as a medium and not just as a form of entertainment. I watched a lot of [Ingmar] Bergman, I still love him, I must watch his *Persona* at least once a year. Tarkovsky's *Mirror* is another favourite that I keep going back to. I've also been a fan of Ray and Gulzar's movies.

So, I realised that cinema was bigger than time-pass. Much later, when I was making *Cake,* I needed it to be something very, very close to my heart. I couldn't just do entertainment. I can't make pure popcorn masala, period.

Talking about your early days, what did you study at school?

AA: I graduated in Economics and then went into banking. I worked as a banker for 10 years. At age 30, I told myself, "*Bas!*" (enough). And my parents agreed. By that time, in Pakistan, films like *Bol* had come out, TV had become gentrified, the public perception of showbiz people was changing, and my parents were more amenable. So, I went to SOAS and did my Masters in Film Theory. Then I enrolled in

London Film Academy for a diploma in Filmmaking. All this while, I was desperate to start writing and directing. Soon I was making short films. They were screened at festivals. Then I made more shorts, and my craft got better.

What kind of movies inspire you the most — those that focus on 'individual versus society' or the ones that highlight an individual's inner conflicts?

AA: For me, there is a distinction, but I am open to both. *Cake* was an ensemble, but it also had some focus on individuals because it was about a small family. *Churails* was more social. But what I don't like is when social becomes preachy. I love Shoaib [Mansoor] saheb's films, but I would like to cut out the preachy parts, because when as an audience I have understood everything, why do you need to spoonfeed your message?

I felt the same while watching *Motorcycle Girl* also. I wished Sohai [Ali Abro]'s speech had been a little less, because the concept was so strong. Maybe the makers fear that the audiences won't get the message if it was implied. I think we should trust the audiences to be smart.

Is there a handbook or manual on filmmaking that you like to carry with you to a set?

AA: None to a set, but there's definitely a book that I keep consulting — it's Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*. It doesn't talk about cinema, but it's quite linked to cinema. Basically, it talks about what the hero has to go through in his journey from start to the end. And that is always useful for me to chart out when I am writing.

Any specific terms that you use the most on the sets?

AA: I am always shouting, "Overlap!" That's because I want my actors to overlap their dialogues. I don't want them to wait for the other person to say their lines. I also sometimes write simultaneous dialogues, because I feel that's more real. If I don't get it on the set, I try and create it in the edit.

Do you have a strict, no-mobile-phone policy on set?

AA: No, though I do get very annoyed if someone is using it, because of the distraction. But I was lucky because there was an element of trust, because I was working largely with the same crew again on the web series. I do need phones around, for continuity and calls etc.

A lot of scriptwriters have certain actors in their mind for the characters they are writing. How do you work like?

AA: I don't do that, because then it becomes too limiting for me. What if you didn't get the actor you had in mind? So, when I am writing, it's just the character. I never write anything with a specific person in mind.

Do you have to make a conscious effort *not* to do that?

AA: No. In fact, one has to make an effort in the other situation, when you've to give face to the character that is there on paper.

Do you let your actors improvise?

AA: I think that depends on the actors. Beo is very good at improvising. When she was rehearsing her lines, she would add *gaaliyan* (abuses) herself and I would let her. So, it varies from actor to actor, but you have to give them a certain amount of freedom. You can't box them to a point where they'd stop enjoying the process. They have to be creatively involved.

For *Cake*, I involved my actors much earlier on, in prep. We had a long rehearsal process. Likewise for the web series [*Churails*]. We didn't necessarily do the same scene over and over; we'd sit together and discuss our lives. Trust building is very essential. Actors are the most fragile group on a set, so you have to connect with them. Otherwise it's only about giving them lines to utter.

Is there something about the process of filmmaking that you simply hate?

AA: Working in the summer in Pakistan! (*Laughs.*) I did it for *Churails*, but I've promised myself that I won't do that again.

Most directors have punishing schedules for shoots. What about you?

AA: We usually work 12 hours at a stretch. That sometimes goes to 14. Mo Azmi, who was my co-producer on *Cake* and a producer on *Churails*, is very conscious of that. He'd take good care of the crew's meals and their sleep. And rightly so, because after a point all these things affect their efficiency. Sometimes,

we'd plan an overtime day, once in a week or two weeks, but after that we'd have a day off. By the way, we never worked for more than six days a week.

How would you compare the experience of a feature film with that of a web series?

AA: *Cake* was very nuanced and small and intimate, and as for *Churails*, I hadn't done anything on that scale before. It had a very big cast — not in terms of stars, but in terms of the number of people. Also, it [*Churails*] was much darker. I know that if it had been exhibited in cinemas, it might not have done well, and if it were made for TV, it wouldn't make it past the censor board. So, I really liked the idea that it was for web. Creatively, it allowed so much freedom.

Churails had to take advantage of the medium. When you are competing on a global platform, your production quality and everything have to be elevated. For me, that was a big deal. It had to feel like it was no less than a film, aesthetically, but it was just longer.

Also, honestly speaking, my stories aren't very mass; they aren't for your every person. Yes, one would want that one's film is exhibited in theatres, but that brings with it a huge baggage about distribution, promotions and marketing, all of which is not easy. For me, web series was, in a way, almost as exciting, if not more, because I got to make content free of all worry about box office and I was still being allowed to maintain the quality that I would in a film. So, for me, it was like a win-win.

At the end of the day, I am a storyteller. After my first feature, the medium became less important to me — less than the stories. Today, whichever medium allows me to tell the stories I want to tell, I will go there. Besides, I hope Pakistan's censor policy gets a little revised, with regard to their ratings system.

Mr. Usman Ghafoor is an award-winning film journalist, a Member of Fipresci-Pakistan, based in Lahore.