

Ajab Khan Afridi in Pashto Cinema: Changing Representations and Shifting Identities

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Abstract

The use of cinema as a tool to cement carefully crafted notions of national identity is not uncommon, and there has been some scholarly work devoted to exploring Pakistani cinema from this lens. However, the regional cinemas of the country have largely been neglected. This research compares two major themes, the construction of Pashtun identity and gender portrayals across two Pashto films, *Ajab Khan Afridae* (dir. Rahim Gul, 1971) and *Ajab Khan* (dir. Badar Munir, 1995), by studying the characterization, narrative analysis, and a *mise-en-scène* analysis of selected scenes. As both these films are historical adaptations of the same story, that of the anti-colonial Pashtun hero, Ajab Khan Afridi, they offer a convenient space to study the evolution of Pashto cinema itself, between 1971 and 1995. The study finds that Islamic elements came to occupy a greater space in construction of the Pashtun identity, while the objectification and sexualization of female characters, as well as on-screen violence, increased simultaneously. This essay then situates these changing themes of Pashto cinema in the broader sociopolitical context of the country during this time. The changing notions of identity and increasingly hypermasculine characterization of the lead characters are found to be linked to nationalistic project of the state, prominently featuring Zia-ul-Haq's quest for legitimacy, and both the preparation and aftermaths of the Afghan Jihad. It concludes with a call to seriously study regional cinemas of Pakistan, particularly Pashto cinema, and move beyond stereotypical portrayals devoid of any efforts to contextualize these in their respective time periods and political environments.

Keywords: Pashto Cinema, Ajab Khan, Pakistani Nationalism, Pashtun Identity, Afghan Jihad

Introduction

This essay compares the construction of Pakhtun identity and gender portrayals across two Pashto films, *Ajab Khan Afridae* (dir. Rahim Gul, 1971) and *Ajab Khan* (dir. Badar Munir, 1995). As both these films are historical adaptations of the same story, that of the anti-colonial Pakhtun hero Ajab Khan Afridi, they offer a convenient lens to study the evolution of Pashto cinema itself between 1971 and 1995. The study finds that Islamic elements—including representations of piety and recurring Islamic motifs, themes, and language—came to occupy an

increasingly prominent space in the construction of Pakhtun identity, while the objectification and sexualization of female characters as well as on-screen violence and bloodshed increased simultaneously. This is somewhat ironic, as modest dress codes and behavior are often associated with Islamic identity, and the conservative Pakistani society tends to enforce stringent standards of decency in the name of Islam, particularly for women. Such standards do not allow such displays of the female body and sexuality as seen in the 1995 film (and other contemporary films). The essay then situates the changing themes of Pashto cinema in the broader sociopolitical context of the region during this period and the corresponding changes in the national and other regional cinemas of the country, which are found to be linked to the nationalistic project of the state.

Indeed, the period under study (1971–1995) was a tumultuous one for Pakistan and surrounding regions. The year of 1971 was a watershed moment in the history of Pakistan; for most of this year, Pakistan was fighting a secessionist movement in its non-contiguous Eastern wing, which culminated in the independence of Bangladesh in December 1971, and the entire period had a deep and lasting impact on the national and local film industries. After 1971, two major events occurred in the country's history which similarly impacted film production. Firstly, in 1977, General Zia ul Haq seized power and imposed martial law; the General's tenure witnessed an increasing role of religion in state and social affairs, as the rhetoric of Islamization was deployed in an attempt to legitimize his coup (I. Khan 52). The draconian censorship laws, banning films that violated "accepted moral standards" or went against "national sentiments," had catastrophic effects on the film industry (Khan and Ahmad 150), but while these impacts have been studied in the context of the Urdu and Punjabi film industries, little scholarly attention has been paid to Pashto cinema. Moreover, due to this dearth of academic research, another significant shift in the trajectory of Pashto Cinema has also been overlooked: the influence of the Afghan Jihad. In 1979, Pakistan supported and aided the *mujahideen* against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, encouraging the fighters to reject the Soviets in order to protect Islam (Weinbaum and Harder 28). Simultaneously, following the war and violence in their country, millions of Afghan citizens sought refuge in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These political developments continue to have an undeniable influence on the region even today; however, this essay specifically focuses on the impact on the Pashto film industry, which has previously been largely ignored by Pakistani film scholars. The first section gives some background on Ajab Khan Afridi himself and the different adaptations of his story in the Pakhtun culture; it ends with an introduction to the films discussed in the essay. The next two sections comprise an analysis of the two main themes studied here: notions of Pakhtun identity and gender characterization, respectively. The final section concludes the discussion and attempts to contextualize it in the current political situation of the region.

