

Violence Against Women in Pakistan: Through the Lens of Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy

Esra Faisal Khan

Abstract

This paper discusses the cinematic portrayal of violence against women in Pakistan, looking specifically at Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy's *Saving Face* (2011), filmed in Barakahu and Muzzaffargarh, and *A Girl in the River* (2015), filmed in Gujranwala. *Saving Face* tells the stories of acid attack victims and a surgeon, Dr Jawad, who returns to Pakistan to help these victims by performing reconstructive surgeries on their acid caused wounds. *A Girl in the River* tells the story of a girl called Saba, who is killed for honour and thrown in the river, however, she miraculously survives and tells her tale. The paper analyses Sharmeen's intent and the reforms brought about through these two films. It then discusses the common themes of violence against women, beauty and women empowerment, in both the films. It also looks at how the story is conveyed through the form of a narrative analysis. It, lastly, looks at how the recurring themes are documented through the films by focusing on cinematography i.e. use of colours, sounds, shot durations and angles, mise-en-scène etc. to support the narrative and thematic analysis.

Keywords: Documentary Film, Pakistani Cinema, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, Gender in Pakistan, Gender-based Violence

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and her Films

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy is the first Pakistani female filmmaker to receive an Oscar, for her film *Saving Face* (dir. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Daniel Junge, 2012). However, because the film focuses on a negative aspect of Pakistani society and went on to be featured internationally its fame was thought of in Pakistan as somewhat tainted. In an interview with the United Nations, Obaid-Chinoy said that she wanted to raise her voice for women and women's issues, which meant that she has a certain ambition with regards to the production of these films, to bring out in the open, the voices of these victimized women. In fact, Rahat Imran lists Obaid-Chinoy as one of prominent Pakistani documentarists that have a feminist scholarship, and political and activist attempt (24). But despite the fact that she has opened a global discussion of violence against women in the forms of acid attacks and honor killings, the success of her films can be understood by how they have resulted in and depicted, the Pakistani government taking active steps to combat these violent acts by making amendments to their laws. Piturro analyses *Saving Face* and the director's intent, which is stated to be not an attempt to raise awareness and shed light to the issue, but to move the audience through the aesthetics and method of filming of the documentary (2014). Obaid-Chinoy believes that the statistics she has found are not accurate and in fact many more honor killings and acid attacks go unreported; thus her telling the story of one woman's life, if done movingly, was enough as the window representing all women undergoing such violence.

Whatever style and themes Obaid-Chinoy uses, her documentary films have successfully served as cinema of accountability—a new genre that addresses the distinct set of problems faced by Muslim filmmakers (Imran 171). Both films have won awards and helped to spur on a change of law by the government of Pakistan. In *Saving Face*, towards the end of the film a bill is passed which allows criminals to be sentenced to life imprisonment for the act of throwing acid on another human being; previously the punishment was not as severe. This enabled the husband of one of the protagonists, Zakia, to be sentenced to two terms of life imprisonment for this crime. After the release of *A Girl in the River*, the prime minister held the first screening of the movie at the PM house and also made reforms in the law. Those convicted of honor killings are now not able to be forgiven by the victim's family, whereas at the time the film was made its protagonist, Saba, had to forgive her father and uncle in the end, and so they walked away free men. She wished she didn't have to but was pressurized into doing it anyway. However, the new law helps women like Saba against such pressures and punishes the perpetrators for their crime.

Violence against women can take many shapes including domestic abuse, acid attacks, rape, and murder. According to an interview with *Reveal News* Obaid-Chinoy first heard about acid violence through her co-director who had heard Dr Mohammad Jawad talk about it on BBC Radio (Wu and Ritscher, 2012). She then did some research and decided to make a film about this issue. In the case of *A Girl in the River*, Obaid-Chinoy actively looked for a way to talk about honor-related violence; having read about Saba's case in the news she quickly went over to the hospital where she had been admitted (The Guardian 2016). *Saving Face* follows closely the lives of Zakia and Rukhsana both acid attack victims. Zakia wanted a divorce from her husband and he refuses. She then goes to court and, on her way out her husband pours acid on her. Rukhsana is a victim of maltreatment from her in-laws in the form of acid attack and burning. Her husband throws acid on her and then her sister-in-law throws gasoline on her, whilst the mother-in-law lights her on fire. She leaves their place and later must come back because she cannot afford to take care of her children. The difference in the two types of violence can be seen, as one is a firm belief in a woman's dishonoring actions that the culprit kills her for honor, whilst the other is a type of revenge in which the culprit wants to make the woman's life painful, ugly and an example for everyone who looks at her. The depictions of this variety of violence in Obaid-Chinoy's films not only highlights the problem of violence across the country but informs about the many ways it is carried out. This goes to show that the problem of violence against women is real and manifest in different ways.

