



By **Kalsoom Lakhani**

Last week, I attended a screening of *Slackistan*, an independent film by director Hammad Khan.

The film, which premiered in London, Abu Dhabi, New York City, and San Francisco [Pakistan screenings are coming soon], was recently described by the

[NY Times](#)

as, “a pitch-perfect comedy about restless youths in Islamabad,” and is a raw embodiment of 20-something angst, superficiality, and existential musings about life. As someone who grew up in “the city that always sleeps,”

Slackistan

was – ironically - a very

real

treatment of Islamabad’s detached reality.

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That, in many ways, was director Hammad's point – to organically create something that was closer to a documentary than a film. *Slackistan's* characters to an extent even mirror the actors who portrayed them – somewhat like art imitating reality. Hasan, the narrator and main character in the film, is a 20-something who dreams of becoming a filmmaker, but instead drives listlessly around the city with his friends, hangs out at coffee shops, and waxes philosophical about where his life could be going instead. He is played by Shahbaz Shigri, also a 20-something, also an Islamabadi, and also an aspiring filmmaker, though he is making that dream come true rather than slacking alongside the city's affluent class.

Hammad told me, "It was really important that the casting was right, and that we cast people from Islamabad who could at least embody the attitude of the character. It was important that I didn't try to impose characters on the actors, but allowed it to organically happen."

Ali Rehman Khan, who played Sherry, Hasan's best friend in the film, echoed, "It was easier for me to relate to my character because I grew up in Islamabad and have been through many of those same experiences. It was important that Islamabadis were a part of the film because it gave *Slackistan* authenticity – we weren't really characters as much as people in the film." The making of the film, he added, was also a collaborative process, with Hammad mapping out a scene while the cast and crew were at a cafe or another site, always keeping his camera on him at all times.

The interesting thing about *Slackistan* is its *lack* of political commentary or real mention of the volatility and violence that often shape Pakistan's image in the news media. Instead, current

events were pushed into the periphery, mentioned in passing conversations or playing on the television in the background. This was done on purpose, noted Hammad, “to reflect a narrative that was based on perspectives of young characters where the political situation and militancy are not the focal point in their daily lives.” He added, “It was very difficult for me not to be political because I am a very politically charged person. In fact, in the first draft of the script, Hasan would have monologues that would then connect back to a current event in Pakistan. However, we realized that this was artificial because a typical 21 year old wouldn’t necessarily think like that.”

Hammad didn’t want Hasan’s character to live entirely in a bubble, though. Perhaps the most telling part of the film was when he stumbles onto one of Islamabad’s many Christian colonies – or slums that house the marginalized Christian minority. The colonies are located amid some of the city’s nicest neighborhoods, but they are a far cry from the well-paved roads, pristine houses, and fancy cars outside their walls. The slums are dotted with cramped and dilapidated homes, and suffer from poor sewage and a lack of electricity. Hammad noted, “I wanted to make the point that these slums are basically a stone’s throw from some of Islamabad’s best houses and streets. It is an adjacent world that is literally right outside our door.”

Of all the days of filming, shooting the Christian colony was one of the cast and crew’s best experiences. “It wasn’t like we were shooting a movie,” Hammad told me. “For me, it was quite a transformative experience to see the joy and the sense of community among this minority, and then outside the slum’s walls to feel the sense of detachment and affluence in the city.” Ali added, “This is the reality of Islamabad in many ways, that we ignore the things that are right in front of us.”

That, ultimately, seems to be the biggest criticism of Pakistan's elite – the apathetic divide between the rich and poor, the detachment from the jarring reality outside their doors. While this appears to be a criticism of *Slackistan* – that its attempt to show another side to Pakistan is still only depicting the affluent class, both Hammad and Ali argue that this is still a very real side of Pakistan. Ali noted, “We are such a bubbled society in Islamabad. There are lots of bureaucrats, diplomats, and politicians, and we're the offspring of that. And this is how some people live – it may not be reality for the majority of the country, but it is a very real depiction of this slice of society.” In an interview with PRI's

The World
, Hammad
[stated](#)

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It's important to say that it's a personal film...it [Islamabad] always used to frustrate me that well, we're pretty modern, we're pretty connected, but the town and the environment just doesn't lend itself to any kind of creative growth or progress. You know, we had nothing to do, nowhere to go. So that was something that I thought, what do you do? How do you move forward? And that sort of extended itself into this kind of metaphor for the country as well because these are young people living in a bubble and they can't really move forward and in a sense that's kind of how Pakistan is right now in the world.

In an interview with the [Guardian](#) last year, Hammad further noted, “Slackistan should be a wake-up call to the wider youth base, both in and outside Pakistan, to redirect the future of the country.” The film, though it depicts affluent young 20-somethings with no sense of purpose, does have a purpose and a solution – to take action, even if it means taking small steps to achieve that goal.

If there was one thing Hammad would like us to take away from the film, though, it's to keep in mind this is only *one* film, one snapshot of life in the country. "Judge the film all you want," he noted, "but judge me after watching ten of my films. Because the next one I am working one will be a drastically different lens of Pakistan, as will the ones after that." Moreover, he added, "I am entirely dedicated to supporting anyone who wants to make films about Pakistan," given the need for different perspectives and the power of imagery in changing perceptions of the country. "Cinema isn't part of our culture in Pakistan, but images can be educational and they can be socially useful in showing a nuanced side of Pakistan. That can and should be imparted to Pakistan's youth."

Slackistan, though not without flaws, was a unique and telling film told through a Pakistani lens, one of many into the country's rich and vibrant society. As a fellow Islamabadi, it was not only a very *real* depiction of life in the city that always sleeps, but it was also a genuine attempt to capture the uninspired underpinnings of this slice of society, a wake up call for the apathetic and the affluent.

To join Slackistan's Facebook page and learn about screenings in your city, [click here](#). You can also visit

[Mara Pictures](#)

for more information on UK and future Pakistan screenings of the film.