

# Islamic Nationalism and Gender in *Zerqa*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the tumultuous relationship between women and nationalism in the film *Zerqa* (1969) directed by the late Riaz Shahid, an acclaimed Pakistani director. Drawing upon the cinematic narrative that *Zerqa* offers, this paper will relocate the issues that the film raises within wider discussions of the role that women occupy within the paradigm of nationalism. *Zerqa* is concerned with the Israel-Palestine conflict. This paper argues that despite the fact that this is a Pakistani film, the hue of nationalism that it espouses is not particularly Pakistani; rather, the film is positioned within the larger cause of Islamic nationalism, as well as referencing the martial law regime that was in power in Pakistan at the time. Adding to this landscape, the paper pays particular attention to the manner in which the two female characters in *Zerqa* are depicted; these are Zerqa, who stands for Palestine, and Angela, who is an Israeli freedom fighter. Three dimensions of the film are analyzed: the narrative of the film, the way the female's body occupies the screen, as well as an analysis of the mise-en-scène.

Keywords: Nationalism, Gender, Palestine in Cinema, Pakistani Cinema, Pan-Islamism

## A Note on Language: The Politics of *Italicization*

Language is a tool that we use to express ourselves freely, through whatever medium we deem fit. By virtue of the fact that language is a tool that is used to express freedoms, one loses sight of the fact that language is not free in and of itself. The anxieties that are embedded within language itself are not the focus of this paper, however, a brief note on language is required in order to be able to understand why the Urdu, Punjabi and Arabic words in this paper are not italicized. These words are freed from italicization in order to make a statement regarding the politics that engulf language, not to illustrate negligence on the part of the author of the paper.

History shapes the current state of affairs, and colors the power structures that exist in the present day. It is evident that years of imperial and colonial rule are what have allowed English to be the dominant language, to put history in a ridiculously simple nutshell. English is our default mode of expression no matter what part of the world we occupy, regardless of the histories that have given birth to our people. We think in English. We dream in English. We communicate in English, and yet, we do not think much of why this is so. It is within this hegemonic language, that the space for local vernaculars is diminished, if not removed completely. By italicizing words from my history, my region, my culture, I feel as if I am subliminally stating that language belongs to English, and that my own vernacular should have to be italicized in order to be allowed to occupy a space within this uneven playing field. Language belongs to all. It should not have to be governed by the one language that has managed to pull the strings of much of history. Through abstaining from italicizing words from Urdu, Punjabi and Arabic, I seek to claim the

space for the languages of my region and culture, in the hopes that language may, one day, become a level playing field for all.

## Research Methodology

This paper explores the relationship between women and nationalism by observing the ways in which the woman's body occupies the space of the screen; how she is clothed, how she is depicted, what tasks are associated with her, and how she interacts with the men on the screen. Different images have also been taken from the film in order to visually illustrate the way in which the woman occupies the screen affects her overall role in the narrative. The analysis of the film is tripartite; there is a narrative analysis, an analysis of the way the female's body occupies the screen, as well as an analysis of the mis-en-scène. The narrative analysis will focus on the plot, the theme and the vantage point from which the story is being told. The analysis of the female body on the screen focuses on the way the female's body occupies the screen, in isolation as well as in relation to the men on the screen. The analysis of the mis-en-scène focuses on the costumes, colors and lighting, sound and music and the choreography of the dance sequences.