The Life and Legacy of Ajab Khan Afridi

Ajab Khan Afridi is a twentieth century anti-colonial hero who became immortalized in Pashto folklore and culture when he kidnapped Molly Ellis, the daughter of a British army major, from their military compound in Kohat Cantonment in 1923. Molly was subsequently taken through the tribal areas by Ajab Khan and his accomplices as the British tried in vain to retrieve her. Three weeks later, a rescue mission was sent by the British, which included Lilian Starr, a nurse who served in Peshawar and knew Pashto as well, hoping that sending a woman would mean

avoiding any violence. Ajab Khan and the Bostikhel Afridis negotiated through Mullah Akhunzada, a well-respected tribal and religious leader of the area. The narrative of this story is somewhat contested; the British portray the kidnapping as an unprovoked act confirming their conception of the Pakhtun nation, especially the tribal people, as barbaric savages. On the other hand, to this day Ajab Khan is hailed in his hometown of Darra Adam Khel and surrounding regions as a brave son of the soil who fought for justice and taught the British a lesson about Pakhtun pride and courage. According to Ajab Khan, in his letters from Afghanistan after the incident, he had been wrongfully accused of stealing rifles from the Kohat Lancers and his pleas of innocence repeatedly fell on deaf ears (Kolsky 30). Some sources—including records of the then Chief Commissioner Maffey’s telegraphs—also report that the British had been attacking the Afridi tribe in the region during this time and had violated the privacy of their homes and the sanctity of their women’s purdah (Kolsky 17). The retaliation by Ajab Khan, thus, was merely a righteous act to seek the justice that they had been denied. For Pakhtuns even today, this is told as a tale of success; however, what is often overlooked are the consequences for the local tribes after this treaty was concluded. While Ajab Khan sought refuge in Afghanistan in an effort to save his people from retaliation, the British “used the kidnapping as an opportunity to expand the state’s material interests in the name of imperial security” (Kolsky 29).

The plot of both the films follows the story of Ajab Khan up to the point of Molly Ellis’ return to the British. The films follow a long tradition of adaptations of nationalist and anticolonial struggles on screen, in cinemas all around the globe. These stories, especially those of the more militant struggles, can be adapted easily into films as they offer thrilling storylines that can be turned into “engaging and palatable” films (Kachwala 704-7). Such films are deeply situated with the contemporary sociopolitical climate of the context in which they are produced, and often play an important part in the construction of a nationalist narrative and nation-forming (Srivastava 715). Consequently, the analyses of these films can give important insights into the cinema and culture of a nation.

The Context and Construction of Identity

One of the most widely used definitions of a nation is Benedict Anderson’s concept of an imagined community, a group that shares a sense of comradeship based on socially constructed, “finite, elastic” boundaries (7). In her study of the construction of national identity in Egyptian cinema, Khatib combines Anderson’s conception of a nation with Hobsbawm’s concept of invented traditions and argues for understanding cinema as an example of the “myths and symbols that bind a nation together” (66). Building on these interventions, this paper examines who is imagined as part of the community and who is excluded in order to explore ongoing contestations of nationhood in Pashto cinema.

