

Article

Cruel Optimism and Gender Identity: A Case Study of *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani* and *Oye Motti* in Contemporary Lollywood

Muhammad Sohail Ahmad ^{1,*}, Amina Malik ¹ and Rana Yassir Hussain ²

¹ Division of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of English, University of Education, Lahore 54770, Pakistan

² UE Business School, Division of Management and Administrative Sciences, University of Education, Lahore 54770, Pakistan

* Correspondence: sohail.ahmad@ue.edu.pk

Abstract

This paper examines how Pakistani popular cinema reproduces a cruelly optimistic attachment to gender identity and thinness, where weight loss is imagined as the key to love, success, and social acceptance. Rather than surveying the entire industry, this study focuses on two emblematic case studies—*Jawani Phir Nahi Ani* (2015) and *Oye Motti* (2021)—to show how Lollywood normalises fatphobia through comic ridicule, makeover tropes, and exclusionary casting practices. The analysis reveals how fatness is framed not as an identity but as a flaw to be corrected, rendering overweight characters undesirable despite their talents or personalities. Thus, fatness is usually treated as an obstacle to social acceptance, marriage, and personal happiness; the very hope of inclusion becomes an instrument of exclusion, exemplifying Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism. In Berlant’s terms, cruel optimists always struggle to achieve unattainable fantasies of a better life that promise upward mobility.

Keywords: fatphobia; Lollywood; appearance; objectification; cruel optimism

1. Introduction

Research on fatphobia has examined various dimensions, including characters’ attire (Fox-Kales 2011), idealised slimness (Plotz 2021), body shaming (Khan et al. 2023), normalising fat fear (Ashraf et al. 2018), bodily differences in favour of a universalised ideal (Shaviro 2008) and systemic oppression (Mullaly 2002). Additionally, entertainment media representations also contribute to the complications of these issues as they influence the views of the masses on what is acceptable in terms of bodies and behaviours (Kyrölä 2021), in which fat bodies remain undesirable despite representation. As an example, obesity is a source of humour in Pyari Mona drama and films such as *Bol* (Mansoor 2011) and *Load Wedding* (2018), where the characters with obesity appear to be unacceptable or romantically challenged in the Pakistani film industry (Khadim 2018; Memon 2022). In addition, past scholarship on fatness (Farrell 2011; Murray 2008; Strings 2019) has already covered the way it is constructed as comic overindulgence or ethical failure within Western culture. Yet little scholarship situates Pakistani cinema within this global conversation, which this study attempts to address.

This paper reflects on how fatphobia within Lollywood discourse transforms obesity into a crisis by analysing the drama series *Drama Oye Motti* by Iffi (2021) and the film *Jawani Phir Nahi* by Baig (2015). In addition, it holds that modern Lollywood perpetuates fatphobia not only by deriding or marginalising, but also in the way that Berlant (2011)



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theorises cruel optimism: emotional investment in ideals that hold a promise of a better life and foreclose the structural possibilities of fulfilment. Fat characters are also told again and again in the Pakistani popular cinema and television that weight loss will bring love, social legitimacy and personal success. But they are promises which are narratively and aesthetically programmed to fail. The close textual and affective analysis in the paper supports this argument. Based on the theory of cruel optimism introduced by Berlant, with the additional contribution of her conversation with Lee Edelman regarding normativity, futurity, and social legibility (*Sex, or the Unbearable*), this paper focuses on how narrative arcs, comic devices, makeover tropes, and visual framing govern fat bodies but maintain a sense of transformation fantasy.

This article suggests three interventions by introducing the idea of fat to the South Asian film and television scholarship by engaging in fat studies and affect theory. One example is Berlant's theory of cruel optimism, which can be applied to the Pakistani media setting, where it gains explanatory power, rooted in particular moral, religious, and post-colonial logics. Second, Bollywood-driven narratives of South Asian body politics should be questioned by prefiguring the particular negotiations of thinness, respectability and gender by Lollywood. Lastly, fatphobia should be redefined not as a fringe representational concern but as a mainstream organisational process by which Pakistani popular media manages belonging, desire and imaginative vision of a feasible future.

2. Pakistani Cinema and Television: Historical Overview

The film and television industries in Pakistan have emerged along with the changing national, moral, and aesthetic regimes that have significantly influenced the image of gender and embodiment. This historical account is not just descriptive, but defines the cultural circumstances by which fatness as a moral and social failure is presented by contemporary Lollywood. This section explicates the shift in cinematic norms during postcolonial nation-building to the neoliberal consumer culture by tracing how thinness currently serves as an investment in belonging and success in the Pakistani media.