Empowerment and Beauty

Another lesson that is common in Obaid-Chinoy's documentaries has to do with women's empowerment, particularly women empowering other women. Apart from the direct motive of reporting female violence, Obaid-Chinoy incorporates instances in the films where women such as nurses, lawyers, parliament members support the victim. Firstly, in *Saving Face*, Zakia describes how her lawyer works very hard on women's cases, even taking on Zakia's case for free. At one point she even refers to men as "animals" that need to be punished by being kept in 'cages' [prison] as she fights the case. This shows a connection between the two women and their equal abhorrence against the acid attackers for their heinous crimes. Her lawyer also believes that Zakia is a very brave woman since she visits the court regularly and so is fighting for justice by herself, and that this is not a common trend among women. Secondly, when Zakia visits the Acid Survivor's Foundation (ACF), all the women can be seen in laughs and smiles across the dining table, in communal harmony. The women state that this place makes them feel accepted and forget their worries. This is one of the few rare instances in this film where there is laughter on screen. The second instance is when the women gather after the ACF stakeholder's meeting.

In this scene they can be seen in hopeful celebration. The last instance is that when the bill gets passed announcing that the acid attackers cannot be forgiven and will have to serve long terms of imprisonment, women are seen hugging and congratulating each other. Finally, nurses, Marvi Memon, and Zakia's daughter all are seen supporting the victims after their attacks; at one point, a nurse is counselling Rukhsana about her soon-to-be-born baby.

On the other hand, there is also an instance of woman to woman violence. After Rukhsana's husband throws acid on her, her sister-in-law throws gasoline and her mother-in-law lights her up. Despite women being the most understanding of one another throughout the film, Obaid-Chinoy highlights the aspect of female-on-female violence as well. It may evoke guilt among some and sends an encouraging message to understand the female's plight and turn to support them stressing the need to curtail such acts. In *A Girl in the River*, Saba is only supported by one female throughout the film, her mother in-law. Despite being from a society in which her mother and sister still condemn her, Saba's mother in-law shows tremendous love and care for her. She is in fact happy to add a member to her family. On the other hand, in the end, Saba goes to meet her sister and mother, and both end up turning in her favor by the end of the documentary. They shower their love and blessings on her and treat her like family once again. This shows, that it's the women's hearts that turned towards love and forgiveness unlike her father who did not realize his mistake till the end. The documentary ends with the news that Saba is pregnant and she says she wishes it is a girl, so she can be brave, stand up for herself, be good and educated, and do whatever her heart desires. With how brave and hopeful Saba is about raising a daughter emphasizing the beauty and strength of the relationship of mother and daughter. These are ways Obaid-Chinoy Obaid-Chinoy depicts girl power. Obaid-Chinoy use of this theme in her documentaries helps encourage women to raise their voices for other women. Not only do these scenes teach her viewers how important such support is for a victim, but also how Obaid-Chinoy finds it important to lend a hand to them and raise their voice, convey their message all over the world.