In *Ajab Khan Afridae* (1971), there is a deliberate effort to assert the Pakhtun identity of the hero. This is evident in multiple dialogues of the hero that repeatedly emphasize Pakhtun values and pride, often highlighting these by explicitly drawing contrasts with the unprincipled and immoral Englishmen. For instance, multiple scenes showing the British soldiers are accompanied by dialogues, especially by Ajab Khan himself, which emphasize the dignity of the Pakhtuns, who always stand true to their word. There are no prominent allusions to the religious identity of the hero. This is in stark contrast to *Ajab Khan* (1995), which is replete with religious symbols. The film begins with a montage that succinctly captures those visions of identity that the film

propagates. The first sequence is of the Holy Ka'aba, showing hundreds of people circumambulating it in the routine *tawaaf*. This is accompanied by the call to prayer, the *azaan*, that can be heard in the background. The call to prayer continues, as the screen shows a brief shot of the Minaar-e-Pakistan, a monument in Lahore marking the site of the Pakistan Resolution and a historic symbol of Pakistani nationhood. The montage then cuts to a still image of the gateway to the Khyber Pass, another Pakistani landmark located at the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is frequently used to represent the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and more specifically its capital city Peshawar. The flag of Pakistan can be seen prominently placed on top of the gateway. The montage ends by cutting back to the same clip of the Holy Ka'aba, as the *azaan* continues. The *azaan* in the background is then replaced by the sound of birds chirping, as the new scene opens with a pan across a barren, hilly landscape, presumed to be Darra Adam Khel. The camera zooms in, focusing on a rather lush green patch amidst the dry hills, with the camera movement itself intensifying the contrast between the dull background and the bright patch. A man—Ajab Khan—can be seen praying besides a rifle that has been lodged into the ground. The camera then cuts to a close-up shot, where the man's face can be seen through the rifle bandolier, as he abruptly turns to look into the camera with an aggressive expression. The camera pans again to focus on the film's title "Ajab Khan" painted over the hills in the distance.

Such religious elements or "visual signifiers" that allude to an Islamic identity are prominent throughout the rest of the film (Khatib 76). The first sequence of the film, described above in detail, is followed by a scene introducing the audience to Ajab Khan's home and family. This scene begins by showing a group of children, young boys wearing *topi*¹ and girls wrapped in *chaadar*², rocking back and forth as they appear to be reciting the Holy Qur'an. The camera then focuses on Ajab Khan's mother, an elderly woman dressed in white clothes and a white chaadar, with her hands raised in prayer as she utters, "*Ameen*" ('amen'). The color white and the chaadar are both common symbols of purity and piety. This technique of adding shots of the Holy Ka'aba to symbolize a transnational Islamic *ummah*³ may not be unique to this particular Pashto film and such use of visual signifiers has echoes across the Islamic world. In her analysis of Islamic films in Indonesia, Izharuddin notes that biographical films are often chosen as sites of construction of a distinctly Indonesian Islamic identity, and one of the biopics in her analysis also includes a documentary montage of pilgrimage in Mecca in its epilogue (103). Similarly, Kabir notes the "conspicuous praying" and "conspicuous veiling" in many Indian films, used as visual indicators of the Islamic identity of the characters (380). Bangladeshi films have also been found to use Islamic symbolism to formulate a collective identity, with the *azaan* and *topi* amongst some of the common symbols used (Ohlmacher and Pervez 155-6).

Such themes are also apparent in the last two scenes of the 1995 film, which emphasize the religious identity of the protagonist in a similar fashion. As the Captain of the British army, who has been leading the British efforts to retrieve Molly Ellis throughout the film, is cornered by Ajab Khan and about to be killed, the familiar *azaan* plays in the background once again, this

¹ The word means simply hat or cap, but it denotes a specific kind of cap, usually white in color, worn by Muslim men while performing prayers or other acts of worship.

² A large piece of cloth used to cover the head and chest of a woman. In this region it is usually white in color, and in the Pakhtun and Pakistani society, it symbolizes the piety and honor of a woman.

³ Literally, a community. This Arabic term is commonly used to describe the Muslim community all over the world as a global collective, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, which shares Islamic beliefs.

time as diegetic sound. Ajab Khan drops his weapon out of respect and explains to the Captain how the azaan signifies a call to worship, barring the Muslims from hurting anyone during this time. A close-up shot captures the feelings of disbelief and admiration on the Captain's face. In the last scene of the film, it is discovered that the Captain has been so inspired by Ajab Khan's moral conduct that he decides to embrace Islam; he recites the *kalma*⁴, while people wave their rifles and cheer. A rhythmic chant of "*Allah hu*"⁵ begins playing in the background, which continues as the sequence cuts to, once again, a clip of circumambulation at the Holy Ka'aba.