The Pakistani film industry emerged during the time of the Partition of 1947, as the formation of the film industry was linked with the creation of the new state. The first Urdu film, *Teri Yaad* (1948), opened a national cinema that soon became established with films in Urdu and in the regional language (Iqbal et al. 2022). The early Urdu cinema was heavily influenced by the Indo-Persian aesthetics whereby plump female figures were a symbol of prosperity, fertility and artistic culture. Noor Jehan and Shabnam (actresses) were the representatives of a visual economy in which the desirability was not yet connected with excessive thinness. The Lollywood industry underwent a golden era between the mid-1950s and early 1970s, during which it created movies, with the giant production hubs being Dhaka, Karachi and Lahore until the East Pakistani secession in 1971. Such movies as *Shaheed* (dir. Khalil Qaiser, 1962) and *Armaan* (dir. Pervez Malik, 1966) were the critical and commercial successes of the period, characterised by technical innovation, colourful film music and a strong export market throughout the Gulf states and South Asia. During this time, bodies on screen significantly served as an indicator of romance, melodrama, and performance of music more than as a signifier of moral discipline.

The industry faltered during the 1980s under the martial-law administration of General Zia-ul-Haq. Islamisation policies (1977–1988) imposed strict censorship on song, dance sequences and romantic storylines, undermining the conventions that had sustained popular cinema (A. U. Khan 2022). In this environment, the acceptable body became one that signified discipline and piety rather than sensual excess. For instance, the actress Noor Jehan in *Shabnam* represented a fuller-bodied aesthetic inherited from Indo-Persian traditions. This moralisation of the body laid the groundwork for later associations between bodily

regulation and personal worth. By the late 1990s, production of the film had reduced to a mere fraction of what it had been in the 1970s. In this way, local viewers were becoming more attracted to the state-owned television dramas created by the Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), which had been aired since 1964 (K. Z. Khan 2014).

The liberalisation of the media in the 1990s and early 2000s brought satellite television, Indian television and Western advertising into Pakistani living rooms. The revival started in the early 2000s tentatively, and new filmmakers brought fresh dynamics and experimentation by releasing forty movies each year, much less than its historical benchmark (Iqbal et al. 2022; Raju 2022). Rather than producing a gradual transformation, this sudden influx generated a convergence between global neoliberal beauty standards and local moral discourses. Thinness was to be associated with not just glamour and modernity but also discipline in the self and morality. The notable films during this period of transition were *Yeh Dil Aap Ka Huwa* (2002), *Larki Panjaban* (2003) and *Salakhain* (2004). This was followed by institutional encouragement, with one of the subsidiaries of the private broadcaster Geo TV, Geo Films, declaring a self-named Revival of Pakistani Cinema campaign, when state funding was found insufficient. Its flagship production, *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007), was the first Pakistani film to both Pakistan and India to receive a simultaneous theatrical release in both Pakistan and India, marking a resurgence of Pakistani cinema into the regional and global cinema markets (Rasheed 2022). Thus, the modern Lollywood revival cinema and the television drama of privacy took globalised aesthetics of thinness and framed the bodily change as a sign of individual righteousness and social accent.

While the global circulation of thinness as a beauty ideal is undeniable, Pakistan's historical trajectory helps explain why Pakistani media often frames fatness through moral and affective registers distinct from neighbouring industries. Moreover, the media brought unfiltered Indian and Western programming into Pakistani homes right after the liberalisation of private television and the arrival of satellite channels in the 1990s. This liberalisation created a sudden convergence toward Euro-American beauty standards rather than a gradual shift as in neighbouring India. Unlike Bollywood, where the glamour of the "item number" eroticises fatphobia, Pakistani media frames weight loss as a sign of religious and moral self-discipline. This moralisation renders fatness a spiritual as well as social failing, a twist on Berlant's cruel optimism that differentiates Pakistani representations from other South Asian contexts.

By situating contemporary fatphobic narratives within this longer history of moral regulation, global media flows alongside neoliberal aspiration; this section prepares the ground for analysing how *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani* and *Oye Motti* mobilise body size as a narrative problem to be corrected. In these texts, the hope of acceptance through transformation becomes a disciplinary mechanism, revealing how Pakistani popular media sustains a culturally specific form of cruel optimism structured around bodily conformity.

3. Body Shaming and Objectification in Lollywood

Body shaming and objectification in Lollywood have to be interpreted in the context of a larger transnational media economy, whereby the images produced by a movie are shared across borders and contribute to the normalisation of aesthetic standards. Signs of desirability, productivity, and moral value, thinness and bodily control have long been an institutionalised part of film and television sectors, whether Hollywood or Bollywood, Korean popular culture, or European advertising (Farrell 2011; Murray 2008; Strings 2019). These circulating images create what Bordo (2023) has referred to as a globalised body regime whereby slimness is not only an aesthetic choice but also a symbol of self-discipline, modernity and social mobility. Equally, Lollywood does not act in a vacuum. Still, it is part of the globalised system in which the narrative in cinemas, the aesthetics of advertising, and

celebrity culture promote limited notions of the body across diverse cultural backgrounds. Situating Pakistani cinema within this wider framework highlights that body shaming is not a uniquely local phenomenon but part of a global regime of representation.