## Friends or Foes? *Zerqa* and the Censor Board

In an interview conducted with Riaz Shahid's son, Ejaz Shahid, it was revealed that the director faced a lot of backlash because he wanted to release a film that spoke very openly about the Israel and Palestine issue. At the time when the film was released, Pakistan's relations with the United States of America were strained (Gazdar 113). Shahid described an event, before the film was released, in which six black cars from the American Embassy made their way to Evernew Studios and asked Riaz Shahid to pay a visit to the American Embassy. At the Embassy, the director was offered money by the officials so that they may purchase the film. The director thought that this desire to purchase the film was because the officials wanted to facilitate a release for the film in the US. This, however, was not the case. According to Ejaz Shahid, the officials told the director that they wished to purchase the film so that they may burn it, commenting on the fact that the film should not be released because of its content. When the director refused to compromise, the officials warned him and stated that if anything were to happen to him or his family after the release of the film, it would not be their responsibility. Shahid comments, stating that his father did not wish to compromise his vision or his work no matter what the cost. A few weeks after the film was released, the director's counterpart, Khalil Qaiser, was murdered. In a number of months after the release, Riaz Shahid himself fell ill and died of cancer; through interviewing Shahid it seemed as if the director's family believes that Riaz Shahid was in fact poisoned as a punishment for his compelling work. According to Shahid, *Zerqa* was not censored as heavily as *Ye Aman* (dir. Riaz Shahid, 1971).

## Imagining Islamic Nationalism

The discourse surrounding nationalism has taken on different hues, and through these nuances it is vital to understand that not all conceptions of nationalism are befitting in terms of the context of Pakistan. The post-colonial 'secular' Islamic Republic is characterized by its own desires, aspirations and inherent contradictions, and this paper deals with a very particular kind of nationalism somewhat different than

others. The discourse developed by Benedict Anderson terms the nation as an “imagined community,” one that is thought to have fundamentally primordial roots. Since this research addresses the context of Pakistan, and explores the project of Islamic nationalism, Anderson’s definition cannot be accepted in its entirety. Anderson views nationalism as a project that the East essentially ‘inherited’ from the West, which in some ways limits the nationalist project that the East embarks upon. If nationalism is inherited, its articulation is naturally affected, and is bound to show influences of the region from where it is said to be inherited. Amina Yaqin contributes to the discourse on nationalism by shedding light on the fact that nationalism vis-à-vis Pakistan must be defined in a careful manner that considers Pakistan’s history and the post-colonial anxieties that come with it. After regarding the national language Urdu and the political makeup that is marred with instability as the key national trajectories of culture, Yaqin further develops her discourse on Pakistani nationalism by referring to the works of Jamil Jalibi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Fahmida Riaz. Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s understanding and exploration of Pakistani nationalism is relevant here. Yaqin quotes Faiz as stating that the “‘nationalist doctrine’ [in Pakistan] is subservient to religion” (Yaqin 126); the aforementioned statement clearly draws attention to the religious hue that underpins nationalism in Pakistan.

Thus, the fact that religion colors the nationalist project in Pakistan further allows us to understand why a Pakistani director would be preoccupied with working on a film that explores Islamic nationalism. Gazdar terms the period from 1967 to 1976 as a ‘Decade of Change’ in Pakistani cinema. At this juncture in history, the Pakistani state’s relations with the United States of America were at an all-time low. Gazdar states that “exposure of imperialist designs in any form was encouraged by the regime and willingly cleared by the Censor Board” (Gazdar 113). *Zerqa* fared exceptionally well, becoming the first diamond jubilee hit of Lollywood (ibid.). Shifting the vantage point and focusing it on the dwindling relationship between Israel and Palestine at the time, it is apparent that the film was released right after the Arab Israeli War of 1967, and only a few years before the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Hence, it is apparent that the film was released at a point in time when nationalist fervor was at its peak. Furthermore, it is apparent that throughout the film, the terms shahadat and jihad have been used many times. In fact, it is these two words that are featured most in the opening scene of the film. According to the film itself, “Jo khuda ki rah mein jaan deta hai woh shaheed hota hai” (‘Whoever gives his life in the way of the Lord is a shaheed’). Jihad refers to the war that a believer wages against an unbeliever and is a battle that the Palestinian freedom fighters in *Zerqa* are more than willing to sacrifice their lives for.