Zakia is a woman who loved being photographed every time her mother brought her new clothes. But ever since the attack, Zakia is hiding behind a face veil and a pair of sunglasses. She doesn't want to be seen or even want anyone to see her. At the ACF gathering she says that looking at other courageous victims helps her feel better but does not invoke enough confidence for her to go back to how things always were. However, by the end of the movie, with her new prosthetic eye piece, Zakia for the first time ever goes out in public without the face veil. On the other hand, in Saba's case, her wounds are not as damaging as the acid attacked victims. Throughout the film Saba heals and towards the end, she's left with a scar on her face, but that does not stop Saba from imagining her life before the attempt of her murder, as she shows the viewers a picture from her past. Saba thinks back to the past as a carefree and naïve time when she didn't think her family would go as far as trying to kill her. She is now seen as more mature and confident in herself. She believes she did the right thing for her future and that God is with her as he is the one who saved her, since her father and uncle swore by the Quran that they wouldn't harm her, and yet they tried to take her life. Saba's story is that of a brave young woman who didn't let society dictate her life, didn't succumb to fear imposed by parents and believed in her love. She sends a message to other young women to believe in themselves and fight society. Saba believes in her inner beauty, freedom and love. She believes in herself more than what people say about her actions (according to her mum, her honor is 'dirtied' thanks to Saba). This is an empowering message to women viewing the film with regards to inner beauty. In the fast-moving pace of society today, in the world of skinny models and flawless Instagram feeds, Obaid-Chinoy seems to be conveying a message against these beauty standards. Fiction films have set a high standard of expectations, with regards to beauty, that women on the screen are expected to have but in the documentary film we see a complete flip side of beauty, this makes Obaid-Chinoy's documentaries open up new avenues as they become inclusive of all

beautiful women. We see that it's alright to be physically impaired and yet be beautiful as well as the message of focusing on inner beauties instead of outer beauty as we see Saba, not at all care, about her physical appearance after the attack.

Narrative Analysis

The two films are classic realist narratives that follow a pattern of enigma and resolution; in both the films enigma surrounds the violent attacks all the protagonists (Zakia, Rukhsana and Saba) had to face and resolution came in the form of court decisions on the cases against their perpetrators or in the form of a 'ray of hope' towards the end of the films. Additionally, there is a main story line, all events follow a logical sequence and verisimilitude (all events are believable). Furthermore, the focus of the narrative is on individuals—in *Saving Face*, even though the film features multiple women that have undergone acid attacks it only focuses deeply on two of the them. Lastly, the audience can empathize with the characters—for example, in *Saving Face*, Rukhsana tells the viewers whilst standing in the place of her attack, describes the locking of doors and her yelling plea. The only feature that is a deviation from this standard style is that all questions that may be posed in the start of the films are not answered towards the end. It is because these are documentary films and the women featured in them continue to live on in their lives post the violent events. This sort of structure is a classical theatre narrative, which allows the story to be divided into an opening, middle and end. And thus, release the story at set intelligible points to engage audiences' minds. With this straightforward narrative style, the story is easier to understand and stay with its audience for longer. Also, with this familiar narrative style the viewer can focus on the message of the story and submerge themselves in it. They can feel like they are living through Zakia's tragedy or Saba's ordeal. According to Peter Wollen's (1985) work on identification of narrative patterns in films, these films display narrative transitivity, meaning that both the films are stories told in simplistic ways to make one consider the gravity of the problem they capture. Hence there are no gaps, interruptions, or plot twists. Furthermore, identification means that both the films feature empathy and emotional involvement by direct communication with the victims and other characters such as Dr Jawad, and Saba's husband Qaisar.

The storytelling methods used in Obaid-Chinoy's documentaries involve first an opening sequence where the audience has a glimpse of the lives of the protagonists and the violence they experienced. Even though this conveys almost immediately what the story is going to be about, it keeps the audience engaged at a personal level with the women, so they are inclined to see what happens next. The second part is the main narrative in which the camera follows the protagonists in their day to day interactions with the people around them and with their own new realities after being victims of violence. In *Saving Face*, there's a scene where Zakia is looking at herself in the mirror and dressing up to go to court. Here she talks about how she is still not comfortable with herself to look at herself in the mirror. In Saba's case, we see her being settled into her new life with her in-laws after being discharged from the hospital. These story lines of looking into these women's lives after their attacks keeps the audience engaged with the narration and curious of what is to come next. The last narrative phase of the documentary films are the conclusive scenes where development takes place as to the violent attacks. In Zakia's case we hear that her husband receives a double sentence of life imprisonment after a new law is passed. We also see her get a surgery and a new prosthetic eye. She moves on in her life and begins to go out. This is a typical happy ending which not only is depicted in the element of hope but also a positive light for the national image of the country. In Saba's story we hear of how her uncle and father are set free from prison after she is forced to forgive them in court. This is an element of darkness that leaves the audience wondering what will be done for the justice of such victims.