In Pakistan, national, linguistic and cultural boundaries are fluid. Therefore, cinematic media is crucial in shaping perceptions of nationality, beauty standards, and body ideals (Masood 2023). Arguably, on the one hand, cinema is a powerful medium for preserving cultural heritage and influencing youth by presenting engaging narratives and appealing aesthetics (Naeem et al. 2020). On the other hand, it also promotes gender-stereotyped attitudes where women with slim, perfectly curved figures and balanced complexions are considered beautiful, whereas men with muscular physiques and balanced complexions are considered handsome (Dittmar and Howard 2004; Lin and Kulik 2002; Polivy and Herman 2004). However, Ahmad (2016) sees it through the lens of the “ideal beauty” while Shabbir et al. (2021) link it with the body-shaming trend.

Body shaming, according to Duncan et al. (2019), is insulting or ridiculing people due to their body characteristics. In the same way, Duarte et al. (2014) believe it to be bullying based on physical characteristics: body size, facial features, hairstyle, or dressing style. This tradition emphasises how cinema and the media, in general, value physical looks more than ability or skills. Moreover, such objectification supports the social judgments related to overweight people by considering their worthiness in accordance with the conventional standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness. Due to this objectification, youth in developing countries tend to forget their conservative values (Adebola 2015) and are conditioned with the beauty ideas displayed on the screen (Madhi 2024). Using Lollywood as a context in this global media ecology, we understand that the cinematic representations of fatness are components of a broader ideological system that makes exclusion normal and inclusion possible through body conformity.

Pakistan’s cinematic industry (known as Lollywood) also promotes the objectification and “gaze meter” where “bold and beautiful” characters replace the traditional “chhooi-mooi (serene)” representations (Rizvi 2014; Watkins et al. 2018), influencing public debates and shaping people’s identities and life decisions (Rehman 2016; Fayyaz 2019). For example, shows like *Good Morning Pakistan* regularly promote weight-loss strategies through diet segments featuring nutritionists such as Dr. Hina Anis and Dr. Ayesha Abbas, alongside actresses like Kiran Khan and Rubina Ashraf. Moreover, Ahmed Ali Butt, a well-known comedian, lost 15 kilos of weight and grabbed two new projects just because of his transformation, while Kubra Khan faced harsh criticism and remarks like “motu, ghaplu”, “fatty”, when she was on her medication and gained weight (Farrell 2011). The trend shows that actors’ weight vacillations for roles are admired as a sign of devotion, otherwise entirely denounced (Kyrölä 2021), which Berlant (2011) aligns with cruel optimism as thinness is equated with success and acceptance. However, the illusion of a better life linked to weight loss is ultimately unsustainable and leads to fatphobia. Here, fatness is portrayed merely as a surface flaw, whereas dieting is framed as a moral journey toward a “true” slim self. This focus on personal transformation obscures the deeper structural and cultural forces that also shape bodies and lives in unequal ways (Thompson 2015). As an example, under colonial rule, bodies were interpreted as a sign of personality and eligibility to be incorporated into the social environment. Modernity and progress were linked to thinness, restraint and self-regulation and excess bodies were interpreted as failure in morality or society. Even after independence, these bodily hierarchies did not fade away, and they still formed the cultural norms. These values were subsequently justified by the US imperial and cultural hegemony through Hollywood film, advertising, diet culture, and the beauty industry of the rest of the world. As a consequence, the contemporary Pakistani media has been focused on stratified history, in which the acceptable body is already determined by

the postulates of colonial and neoliberal levels. In this respect, the fat body appears to be a crucial intersection of the remains of colonialism and consumerism in the modern world, in which the state of fatness becomes interpreted as something which cannot be attributed to anything good in this life, and the process of weight loss is promoted as a marketable method of loving, being successful, and fitting in with modern society. Thus, with fat characters, the identification with thinness is a cynically hopeful solution that enables fat individuals to exist within a fatphobic regime; it prevents more radical solutions to body acceptance or fairness. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, this article argues that in Lollywood constructions of fat bodies, optimism is not about feeling hopeful but about surviving within fatphobic social and cinematic structures.