### **Patriarchy: A Force to be Reckoned With?**

Kandiyoti argues that under patriarchy “women strategize within a set of concrete constraints” in order to “maximize security and optimize life options” (274). She argues that women utilize the different, limited options that they have, and work with these options under the given constraints that they are subjected to in the face of oppression. This applies well to the character of *Zerqa*; as a woman she has a number of factors working against her in the form of constraints, and she has to stand up for what she believes in despite the conditions that limit her agency. *Zerqa*’s agency is controlled by the male characters in the film. In the beginning of the film, *Zerqa*’s home is attacked by the Israeli army, and this raid leaves her father fatally injured. It is her father’s dying wish that she must go to the Palestinian Headquarters, to the leader of the Palestinian freedom fighters, Shabaan Lutfi. In essence, *Zerqa* is instructed to go from the hands of one man, to the hands of another. Throughout the course of the film, it is *Zerqa*’s father, Shabaan Lutfi, and *Zerqa*’s fiancé Ammar, who decide what she must do and how she must do it. The only other female character in the film, with the exception of a minor female character

who served merely as an extra, is an Israeli freedom fighter named Angela; Angela actively fights for her country and is clothed in a set of green shorts and a shirt during most of the film. Even though Angela is allowed by the males who surround her to actively fight for her country, she too is met with her own set of constraints. Moreover, men do not only control the agency of the two women in the film, rather, they also control the deaths of the two female characters. Women are also, to an extent, regarded as the Other within the paradigm of nationalism, and the role that they occupy is generally less violent than the role of men (Iveković). Binary models such as gender “are symbolic power-systems through which the symbolic system works and onto which it projects itself” (Iveković 115), pointing to the fact that men and women occupy the paradigm of nationalism in binaries: the man is the Self and the woman is the Other. In *Zerqa*, the male freedom fighters and army generals that surround Zerqa have their own rigid perceptions regarding what she can and cannot do, and how she can aid the Palestinian cause. Her capabilities are also determined by the men she comes into contact with; Shabaan Lutfi and Ammar demand that she become a dancer if she truly wants to serve her country. Hence, Zerqa works within these constraints, existing within her identity as the Other, in order to fight for her nation and comply with what her fiancé desires for her. Therefore, this paper argues that the women in *Zerqa* use their bodies and their femininity to bargain with patriarchy.

### **Men as a Collective and Women as Singular**

The film opens on a large congregation of men, lined up in similar attires, resembling an army battalion. These men have congregated together in order to prepare themselves for jihad; before they embark on jihad, they are to hear a story narrated by a Palestinian freedom fighter, who lost his sight as a result of his endeavors. This freedom fighter narrates the story of Zerqa, dramatically stating that the story that he will narrate will be the story of Zerqa’s shahadat. The fact that a man is narrating the story of a woman echoes Nagel’s idea that narratives of history are written largely by men, and for men; this reality is clearly visible in the opening scene where a congregation of men gathers for the very purpose of listening to another man’s account of a woman’s strife. Nagel discusses the “designation of gendered ‘places for men and women in national politics’” (242), as well as the differing, and at times conflicting, roles that men and women have with regards to the nation as a whole. The author sheds light on the fact that in terms of state-making the role of women has been glossed over not because of the fact that their role is minimal, but because “the scripts in which these roles are written are written primarily by men, for men, and about men” (243). These notions can be applied to the gender dynamics that exist vis-à-vis nationalism in *Zerqa*.

Additionally, the men in the opening shot stand completely straight, armaments in hand, with their heads covered in keffiyehs; the formation and the matching attire makes them appear as a homogenized unit, ready to protect their nation at all costs. Throughout the film, there are increasing references to the fact that the men operate in a unit, and how women cannot be a part of this unit because they are considered to be weak. The unity of the men is highlighted visually, more often than not, as they are usually clad in the same attire, seated in the same manner, and reacting to the action in the same way.

The first depiction of the men stands in direct contrast to the first time Zerqa is depicted on the screen. As the narration of Zerqa’s story begins, a festive soundtrack of music plays in the background, accompanied with a visual of her tip-toeing feet; the viewer cannot see Zerqa immediately, and there is an element of mystery that surrounds her as the camera resists introducing her to the viewer all in one go. This means that the camera introduces Zerqa visually bit-by-bit. The female protagonist has been

reduced to body parts when she is welcomed onto the screen, foreshadowing the objectification that she faces as a result of eventually becoming a dancing girl in a Palestinian court later on in the film.