The differences in the portrayal of Pakhtun identity across these two films is also reflective of competing ideologies in Pakistan's history. In the 1970s, secular Pakhtun nationalism, championed by groups like the National Awami Party, was still prominent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, although facing increasing persecution by the state (Saigol 200). Similarly, Ijaz Khan argues that during the 1970s, with the military discredited due to its misadventures (in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War as well as the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War), Pakistan witnessed greater acceptance of cultural diversity (62). However, after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this changed drastically. Increasingly, the military government in Pakistan began using the rhetoric of Islam and *Jihad* ⁶ to unify the Pakistani nation, and Pakhtuns in particular, to prepare a response to the Soviet forces, characterized as 'infidels.' This was a part of the broader Cold War rhetoric deployed against the Soviets, whose atheism was deemed dangerous for the rest of the world. The invasion, thus, presented a fertile pretext for Pakistani state to curb any Pakhtun nationalist tendencies in the northwestern province, in favor of promoting in its place the idea of a transnational Islamic identity (Weinbaum and Harder 28-31). Khan also points to the use of anti-Hindu rhetoric by the establishment; the otherness of Indians and Hindus is used to reinforce the homogeneity of the Pakistani nation (57). Thus, while both the films under discussion narrate the tale of an anti-colonial hero, with the British shown to be the main antagonists, the 1995 film also includes Murli Das, an additional character (of which no such historical record could be found to exist) who is a Hindu. Murli Das is portrayed as a coward, who, throughout the course of the film, attempts to invent covert plans to trap Ajab Khan, never engaging in a direct confrontation or fight, and ends up being killed by a woman (the partner of Ajab Khan's brother) – the ultimate depiction of his weakness. In her study of Egyptian cinema, Khatib notes the use of "sensationalist stereotypes" which reinforce the otherness of a group (76). This can be seen in the use of the visual symbols for the character of Murli Das such as his *shikha*⁷ and repeated use of the phrase, "*Ram Ram.*" His character, along with the anti-colonial narrative, thus strengthens the Muslims versus Others dichotomy.

Srivastava, in her discussion of Bollywood films on anticolonial nationalist struggles, notes how these films reconstruct the colonial past in a way that is in line with the prevailing ideas of nationhood, as envisioned by the state (708). Such films are meant to be didactic, to inspire and socialize the youth of the nation into the nationalistic ideals. She also highlights the gendered aspect of this nationalistic project; the past is interpreted in an increasingly masculine and violent

⁴ In the Pakistani context, the *kalma* usually refers to the *shahada*, a short phrase declaring the unity of God that forms the basic creed of Islam.

⁵ An Islamic chant that means "God is", used to reaffirm the faith in oneness of God.

⁶ While this word literally translates as 'struggle', it is now most often used to describe a war against non-Muslims to protect Islam, similar to the Christian concept of crusade.

⁷ The *shikha* or *sikha* is a long strand of hair left at the top of the shaven heads of Hindu men. An ancient symbol of devotion to God, the practice is now most frequently associated with priests.

fashion. These phenomena are apparent in the films made on Ajab Khan's life as well, as discussed in the following section.

Reimagining Masculinity & Gender Portrayals

Izharuddin notes that the construction of a national identity is a gendered project, which specifies different roles for men, usually as the protectors, and women, as the supporters (98). In a similar vein, Partha Chatterjee, outlining a distinction between the material and the spiritual spheres of the cultural domain of a nation, argues that since the East was forced to concede the superiority of Western civilization in the material sphere, the spiritual arena becomes a key site for asserting a distinctly Eastern national identity (120). Consequently, the spiritual world is equated with the inner world and the home, and women are relegated to this sphere as they become "active agents in the nationalist project" (147). For instance, Kachwala analyzes the portrayal of revolutionary nationalist heroes in Bollywood. These stories are used to buttress "a masculinist fiction of the nation where male revolutionaries are rehabilitated as principled nationalists and gendered as virile heroes fighting for sovereignty with the support of their chaste female compatriots" who exhibit no political volition or ideals of their own (Kachwala 705). The gendered division of spaces and roles is reflected in both films discussed in this paper too, which show Ajab Khan as the main protagonist and the women around him, including his mother, his fiancée, and even Molly Ellis, playing supporting roles in what becomes his quest for justice. This also reflects the historic narrations of the incident itself. In her work on Ajab Khan, Kolsky highlights that this incident was a contest of egos, with the British asserting their masculinity as overcompensation for their insecurities, i.e., the failure to safeguard their women (6). On the other hand, Ajab Khan's retaliatory action seemed to be similarly asserting his masculinity in ways aligned with the tenets of *pakhtunwali*⁸. An attack on his home in the presence of the women of his family was a violation of his *nang* ('honor'), necessitating *badal* ('revenge'). While both films stay true to the story of competing masculinities, there are a few variations in the portrayals of gender, including new storylines introduced in the 1995 film.