4. Fatphobia in Contemporary Lollywood

Fatphobia in Lollywood cannot be understood in isolation; it is embedded in broader historical and transnational trajectories of body politics. Body politics is seen as the means through which media and cultural institutions control bodies by imposing moral, social and economic worth to specific modes of embodiment, a process that contemporary visual cultures have linked more and more often to slimness as a disciplinary, productive, and desirable characteristic. Scholars such as [Gazdar \(1997\)](#) and [Rizvi \(2014\)](#) have demonstrated that Pakistani cinema has been negotiating cultural modernity for a long time, using visual aesthetics that have been borrowed from Bollywood and Hollywood, which have institutionalised slimness as a precondition of desirability on a screen. However, [Strings \(2019\)](#) has linked it with whiteness, morality, and modernity: logics that travelled into South Asian media cultures. In the same manner, [Farrell \(2011\)](#) and [Murray \(2008\)](#) also record how the Western popular culture frames the idea of fatness as moral weakness or comic excess, an idea which is echoed in Lollywood films to portray overweight characters as bad or funny. These discourses are transnationalised in global flows of media affecting industries outside of the Euro-American cultural contexts. Furthermore, access to the views of such scholars helps to understand that the aesthetic hierarchies of Lollywood are not local manifestations of local prejudice but a subset of the larger global economy of images, whereby bodies are disciplined via aspiration and shame. In this regard, being fat becomes an obvious symptom of unsuccessful modern subjecthood, whereas the process of weight loss is presented as a path to social recognition and cultural integration.

Comparative films like *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and *Kalank* (2019) also come from Bollywood and show that Pakistani cinema takes part in a broader South Asian cinema economy, commodifying slimness while putting larger bodies on the margins. Placing Lollywood fatphobia in this longer history of cultural dominance, global movement of media, and neoliberal politics of the body, this paper illustrates how fatphobia in Lollywood narratives converts obesity into a crisis.

Male obese characters in Lollywood endure ridicule, whilst female characters have to manoeuvre a field that closes doors to possible marriage and job opportunities. The comedy-drama *Fat Family* takes social critique and humour as the combined means of drawing attention to these barriers. Actress Naima Khan's derogatory remark, "I usually tell obese girls that you look like an aunty" ([Tahir 2022](#)), reflects societal disdain for overweight individuals ([Arroyo and Andersen 2017](#)). Similarly, research by [Farrell \(2011\)](#) highlights how fatphobia perpetuates negative stereotypes, reinforcing discrimination and exclusion, whereas [Kyrölä's \(2021\)](#) comment of "headless fatties" reinforces their objectification. This objectification, in turn, heightens self-consciousness and contributes to severe psychological and physical consequences, including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and impaired sexual well-being.

5. *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani, 2015 and Oye Motti, 2021: A Case Study*

Film *Jawani Phir Nahi* is a story of three middle-aged friends, Sherry, Saif, and Pervez (also known as Pepe). In order to evade marital and professional commitments, they take a covert vacation in Thailand. Their adventure is accomplished by the use of musical numbers, physical comedy on a large scale, and love plots. Pervez, the group's overweight member, is repeatedly mocked for his appetite and bulk, with gags about broken chairs, the need for "two seats on the plane," and camera framings that exaggerate his body. This line makes it seem as though his body is too big to appear in normal spaces. Such verbal hyperbole is immediately supported by framing: the camera tends to be in a wide shot in which Pepe is drawn in as a whole body in the group formation, and thus, physically validating the joke, as opposed to refuting it. Instead of fading to a close reaction shot, which could express his emotional reaction, the film lets the scene remain in a common frame, prompting the audience to interpret his body as spectacle.

The role of food-related humour works in this way. Pepe is joked about in eating situations, with remarks like, "Bas kar yaar, sab kuch tum hi kha jaoge?" ("Stop friend, will you eat everything?"), which puts appetite into comic profligacy and a moral inability to control. These scenes are usually filmed in medium-wide shots where his body is still in view in regard to food and other characters. The fact that the camera does not shift to a closer shot helps to sustain the emphasis on the bodily consumption as compared to the interior feeling, which confirms the linkage of fatness and excess. Food-loving is reduced to the status of shorthand abjection; aesthetically, body size is connected to a loss of control over oneself.

This logic is also exacerbated by the use of dance sequences, which turn the movement of Pepe into spectacle. The teasing by friends is sometimes put in a context of hyperbole, such as "Pepe, dance floor toot jayega" ("Pepe, dance floor will break down"), which is predictive of the audience laughing before he even starts moving. The narrative structure soon pulls Pepe back into this comic economy at the times when he tries to assert his confidence. His statement, "log meri charm pe girte hain" ("people fall due to my attractiveness") causes a momentary gesture towards confident manhood and erotic potential. The line is usually placed in a group dialogue, which sparks off laughter or an ironic response from other characters. This recurrence is an image of the cruel optimism of Berlant. Pepe is stuck to the illusions of beauty, friendship, and romantic acceptance—illusions that allow him to continue to be involved in the social world of the film. Additionally, these visual and storytelling effects and techniques replicate a well-known transnational script within which fat bodies become hyper-visual as a joke and invisible as an acceptable object of desire.

There is a parallel plotline of Gul, the fattest woman, who returns towards the end of the film much thinner, and this thinness leads her to have a sudden romantic interest. Such narrative and visual decisions make fatness a temporal barrier to attractiveness and losing weight as the only way to social and marital success, which makes the film a paradigm of fatphobic tropes that this article challenges.