Finally, when Zerqa is presented to the viewer, she is seen as wearing feminine clothes, with an elaborate piece of headgear: a metal cap, with colorful tassels that are dangling from it. The look is a festive one that goes along with her cheerful demeanor at the beginning of the film; she is waiting for her fiancé to arrive, and upon his arrival, she happily dances for him and around him. She is also adorned with a necklace, and wears eyeliner and a light red lipstick that accentuates her facial features and further adds to her femininity. The first image of the men, juxtaposed with the first image of Zerqa, serve to set the stage for the different roles men and women occupy, in the film, within the project of nationalism. Men are shown as a unit, ready to take on the enemy, while subscribing to narratives that are written entirely by men as well. Zerqa, on the other hand, a singular woman, is shown as an exaggeratedly feminine woman, who eventually comes to play her very own role within the larger framework of nationalism. In essence, it appears that men are presented as a unit whereas women are presented as individuals.

When Zerqa reaches what seems to be a headquarters for Palestinian nationalists, she gains access to the company of the man whom her father had instructed her to go to. She gains access by revealing a mark that she has on her hand, after which, the man immediately agrees to take her into confidence. As a woman, Zerqa must operate on one man's instructions, only to be subjugated and instructed by yet another man. Her obedience is merely switching hands and she is, after the death of her father, automatically made to serve another man. When Zerqa enters the quarters of the man that her father has instructed her to go to, she finds her lover Ammar. In the first music and dance sequence of the film, Ammar was introduced to the audience as Zerqa's fiancé, and the two appeared to be in love. However, the second time Zerqa encounters Ammar, he does not even greet her, let alone speak of his love for her. In conversation with Zerqa, it was discovered that Ammar suffered from night-blindness, which hindered his vision after the sunset. The implications that this has on the narrative and themes in the film will be discussed in detail later. In this scene, Ammar does not turn to greet Zerqa, or engage with her directly in an emotional manner; Ammar seems to be completely devoid of emotion, and his physical inability to see Zerqa compounds the problem.

Zerqa, horrified at the fact that her own fiancé does not recognize her, appeals to Lutfi Sahab. She makes him aware of the fact that her fiancé has chosen to not recognize her and acknowledge her presence. It seems that Zerqa appeals to Lutfi Sahab because she believes that he will reprimand Ammar and 'instruct' him to engage with Zerqa. However, Lutfi Sahab makes the statement: "Yehan per koi kisi ko nahi pehchanta" ('No one recognizes anyone else over here'). This startles Zerqa even more. In this scene the bodies of the men, Lutfi Sahab and Ammar, are turned away from Zerqa. Zerqa, on the other hand, is engaging with the men who are facing the opposite direction; the manner in which Zerqa's body occupies the screen is illustrative of the fact that she is appealing to the man, either for his sympathy or his assistance. The fact that Lutfi Sahab and Ammar are completely turned away from Zerqa is a visual representation of how they are distant from her, refusing her the emotional engagement that she is trying to seek out in her time of need; Zerqa, at this point in the film has just lost her home and her family, and she is approaching Lutfi Sahab and her fiancé in order to determine how she can help her fellow Palestinians.