A good illustration of these themes is the first scene where the audience sees Ajab Khan together with his fiancée. In *Ajab Khan Afridae* (1971), this introduction follows a song, where Noor Jamal, his fiancée, is seen in a traditional Pakhtun dress singing praises of Ajab Khan's patriotism with other young girls. As Ajab Khan arrives on his horse, the girls giggle and scurry away, leaving the couple alone to share an intimate moment. As they discuss the dangers of the future and the British threat, both are shown to express mutual admiration and love, with Ajab Khan unafraid to openly talk about his feelings and fears. The scene plays out quite differently in *Ajab Khan* (1995). A stoic-looking Ajab Khan is seen sitting by a tree, playing the *rabab*, while Gul Sanga, his fiancée, is depicted running around with searching eyes—close-up shots showing her confusion—trying to find the source of the tune. Her expressions register a sense of relief as she finds him. As soon as he notices her presence, however, she hides her face behind her *dupatta*⁹, commenting that she is no longer a girl but a woman now, and must observe *purdah* until they are married. Hearing this, Ajab Khan guffaws, saying that it is not necessary that they

⁸ Pakhtunwali or Pakhtunwali is an unwritten code of life for Pakhtun people; its major tenets include *nang*, meaning honor or dignity—with particular emphasis on male duty to defend women's honor—and *badal*, meaning justice and vengeance on behalf of those wronged.

⁹ A scarf worn by women for modesty. When used to cover the head, it also signifies piety.

get married, as there many other beautiful women in his village. Gul Sanga threatens Ajab Khan that he will be responsible for her death if they do not get married, and the scene ends with him reassuring her, arm wrapped around her shoulder, that he was merely joking. However, this scene still encapsulates the major differences between the two films' characterizations of Ajab Khan as well as his relationship with his fiancée. Adopting Chatterjee's lens, it is clear that the role of women envisioned in the 1995 film is predominantly within the home and tied more rigidly—even entirely dependent in some cases, as elaborated below—to her relationships and associations with men, as compared to the 1971 film, where the characterization of women is relatively more nuanced, granting them some autonomy.

The female characters in the 1971 film, are certainly subject to the male gaze and objectification by the camera, and largely adhere to the archetype of the passive, "*chooi-mooi*" heroines of 1970s Pakistani cinema, yet they still do command some agency in their supporting roles (Rizvi 81). For instance, when Ajab Khan's home is attacked by the British, Noor Jamal takes his rifle and holds off the British while he escapes. Later, as Ajab Khan and his small party take their captive through the tribal areas, Noor Jamal, dressed as a man, accompanies them for most of the journey and is shown wielding a pistol and fighting alongside Ajab Khan when they are attacked along the way. On the other hand, while Gul Sanga in *Ajab Khan* (1995) is also shown accompanying the captive party, the realization of this plot point is different. Ajab Khan agrees to take her along only after her camp is raided by a savage-looking man who threatens her father and attempts to rape her. She is saved by Ajab Khan, who magically happens to be in the right place, and her old father laments that he cannot carry this burden (referring to his daughter and the responsibility to protect her honor) any longer. The film does not show her fighting at any point on the journey; however, there is a curious scene where she, dressed as a man, attempts to coerce the captive English girl to kiss her on the cheek. Just as the latter gives in and does so, while her pronounced moan can be heard, Ajab Khan enters, and the camera zooms in to capture his incredulity. In an interview cited by Muhammad Aslam Khan, Badar Munir, who plays Ajab Khan in the 1995 film, lamented that the filmmakers of Pashto cinema often take close-up shots of the actors, which they later find embedded between sexual scenes and dances (95). The film under discussion, however, was directed by Badar Munir himself, and this instance represents a rather common occurrence in the Pakistani film world (and scholarship) of the refusal to publicly associate with such content, despite its prevalence.