Jawani Phir Nahi is a film that was released on 25 September 2015. It is a documentary directed by Nadeem Baig and written by Vasay Chaudhary. The film premiered on the Cine Star IMAX Theatre in Lahore and was released in Karachi. It is worth noting that the movie was given some national recognition when the President of Pakistan, Dr. Arif Alvi, tweeted: "I saw the movie [*Jawani Phir Nahi Ani*] yesterday. An excellent production. I am glad Pakistan cinema is catching up and creating good entertainment" (Shafiq et al. 2019). It later had international screenings in Dubai, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The film emerged as the highest-grossing Lollywood film despite significant criticism, notably from Sarwar (2015) and Sheri (2015). They raised objections to the inclusion of Russian women in beachwear, alcohol drinking, and dancing between Pakistani men and foreign

women. In addition, the movie has a rating of 7.3 out of 10, and it won a number of awards, such as the ARY Film Awards for best director, best editor, and best film in 2016. It was also nominated in seven categories in the Lux Style Awards. With earnings of approximately 7 billion rupees, it was declared the highest-grossing Lollywood film to date (Jin and Sun 2022). SZ (2015) noted that while *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani* is neither flawless nor a cinematic masterpiece, it can best be described as “masaledar + mazedar = paisa wasool!” (“spicy, + tasty = money received”), reflecting its strong entertainment value.

The film’s reliance on fatphobic tropes, such as exaggerated physical comedy involving Gul’s body, and derisive remarks from male characters (Arshad 2018), and the climactic reveal of her “improved” slimmer figure mirrors broader South Asian cinematic practices (Almas and Bhatti 2017) where fat bodies are either ridiculed or erased. These depictions reinforce Lollywood’s beauty standards, where social and marital values are closely tied to maintaining a slim, conventionally attractive body. Moreover, *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani*’s use of the “makeover” trope signals that personal fulfilment, romantic success, and societal acceptance are only attainable through weight loss, which Komal Meer links with a larger cultural bias wherein bodily discipline, particularly for women, is aligned with moral and personal virtue (Style Desl and Life 2025).

In contrast, *Churails* (2020) challenge these assumptions by presenting women of diverse body types without pathologising or marginalising them (Abbasi 2020). *Churails* goes further to critique the use of female bodies as items of trade. The film illustrates the entertainment sector’s callous submission to the culture of fat discrimination disguised as humour. Having said that, while there is a surge in advocating for body positivity, Pakistani media falls behind in embracing a generous and inclusive approach towards beauty. In this regard, *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani* is important for the study of fatphobia in Pakistani culture as it highlights the obsession with body weight and the glorification of discrimination against overweight individuals. It also highlights the underlying issues of gender, body, and social status collectively.

The television drama *Oye Motti* chronicles the life of Alia, a young plus-size woman negotiating stigma in employment, family relations, and the marriage market. The title *motti* is an Urdu term used for a fat woman. Moreover, the exclamation “oye” signals the everyday verbal harassment Alia endures. For instance, the doctor had advised her to lose weight for a healthy life, but Alia chose to enjoy life by eating, and then Alia’s mother said to her, “I am concerned about your life and your marriage. Moreover, no one even seems to like you—neither your relatives, nor the matchmakers, nor your colleagues at the office. There is a limit to everything. When are you going to fix yourself?” The plot concerns the emotional and physical ordeal Alia goes through following the request of her fiancée, who wants her to go from 160 kg to 70 kg in a year as a wedding condition. This reaction, where the female is given the ultimatum and feels that she has “no other choice”, discloses the affective construction of cruel optimism: she clings to the promise of romantic inclusion despite being conditional and even unattainable. Later episodes showcase recurrent humiliations, and this increases when Alia is not mentioned by the foreign delegation at the office. Her colleague commented, “You, who are overweight, take so much pride in your word, yet the company did not select you.” When Alia approaches the boss and asks, the boss responds: “It is not your skills that are lacking, but rather your size. Don’t get me wrong—I’m not trying to make fun of you. Any company is careful about its image, and they generally prefer not to send someone who is overweight; you need to understand this”. Even though this series indirectly points to body positivity with its melancholic and optimistic theme song, its main narrative supports romantic legitimacy and social mobility as well as drastic bodily change. This is why the play presents a relevant television analogy to the discourse of the movie, as in *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani*.

Oye Motti is a Pakistani television drama that was initially aired on Express TV on 11 February 2021, and weekly episodes are broadcast every Thursday at 8:00 PM. It is a series that was directed by Muhammad Iftikhar Iffi and written by Sajjad Haider Zaidi. The play touches upon an important social problem: difficulties overweight people experience in finding a job, defining personal identity, and being rejected in marriage offers (Hipin 2021). The title itself confronts fatphobia in society; however, the initial promotional clip of the drama received considerable backlash. Viewers reacted strongly, with comments such as “I can’t get over the surella oye motti” and “what the actual fuck, I’m fuming” (Zehra 2021). Even with this criticism, there were viewers and critics who tried to find meaning in the provocative title and see the discrimination in the trailer as a reflection of real-life feelings: “this is revolting”. Many women experience what happens to this woman in this drama. Though not all the melodramatic depictions of domestic violence are central to the opera, the episodic style, captivating storylines and meaningful narration make the drama a success on the whole.