The scene that follows this one contains an exchange between Lutfi Sahab and Zerqa. The dialogues of this scene are vital to developing an understanding of how women are viewed in terms of their abilities to serve the nation. Zerqa makes it clear to Lutfi Sahab that she wants to serve as a freedom fighter and advance the cause of the Palestinians. Lutfi Sahab, through his remarks, blatantly states that women are

not capable of fighting for the nation. Lutfi Sahab states: “Aurat mein zulm sehnay ka hosla nahi” (‘A woman does not have the courage to withstand cruelty’). Zerqa counters all of the claims made by Lutfi Sahab by asking him why he believed that women were not capable of partaking in the act of freedom fighting if they could give birth to prophets and sing lullabies to the shaheed<sup>140</sup> soldiers. There is clearly a disconnect between what Zerqa thinks she can do as a woman for the cause of the Palestinians, and what Lutfi Sahab believes that she can do for the Palestinians. Through Lutfi Sahab’s dialogues, and his unrelenting belief that women cannot serve as freedom fighters, it is apparent that Zerqa’s valid concerns fall on deaf ears. The fact that Lutfi Sahab commands Zerqa to become a dancer in the Palestinian headquarters right after this conversation is a testament to this fact. Relegating Zerqa to the role of a dancer also implies that Lutfi Sahab believes that her role cannot be much more than the visual pleasure that she has to offer by virtue of her female body; she dresses up in tight-fitting clothes, adorned with makeup and intricately made hair, and dances to the pleasure of the strictly male audience that attends her dances.

At face value it seems that although unwillingly, Zerqa eventually accepts Lutfi Sahab’s command. This, however, is complicated by Zerqa’s interaction with Ammar. She runs to him after her conversation with Lutfi Sahab, thinking that he will be shocked and offended to hear the fact that she has been commanded to become a dancer. Ammar, on the other hand, robotically expresses that Zerqa must dance to serve the cause of the Palestinians. Zerqa is dismayed and shocked to find out that her fiancé supports Lutfi Sahab’s decision, and she complies only after she sees that it will please her lover. Perhaps Zerqa’s eventual compliance is borne out of the fact that she wants to please her lover; she may want to maintain his approval because he is the only male who is responsible for her, given the fact that her own father has been killed.

### **The Dancer and the ‘Male Gaze’**

Mulvey argues that cinema itself can be understood as the product of a patriarchal society. What this means is that, given the male dominant nature of the society that cinema emerges from, it is apparent that the film itself contains residues of the patriarchal experience. Mulvey argues that women are subject to the ‘male gaze’ at three instances. Firstly, there is the male behind the lens of the camera, secondly, there are the male characters within the film itself, and thirdly, there is the male spectator in the audience. Zerqa, bearing a torch, approaches the stage in the Palestinian Headquarters and performs her first dance number with great emotion, grace and allure. The outfit that she wears in this dance sequence is markedly different from the one that she wore in the previous scene. Her previous outfit was a more muted black outfit, with few embellishments. This outfit, on the other hand, is fitted, baring her stomach and the entire length of her arms. Zerqa wears a skin colored t-shirt of sorts underneath this dress, so as to not completely expose her skin; even though she wears ‘revealing’ clothes, she is technically not baring her skin, illustrative of the fact that even as a raqasa, she does have to maintain her izzat<sup>141</sup>. She dances on a raised platform, and Ammar sings along with her, echoing her words. In this domain, she takes the lead,

<sup>140</sup> There is a dialogue in the latter half of the film that defines what ‘shaheed’ means. The dialogue is as follows: “Jo khuda ki rah mein jaan deta hai woh shaheed hota hai” (‘Whoever gives his/her life for the Lord is a shaheed’).

<sup>141</sup> Izzat is an Urdu word that refers to honor. In Pakistan, the notion of izzat is inextricably tied with the body of the woman and her sexuality. Hence, she has to bear the burden of maintaining this izzat, whether it is through her words, demeanor, or her actions. The men around her also police her so that she may perform an identity that allows her to carefully curate the maintenance of her izzat. Even though ‘honor’ would be the direct translation of this word, I do believe that much of Urdu and Punjabi words is lost in translation, hence, for the purposes of this paper, Urdu words are used, instead of their translations.

and the male follows her lead. Ammar distributes leaflets to the scores of men who line the stage; ironically, these men have blank stares on their faces, but their continued presence implies that they are thoroughly enjoying and deriving pleasure out of the show that is being put on. Zerqa prances about the platform, crying out “kumm o lil insaana.” According to Neelo, this is an Arabic phrase that Habib Jalib incorporated into the lyrics of the song, and these words call upon the Palestinian people to free themselves from the *zulm*<sup>142</sup> that is being inflicted upon them by the Israelis.