It may seem surprising that the type of scene described above was even deemed acceptable by Pakistan's notoriously conservative censor board. In fact, the film also includes multiple songs, featuring both named female characters as well as extras wearing tight clothes that accentuate their figures, performing seductive dance moves to suggestive lyrics, in addition to various sexual innuendos in the script of the film. According to Rizvi, whereas such dances and dialogues were prohibited by the censor in earlier years, they had become a common occurrence in the Pakistani films in the 1990s (82). One reason she cites for this shift is changing viewership, with films being targeted towards working-class male audiences rather than families. This has also been highlighted by Ahmad, who describes the audience of Peshawar's film theatre as "the lumpen peri-urban proletariat of a terrifying war zone [who] lose themselves in the collective visual pleasure" of the cinema (91). These changing patterns, in turn, were associated with General Zia ul Haq's strict moral codes for films and theatres, as well as the increase in video piracy and the introduction of the VCR, both of which promoted private consumption by families (especially those who could afford to buy or rent VCRs) within their homes (Gazdar

175). Both of these led to viewership at home being seen as more appropriate for women especially, for whom public space began shrinking fast. Rizvi also attributes this change to the influence of Western media and globalization, with female characterization moving away from “eastern norms” that were prevalent in earlier decades (82). In this case, for instance, one of the songs in *Ajab Khan* (1995) features the brother of the lead character dressed in an oversized two-piece Western suit, and his partner, who alternates between a long dress and a tank top, pants, and jacket ensemble. However, in his pioneering work on Pashto cinema, Muhammad Aslam Khan attributes such changes to the increasing influence of Indian cinema, as a result of the influx of millions of Afghan refugees in the region, who, used to watching Bollywood films that were popular in Afghanistan, demanded similar content from the Pashto film industry (59). Thus, we find a tendency in the discourse on Pakistani cinema to blame outside influence, either from the West or from India, for highly sexualized dance numbers or revealing costumes, a claim which requires more nuanced analysis beyond the scope of this study. Indian films, for example, have always been popular in Pakistan, and with the advent of VCR, Khan and Ahmad report that the viewership of Bollywood films bloomed at unprecedented rates after the mid-1970s (154).

While much has been written about the evolution of female characterization, Iqbal Sevea, in his study of the representations of gender and caste in Pakistani Punjabi films, draws attention to changing masculinities in Pakistani cinema. These representations of a “specific male cultural type” are constructed using repeated codes and actions that constitute performance of gender and delineate gender norms, reflecting the cultural discourses of masculinity in Pakistani society. In particular, Sevea points to an emerging hero in Punjabi cinema in the 1980s, described as a “hyper-masculine, rural, and proudly violent figure,” remarkably similar to Badar Munir’s unkempt and redoubtable Ajab Khan in the 1995 film (130-131). He notes how different this was from the earlier heroes, who were more soft-spoken, well-groomed, and exhibited great self-control (132), a description that aligns more closely with Asif Khan’s performance in the 1971 film. These changing ideals of masculinity are best reflected in the scenes in both the films where Ajab Khan is accused by the British Captain of stealing rifles from the army compound. In *Ajab Khan Afridae* (1971), Asif Khan, clean shaven with a sleek moustache, marches into the Captain’s office, stands at attention, and maintains this upright posture throughout until he marches out at the end of the scene. As the Captain accuses him of theft and threatens to raid his home, his anger is seen in his widening eyes, clenched jaw, and increasingly thunderous tone of voice (although the volume does not increase much). In contrast, in *Ajab Khan* (1995), we see Badar Munir, with a large moustache and disheveled hair and beard, engaging in a verbal brawl with the Captain, who is seated in front of a large British flag. There is a lot of movement in the scene, as the two men pace around the office and shout at each other, with the hero rapidly turning around and pointing fingers, yelling indignantly, “*Captain!*”