6. Discussion

The fat character Pervaiz (also known as Pepe) in *Jawani Phir Nahi* projects the contradictory rationality of cruel optimism, in which fantasies of desirability are maintained specifically due to their impossibility. The fantasy of youth is held by Pepe, but the film enlists his body as a comic spectacle, and this is the association that Murray (2008) links with disciplined humour. For instance, his friend Saif jokes: “Pepe, you’ll need two seats on the plane, not economy, business class” (Baig 2015). This remark reinforces the societal stereotype that fat bodies are excessive or “too much” for normative spaces and even burdensome in public settings. As Berlant (2011) argues, cruel optimism attaches subjects to fantasies of belonging even as the conditions of that belonging are structured to exclude them. Pepe’s attachment to the fantasy of romantic acceptance is sustained by precisely such ridicule, which makes him visible only as an object of humour and invisible as a legitimate subject of desire.

The cinematography reinforces this exclusion. Pepe is often shot in wide frames, and the camera lingers on his body movements when he dances, encouraging the audience to laugh at his amplified body. Instead of having interiority or romantic substance, Pepe is merely a screen onto which humour is projected. Even making such statements of confidence, saying that it is his charm that makes people attractive to him, is hampered by the narrative structure of the movie, which constantly brings him back to the role of comic relief. This hyper-visible framing exemplifies what Murray (2008) sees as comic material but denies narrative depth. Even when Pepe responds, “don’t worry, people fall for my charm”, the humour functions as a coping mechanism rather than a true challenge to social hierarchies. In terms of the theory of cruel optimism developed by Lauren Berlant, this relationship is an example of cruel optimism: Pepe is held in an affectionate state by his dreams of belonging, masculinity, and romantic acknowledgment, despite the fact that the story of the novel ensures that these dreams never materialise. His jokes, smiles, and the fact that he is ready to engage in group banter are survival strategies that help him to live in a social world that is organised against him. His resistance is therefore a survival strategy that holds him close to the very things that discriminate against him. This state is neither purely tragic nor melodramatic but meta-formal, with fantasy functioning as a life-sustaining yet limiting mechanism for enduring social exclusion. Cultural theorist Saguy (2013) posits that fatness, when framed as moral failure or comic flaw, displaces the possibility of serious identity or romantic legitimacy, which is precisely what Pepe struggles with.

A parallel narrative involving the female character Gul, who was originally framed as obese, intensifies this logic. The movie intentionally uses the makeover cliché. Gul, later revealed as thin and beautiful, intends to highlight the idea of losing weight as the sole path to attractiveness. This change is instantly compensated for with the romantic care and admiration, which confirms the idea that weight loss is the condition of feminine desirability. The makeover trope here functions as a narrative resolution: fatness is not accommodated but erased. Pepe, by contrast, does not transform and remains outside the zone of romantic legitimacy; as [Levy-Navarro \(2008\)](#) posits, fatness often functions as both the joke and the tragedy. The normalisation of the cruelties of optimism logic is in this juxtaposition: thinness is discussed as a moral journey with promises of love and acceptance, and fatness is presented as stasis, loss, and ridicule. This framing, as [Strings \(2019\)](#) observes, by neoliberal body politics turns slimness into a sign of modernity and value and fatness into a sign of backwardness. However, [Tiainen et al. \(2019\)](#) see it as basic human resistance to the “culture of silence” fostered by neoliberal discourses that stigmatise non-normative bodies and desires. *JPNA* thus aligns with transnational cinematic scripts seen in Bollywood and Hollywood, which frame fatness as comic excess until it is erased by transformation.

In the film industry, *Oye Motti* also complicates this dynamic by pre-empting the inner struggles of fat characters, yet it remains attached to the same cruelly optimistic scripts. The main character is a plus-size woman called Alia who deals with stigma both at home and at work, as well as in love. From the outset, the drama positions her body as a problem requiring correction. Alia’s acceptance of her fiancé’s ultimatum, reducing her weight from 160 kg to 70 kg in a year, reveals a crisis of the subject ([Cvetkovich 2020](#)). Her statement, “I am taking this challenge because he is the only one who has accepted me and chosen to marry me; there is no other option for a woman like me” ([Ifi 2021](#)), captures the entanglement of aspiration and despair. Textually, the conversation summarises the mental panic brought about by the pressures of the outside world, and this becomes familiar to the idea of the affective emotions presented by [Ahmed \(2010\)](#) when she speaks of how the sense of shame spins around the social levels and gathers significance. The film visually highlights this dynamic using close-up shots of the desperately expressive faces of Alia in contrast with wide frames that make her body appear huge, which, as a visual effect, recreates the cinematic stereotype of the fat body as spectacle. The cinematic narrative resonates with [Saguy’s \(2013\)](#) critique of the “weight-loss imperative” that positions slimness as a moral obligation for inclusion, thereby exposing how Lollywood mirrors global scripts of fat regulation. By deploying these textual and visual codes, *Oye Motti* demonstrates how Lollywood mirrors global cinematic practices of fat regulation. In doing so, it sustains aesthetic exclusions while ostensibly offering the promise of transformation.