Zerqa performs for the Palestinian freedom fighters, and she is later captured by the Israeli forces and tortured for information. This is because through her position as a dancer, she naturally becomes privy to vital information regarding the strategies that the Palestinians wish to employ against the Israelis; her femininity and gender allow her to occupy the position of the dancer. When Zerqa is ultimately captured and tortured, she refuses to divulge the information that she has access to at the headquarters. The Israeli forces inflict violence on Zerqa’s body, and she still does not falter; she states that “My Allah is watching me,” and hence she cannot defy her people.

### **Recurring References to Almighty Allah**

There are myriads of references to Allah throughout the film, especially in moments where violence is being inflicted upon individuals, or when individuals are being threatened. Throughout the scenes in which Zerqa is being tortured, with every beating she cries “Allah...Allah...Allah”. Invoking God seems to give the character solace during a time of extreme physical pain and mental torture. This goes hand in hand with the themes of jihad and shahadat that are present throughout the film; when Zerqa is threatened to be killed by the Israeli army general, she exclaims “Mein shahadat kay liye tayar ho kar ayi hoon” (‘I came prepared for shahadat’). Towards the end of the film, Zerqa is severely injured after being present in the Israeli army Headquarters in Tel Aviv where she orchestrated a bomb attack with her counterparts. The Israeli army general aims to take advantage of the physical and mental pain that Zerqa is in, by asking her questions when she is injured:

Israeli Army General: “Kon tehreek chala raha hai” (‘Who is running this movement?’)

Zerqa: “Allah.” (‘My Lord.’)

Israeli Army General: “Kon tha tumharay saath?” (‘Who else was with you?’)

Zerqa: “Falasteen!” (‘Palestine!’)

Zerqa not only believes in the cause of the Palestinian people, but she also believes that God is also aligned with her cause. This ties into the project of Islamic nationalism, one in which God is invoked in order to emphasize doing what is right and morally correct. Zerqa, as well as the male Palestinian freedom fighters in the film, seem to be relying on their belief that “God is on their side” and that “God is watching”; this constant, self-professed, ‘support from divinity’ becomes a recurring thought that gives them solace throughout their fight for freedom.

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<sup>142</sup> *Zulm* is an Urdu word that means cruelty, ill-treatment and the state of being subjected to violence.

### “Never the twain shall meet”: Zerqa and Angela

As mentioned earlier, there are only two female characters in the entire film, apart from one female extra. Zerqa’s character as well as her motivations have been explored in the discourse. Angela, on the other hand, is an Israeli freedom fighter who is allowed to actively fight for her people. The details of her involvement are not shown in the film, but it is made clear that she is an active part of the Israeli cause. She is usually shown dressed up in army green shorts and a shirt, tired from the day’s work. Angela freely interacts with her husband who seems to have no qualms against her heavy involvement in the cause; in fact, her husband is proud of the fact that she is actively involved in the cause and is not like an “Arab woman.” In contrast to Zerqa, Angela does not need to use her femininity as a weapon, at least not yet; eventually Angela also has to use her body and her femininity in order to convey what she stands for, as described below.

Angela and Zerqa are set up in binary opposition to each other: the former is the Israeli freedom fighter who is relatively masculine, and the latter is a Palestinian freedom fighter who is the more feminine one out of the two. Defying the constraints that the boundaries of these rigid binaries impose upon their characters, Angela facilitates Zerqa’s escape from the Israeli prison cell. When Angela is discovered by the Israeli army general, she states: “Aurat ki khamoshi aik sahara hai” (‘The silence of a woman is her own support’), “Mein pehle bhi aurat thi aur ab bhi hoon” (‘I was a woman before, and I still stand here as a woman right now’), and “Mera mazhab bhi aurat hai” (‘My religion is womanhood’). Two seemingly irreconcilable characters unite under their shared experience of being women; this is a comment, if not a jab, at all the men who engage in violence and plunder, to fight for peace, rather than practice peace itself. Hence, after Angela’s act of bravery and her interaction with the Israeli army general, it is apparent that the two women were more alike than apart. The two did not need to organize themselves into battalions and wage wars in order to stand up for what they believed in.