Cinematography

The camera shots are at times close-ups or extreme close-ups, at other times they are long establishing shots. The close-up shots show a depth in the field. The establishing shots are meant to give a view of the locale and surroundings of the character. This is used when showing Zakia's house or the place where Saba was shot. They show the houses surrounding the locality, and the tall grassy patches near the river in which Saba was thrown after being shot and thrown into a bag. The close-up shots play a very important role in both the documentaries. In *Saving Face*, these shots focus on people's faces in such depth that the viewer feels their emotions, getting an insider perspective on their stories. This is true in fact for both the films, in the cases of Zakia, Rukhsana and Saba. Another common shot in both the films is the face reveal shot. Both the films start off with viewing the women (Zakia and Saba) from the side of their face that is unharmed and then slowly moves into a face reveal, as Saba looks to the other side and as the camera moves to the other side of Zakia. This creates an anticipation as well as pity in the mind of the viewer, since one can imagine how different their life would have been before the attacks. Secondly, both the films have the common theme of reaching for the protagonists' pasts. Both Saba and Zakia are shown looking at old pictures of themselves after their attacks and reminiscing their beauty. Both these characters suffer damage done to their faces and throughout the film you can see these women feeling a sense of loss because they don't look the same anymore and don't feel as beautiful anymore, another major theme of the films.

The camera angles used are simply from eye level of a person in the room, and the framing also supports this point of view. This creates the effect that the audience are present at the scene and directly looking at the protagonists. There are no special effects in these documentary film as they depict reality and lastly the lighting seems to be completely neutral. Most of the parts of the films are filmed in the day under natural lighting to convey a sense of reality and seriousness. Often in the films there are tracking shots in which the camera follows characters. It follows both Zakia and Saba on their way to court. In the start of *Saving Face*, it follows Dr Jawad as he goes to meet the acid crime victims. Also, when he is walking away crying from his interview with Rukhsana when she mentions how she must move back in with her in-laws, three of them being perpetrators of her attack.

The color palette of the films is based around neutral colors and natural tones. Neither are they dark and neither bright or colorful. The color of the films is a neutral palette, when it looks at Saba's house, the entire frame is full of a neighborhood of brick and mud walls, all a single shade of light brown. The costume and objects of the films feature a key motif of veiling. Both Saba and Zakia are shown covering themselves with black. Black is the most frequently used color of the *abaya* in many Islamic countries. Throughout *Saving Face*, Zakia is in distress and she is shown hiding behind a black veil and black sunglasses. However, in the end when her husband is given two life sentences she is seen in a red *dupatta* (a long headscarf traditional in South Asia). The red that she wears is very bright, which almost feels like she wore her brightest *dupatta*. Red is also the color commonly worn in by brides in marriages in Pakistan, which may show that she feels young and at her prime. On the other hand, in *A Girl in the River*, Saba is wearing different colors throughout the film but in the end when her father and uncle are released from prison, she is shaken and states she wishes she would never have forgiven them. Here she is shown in a large black shawl for the first time. It appears that in their darkest and weakest times, these women are hiding behind the dark black veil. Lastly, the *mise-en-scène* of the documentary films feature living organisms and scenic beauty of the locations. In *Saving Face*, the film features goats and sunflowers at certain intervals. In *A Girl in the River*, there are repeated motifs of birds and the sun. These seem to be a way to depict the things that people see every day in the locality, perhaps to give a sense of place.