Fatphobia permeates both domestic and institutional spheres, functioning as a disciplinary technology ([Foucault 1977](#)); this is what [Wann \(1998\)](#) describes as the moral contagion of fatness. This dynamic is vividly staged in the cinematic narratives through the characters of Ansa and Nosheen Shah. Ansa’s stepmother taunts, “girls should be delicate like butter and cream, but your wife is a giant temple and wishes to be a police officer”, and the brother of Shah’s complaint, “my friends mock me because of her weight”. These derogatory remarks invoke the aesthetic lexicon of fragility and femininity while enacting what [LeBesco \(2004\)](#) identifies as failed femininity. On screen, these dialogues are visually reinforced through framing: lingering shots exaggerate bodily difference, while costume and posture accentuate physical excess against ideals of slim femininity. At the same time, Ansa’s aspiration to join the police reflects the “double bind” of [Bordo \(2023\)](#) and [Berlant’s \(2011\)](#) cruel optimism, wherein the pursuit of dignity and mobility is tethered to institutions that simultaneously foreclose such possibilities. This paradox of striving

for respectability aligns with Cooper's (2021) claim that fat subjects are ensnared in contradictory demands of conformity and erasure. The series thereby underscores how cultural ideals perpetuate harmful attachments, which Prohaska and Gailey (2021) call "fat bullying as social control, compelling fat individuals to endure stigma and exhaustion in pursuit of unattainable norms."

The series ultimately visualises what Love calls "feeling backwards" (Love 2009), upholds a "tyranny of slenderness" (Murray 2008), and critiques how fatness is stigmatised and represented as a social problem rather than a legitimate mode of embodiment. Berlant's framework helps to understand the discourse of fatness, where optimism is not about feeling hopeful but surviving. These narratives also reveal how cruel optimism operates at the level of spectatorship. Audiences are invited to laugh at Pepe, sympathise with Alia, and celebrate Gul's transformation. In both instances, the viewer is involved in the affective economy perpetuating fatphobia. Humour, empathy, and admiration are all part of the re-creation of the norms that equate thinness with value. The normalisation of the view of happiness depending on body conformity is done by framing the idea of transformation as an option and a necessity. Finally, the analysis shows that cruel optimism is not just an abstract theoretical notion but a lived affective form that is implanted in media discourses. *JPNA* and *Oye Motti* demonstrate how characters are connected to the ideals of inclusion that support them and, at the same time, disempower them. Through the expansion of the case study and its combination with the discussion, it is possible to outline the way in which Lollywood and Pakistani television engage in a global media economy that disciplines the bodies in a way that is hopeful.

7. Methodology

This study employs a close analysis of Pakistani film and television through Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, further supported by her collaborative dialogue with Lee Edelman in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Berlant and Edelman 2013). Berlant (2011) conceptualises optimism as an attachment to ideals that sustain life while simultaneously preventing flourishing. When fatness is depicted in Lollywood as an obstacle to love or social progress, the remedies provided (weight loss, adherence to beauty ideals, or integration into the world of consumerism) are not liberating but disciplinary.

This collision points to a key tension within optimism theories. Scott (2022) defines optimism as a positive attitude and sees hope as a tool for resisting oppression. However, as fat studies show, such celebratory analyses obscure the ways in which "hope" is mobilised as a weapon against stigmatised bodies. Weight-loss culture, for instance, leverages optimism by offering inclusion and triumph if only people transform themselves (Guthman 2009). Berlant follows this analysis by uncovering how these promises are forms of cruel optimism: desires that seem life-sustaining but actually trap subjects within systems and hurt them. In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Edelman further complicates this dynamic by interrogating how normative fantasies of "the good life" are tethered to futurity, continuity, and social legibility. Fat bodies, like other non-normative bodies, are positioned as obstacles to these fantasies rather than participants in them. In Lollywood, fat characters are placed in just such a trap. They are depicted yearning for love and social inclusion through bodily conformity, but the stories themselves maintain fatphobic discourses that disallow actual belonging.