When she is in the prison cell, Angela is aware of the fact that the Israeli army general came into the cell in order to torture Zerqa. To this, she responds by telling him that he should harass her instead, because by virtue of being a woman, she is just like Zerqa. At this point in the film, Angela is wearing a fitted red dress, reminiscent of the one that Zerqa wore in the second dance sequence in the film. Angela uses her femininity in order to make a point; she shames the army general by telling him that since she and Zerqa are both women, violating Zerqa would be akin to violating herself. Hence, she allows the general to violate her and torture her in the cell. The army general is greatly disturbed by this perturbing and unforeseen turn of events.

The only three characters who are in any way associated with love in the film are the characters of Zerqa, Angela and Ammar. Angela, in conversations with her husband, comments on how violence should not be directed towards women and children, and that they should be treated with love. Zerqa and Ammar harbor love for each other, which is why Zerqa reluctantly agrees to become a dancer. Ammar is the only male in the entire film who is associated with love in some capacity, and he has night-blindness; it seems as if love clouds his ability to see, and this mental handicap manifests itself in a physical incapability which means he is shown as less masculine than the other men who surround him. His disability makes him somewhat of an outcast in his own community of men; the ideal masculinity of the film does not have room for weakness or disability. Women are viewed as the Other when it comes to the project of nationalism. The two women in *Zerqa* use their otherness to their own advantage; they invoke the power of womanhood and love in order to help each other navigate the terrain that has been laid out for them by men. Even though this cooperation only takes the form of Angela’s decision to free Zerqa, it is one that allows them both to voice what they believe in, and act upon it in the manner that they can.



## Conclusion

The women in *Zerqa* exist within a playing field that has been laid out for them by men. The women not only have a lack of control over their agency, but the manner in which they die is also decided by a man in power. Zerqa and Angela identify small windows through which they can express their agency, even if their attempts are in vain. It also seems as if female agency is only allowed to be activated in abnormal circumstances, as long as the expression of this agency is directed towards restoring peace and harmony. Zerqa and Angela embrace their femininity, using their words, actions, and bodies as tools through which they bargain with patriarchy. This bargain is one that has existed through the ages and has withstood the test of time; it is a bargain that has multiple stakeholders, each as unwilling as the next to relinquish control.

## Film Synopsis

*Zerqa*, released on the 17th of October 1969, was directed and produced by Riaz Shahid. The film was primarily an Urdu film, with the usage of Arabic at various points; there were a number of Arabic phrases used in the lyrics of the songs in the film. The female protagonist of the film was played by Neelo. The narrative is centered around Zerqa, a Palestinian woman whose father is killed by the Israeli army. Her home is also destroyed by the Israelis. Acting upon her father's dying wish, Zerqa eventually joins a team of freedom fighters dedicated to her country and its plight. Eventually, she is forced to work as a dancing girl in a club; this is a position that she does not wish to take up, but she does because of a lack of a better choice, and also because she wants to comply with the wishes of her fiancé, Ammar. Zerqa is eventually captured and tortured by the Israelis for information, to which she refuses because she is dedicated to the cause of Palestinian nationalism and does not wish to defy her people or her Lord. Angela, an Israeli freedom fighter, sympathizes with Zerqa and allows her to escape from her cell; eventually, Zerqa bombs an Israeli army station in Tel Aviv, and is fatally injured. An Israeli army general executes her, rather than letting her die a natural death; he does this because he does not want her to be a shaheed.

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### **Filmography**

*Ye Aman* (dir. Riaz Shahid, 1971)

*Zerqa* (dir. Riaz Shahid, 1969)