Sevea connects the proud rural hero to the wave of populism in Pakistan in the 1970s, heralded by the rise to power of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; however, the major influence for the violent and strong male leads came from Zia ul Haq’s era, where the pursuit of legitimacy led to an emphasis on the necessity of “one strong male leader who would be able to use coercion and force to administer justice” (132). Furthermore, according to Khan and Ahmad, the action films of this period, similar to *Ajab Khan* (1995), directly reflected the “brutality of Zia years,” when the citizens of Pakistan faced increasing violence at the hands of the state (154). Pakhtuns in particular were additionally suffering from the bloody consequences of the Afghan war. This is reflected especially strongly in the 1995 film, which features a significantly higher body count

and the use of explosives and bombs. This is in stark contrast to the 1971 film, where the protagonist is shown to be quite careful in ensuring the protection of all innocent people. The concretization of the hypermasculine hero archetype also, by implication, further circumscribed the role of women in national and family life as subservient to that of the man. As Izharuddin has also observed, women are sidelined, with their familial roles (and men as intermediaries) being the only conduit through which they can partake in any political activity, as the domestic sphere simultaneously becomes the primary site of consolidating the national identity (98). These themes, in turn, are associated with the nurturing of an ideal *mujahid* for the ongoing Afghan war. Glatzer, for instance, noted that the “highly individualistic style” of the mujahideen leaders during the Afghan war was one reason why they were so feared (6). The mujahideen commanders were men who constantly had to reinforce their superiority, especially militarily, to maintain their leadership; this is in line with *tura*¹⁰, another tenet of Pakhtunwali that is closely intertwined with nang. As an example of how young Pakhtuns are socialized into the values entailed by tura, Glatzer recounts the story and popularity of Ajab Khan Afridi (7). Thus, the shifting portrayals of gender relations and masculinities in the 1995 film can be read in a similar way, in the context of the Afghan jihad.

Conclusion

This study of the themes of identity construction and gender portrayals in the two films, *Ajab Khan Afridae* and *Ajab Khan*, illustrates major shifts in the trajectory of Pashto cinema itself, which has not been analyzed in adequate depth prior to this study. It has also, by contextualizing these changes against the broader political and social situation of the country and the evolution of the national and regional cinemas, questioned the notions of the alleged decline of Pashto cinema. The dearth of scholarship on Pashto cinema as well as the prevailing stereotypes associated with it exist because the films are considered “trashy” and “poor quality,” and consequently, marginalized by the cultural elites and film critics (Imanjaya 140). This is analogous to the case of Indonesian cinema, where films with “gruesome and sensual scenes” are relegated to a lower tier of cinema and culture, as studied by Imanjaya (137). Pashto cinema is similarly pushed to the sidelines of Pakistani cinematic world and culture, labelled as being unrepresentative of authentic Pakistani and Pakhtun values. There are two problematic consequences of this. Firstly, this results in an inaccurate documentation of the culture of a society, one which does not correspond to the lived culture and is a tradition curated by the dominant class, based on the values of the contemporary society (Williams 54-5). Secondly, for the Pakhtuns in Pakistan, this kind of reductionist treatment of Pashto cinema serves to exacerbate the existing discrimination that this group faces in the country. This discriminatory attitude has always been perpetuated by the representation of Pakhtuns in literature and scholarship, which is largely rooted in Orientalist portrayals by European colonizers. Due to the underrepresentation of Pakhtun voices in these fields even after the end of colonialism, the trope of the barbaric Pakhtun nation persists (Yousaf 3). While recent political shifts have led to the rethinking of these stereotypes to some extent, for instance the Pakhtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) which attempts to reclaim and represent Pakhtun identity and champions nonviolence,

¹⁰ Literally, a sword. It is a tenet of Pakhtunwali that involves the readiness to fight to protect your and your clan/nation’s honor, combined with the prudence to know when to pick a fight.

there is still a long way to go and many myths to be dispelled, for which a serious study of the cinema is an important step.

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Filmography

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