Crucially, Berlant and Edelman resist framing such attachments as mere personal delusions. Instead, they theorise normativity as an affective structure that compels subjects to remain invested in ideals that repeatedly fail them. In fat studies, scholars note how stigma creates what Harjunen (2016) terms "embodied precariousness," where fat subjects must continually negotiate vulnerability in everyday interactions. Berlant (2011) reframes

this dynamic and posits that the pursuit of unattainable ideals is not only a repeated failure but also a psychic survival mechanism. Freud's notion of repetition compulsion explains why individuals remain tethered to ideals that repeatedly disappoint, while [Raisborough \(2016\)](#) underscores the fact that fat representation is often constructed around "narratives of transformation" that naturalise stigma. In Lollywood, fat characters are emotionally invested in fantasies of acceptance, yet their very investment perpetuates their marginalisation. From this perspective, cruel optimism clarifies the ideological labour performed by Lollywood's representations of fatness: they sustain attachment to norms that fat bodies are structurally excluded from fulfilling.

Integrating fat studies with Berlant's affect theory and her dialogue with Edelman on normativity and futurity allows this study to offer an affective account of how unattainable fantasies sustain fatphobia. [Strings \(2019\)](#) reminds us that fantasies historically impacted Lollywood in the form of cultural hegemony or market leadership of Hollywood, which positioned slimness as a marker of civility and progress. This binds fat characters to fantasies of transformation that uphold both Hollywood's legacies of bodily discipline and contemporary consumerist ideals. In the context of Lollywood, this is evident in the portrayal of fat characters, who are often striving for acceptance through conformity to idealised beauty standards. Berlant and Edelman's refusal of compulsory futurity sharpens this critique by revealing how fatness is rendered incompatible with the temporal logic of success, marriage, and social reproduction. This kind of optimism, which is grounded in the assumption that change will bring about social inclusiveness, is inhumane when it continues to cause psychological torment and further social exclusion. In doing so, these discourses make inequality natural and fatness a perpetual place of failure, whilst ignoring the systems that perpetuate marginalisation.

The two writings were selected based on the fact that they represent the most popular trends of Pakistani popular entertainment in alternative yet complementary forms. The Pakistani film *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani* (2015) was the largest-grossing film of its decade, and was released in over one hundred theatres across the country and promoted as a family masala blockbuster. Its huge commercial success and dependence on formulaic comedy, song sequences, and romance make it a standard of what the modern Lollywood revival cinema is aimed at. In turn, *Oye Motti* (2021) was broadcast weekly on Express TV, which is a free-to-air nationwide channel with a mass audience in urban and rural Pakistan. It is a prime-time domestic drama adhering to the standards of mainstream Urdu television serials, which regularly construct the attitudinal middle-class ideas of gender and respectability. Taken together, these works—one cinematic, one televisual—provide a broad sample of the narrative and production values that reach the largest Pakistani audiences and, therefore, carry ideological weight in defining beauty norms and gender expectations.

By comparison, a niche streaming production such as Zindagi Original's *Churails* ([Abbasi 2020](#)) belongs to a different circuit: it has targeted a global South Asian diaspora and has been widely read as an indie or feminist intervention rather than a reflection of mass-market conventions. We reference *Churails* only to highlight how exceptional and, therefore, instructive such counter-discourses remain within Pakistan's media ecology.

8. Conclusions

The issue of fatphobia continues to thrive in Lollywood as it demonstrates how cinema helps to perpetuate exclusionary aesthetics through its association of thinness with beauty, success and legitimacy. This work contributes to fat studies and affect theory in South Asia by showing that fatphobia in Lollywood goes beyond a visual preference and becomes a disciplining power that influences the way people think of themselves. It asks us to

critically rethink the rules of the cinema and the bonds that perpetuate malicious values. The broader implication of this study is that studying Lollywood expands fat studies scholarship beyond Euro-American contexts and reveals how cruel optimism operates across different media ecologies: the promise that transformation will secure inclusion sustains attachment to ideals that remain structurally exclusionary. Conversely, global fat studies and media theory can bring insight into the way Pakistani cinema is engaged in, and at times challenging, transnational regimes of representation. Through the dialogue of Lollywood with other media cultures, this paper has shown that body politics in the film industry is a worldwide process, and that careful consideration of these intersections should be used to teach more inclusive representational modes in other industries.

This research has three significant contributions. In media studies, it transposes fat studies into South Asian contexts. Moreover, it illustrates how Lollywood cinema and television regulate bodies through concepts of ridicule, makeover, and exclusion and applies Berlant's theory to bridge representation and lived affective experience. Within South Asian film scholarship, this study provides a corrective to Bollywood-centric scholarship by placing Lollywood within global body politics circuits and pointing out Pakistan's distinct negotiations over neoliberal consumer culture and gendered cultural norms. Finally, in arguments regarding body politics, the research reinterprets fatphobia not as aesthetic prejudice but as a regime of discipline that governs social mobility, gender, and closeness, showing how fat people in Pakistan are subject to impossible fantasies of change that uphold hope as they reassert exclusion.

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Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

JPNA Jawani Phir Nahi Ani

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