Conclusion

The paper analyzed two documentary films by Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy to understand the ways that they shed light on violence against women in Pakistan. To do this, it explored four different aspects; common themes, the film narrative style, the cinematography of the film, and also the reception of the film and the reforms influenced as a result. Obaid-Chinoy and her films have been a point of controversy. The films are rarely screened in Pakistan and Obaid-Chinoy is characterized by some critics as an agent of the West, who is trying to show Pakistan in a negative light or exploit her subjects' suffering. However, her films have also resulted in positive outcomes for Pakistan and Pakistani women undergoing such violence. This is because these films have made an everlasting impact not just on their viewers but also on the law, in the case of *Saving Face* the passage of the Acid and Burn Crime Bill of 2014, and in the case of *A Girl in the River* the passage of an amendment to the Pakistan Penal Code in 2016.

The three main themes elaborated in this paper can be seen as three methods that the documentaries use to engage with the audience and influence them. Firstly, in today's world, beauty standards are growing ever high and women are pushed at the forefront of competition. With women like Jameela Jamil advocating a shunning of these exceptionally high beauty standards, we find Obaid-Chinoy's films conveying this very message. Furthermore, the films are also inclusive of the physically challenged. The films help us think everyone is beautiful in their own ways and help expand our notions of beauty. Secondly, the theme of women empowerment is at the forefront of movements such as the Aurat March that have been taking place in Pakistan since 2018. In Pakistan's context, the lack of feminism can be attributed to women as much as men. For Obaid-Chinoy, to convey this theme through her films, an inspirational message is passed on, not only through the courage of Zakia and Saba, but also Obaid-Chinoy herself. Women can be encouraged to speak up as they are not alone in the victimization of such violent acts. They are also taught to find refuge in one another, as they can at best understand each other's pains and struggles. Lastly, the theme of violence, is impactful because there are painful and gruesome attacks occurring against women in Pakistan on a regular basis. In *Saving Face* estimated acid attacks reported in a year are above a hundred. Human Rights Watch indicates annual honor killings in Pakistan to be around 1000. This is enough information to make the theme of violence common as Obaid-Chinoy's tool of impactful documentary storytelling. These three themes, combined with the films' straightforward narrative structures as well as the cinematographic elements of camera shots and angles, and the motif of black work to make the documentaries moving for their audience and powerfully convey their message.

References

- Piturro, Vincent. "Documentary Film Rhetoric: Saving Face and the Public Sphere." *The International Academic Forum (IAFOR)*, 24 Apr. 2017, iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-media-communication-and-film/volume-2-issue-1/article-3/.
- Nisar, Shiza. *Pakistan's Elite English Press Debates Pioneer Women: Hina Rabbani Khar and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy*. Margalla Papers, 2018.
- Imran, Rahat. *Activist Documentary Film in Pakistan: The Emergence of a Cinema of Accountability*. Routledge, 2018.

- Qazalbash, Farwa, et al. "Reinforcement of Patriarchal Structures in Pakistani Society: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Chinoy's *A Girl in The River: The Price of Forgiveness*." *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2019.
- Aqeel, A. "Tales of oppression and liberation in feminine fiction and film texts from the Indian subcontinent: case study of the works of Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Deepa Mehta, and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy." the UWA Profiles and Research Repository. (2015). Available at: <https://research-repository.uwa.edu.au/en/publications/tales-of-oppression-and-liberation-in-feminine-fiction-and-film-t>
- Clark, Alex. "The Case of Saba Qaiser and the Film-Maker Determined to Put an End to 'Honour' Killings." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 Feb. 2016, www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/14/sharmeen-obaid-chinoy-interview-saba-qaiser-honour-killing-documentary-girl-river-oscar-nomination.
- "Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy's Documentary Films Spark Conversation and Legislative Change." *Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy's Documentary Films Spark Conversation - and Legislative Change – Women in the World*, womenintheworld.com/2018/09/12/sharmeen-obaid-chinoy-documentary-films-spark-conversation-and-legislative-change/.
- Wu, Ariane, and David Ritsher. "Behind the Story: 'Saving Face'." *Reveal*, 28 Feb. 2012, www.revealnews.org/article/behind-the-story-saving-face/.
- Roth, Kenneth. "World Report 2018: Rights Trends in Pakistan." Human Rights Watch, 18 Jan. 2018, www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/pakistan.

Filmography

Saving Face (dir. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Daniel Junge, 2012)

A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (dir. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, 2015)