

Vernacular Visual Aesthetic: The Genre of Digital Punjabi Stage Dramas

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Abstract

Punjabi stage dramas are one of the most popular sources for entertainment in Pakistan, with tens of thousands attending these shows each night in Lahore. These shows have gained even greater popularity with millions of views by Punjabis from all around the world on YouTube. This paper studies the digital recordings of live Punjabi stage dramas on YouTube, particularly focusing on the cinematography of the four selected digital recordings of live performances. The paper studies these screen texts while focusing on the ways in which the introduction of the camera shapes the viewing experience and how it is different from the reception of the live performance. The paper takes a closer look at how the camera films particular character archetypes and motifs, particularly the *Bhand Mode* ('jester') and the *ranga-bighla* ('straight man-clown pairing') interactions, in correlation to the themes of the performance, hence uniquely accommodating the themes within its visualization. Furthermore, the paper discusses bodies, gender, and sexuality in Punjabi dramas, focusing on how female bodies are filmed in relation to the male gaze, particularly those which subvert patriarchal norms and power structures such as the *Mahi Munda* ('tomboy' or 'androgynist'). The paper lastly studies the removal of *mujra* ('sexual dance') performances from these recordings and expands on the current understanding of this performance beyond censorship, by explicating cultural ideas of respectability in tandem with the obscenity discourse.

Keywords: Punjabi stage drama; gender; sexuality; censorship; cinematography; culture

Commercial Punjabi theatre is perhaps one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Pakistan, but the current popularity of the art form comes from its digital dissemination; popular YouTube uploads and streaming of these plays having millions of views per video, yet there is a dearth of academic work on the art form. Most sections of society, whether they be artists or news media, relegate the Punjabi stage dramas to the margins of art while terming them as "deterioration" of culture or considering the entire genre "vulgar and racy" (Ahmed). Given this state of negligence, there is not a lot of academic literature on these performances which, by conservative estimates, are attended by at least 10,000 people every night in Lahore alone (Khan). This paper aims to fill this gap in the scholarship by studying the phenomenon of

digitized Punjabi stage dramas as screen texts and their visual treatment of gender, power and status through character depictions and motifs. By doing so, I argue that a pattern emerges in the visual depiction of themes and motifs across the recordings of different performances, which can be seen as distinctive features of a new genre: digital punjabi stage dramas. This paper uses four performance recordings in particular to study the phenomena—*Dolli Darling* (dir. Anon, 2020), *Ishq Haye Sahnu Sattaye/Woe this Love Pains* (dir. Anon, 2017), *Ek Tera Sanum Khana/Your House of Idol* (dir. Awan Jee, 2003), and *Billo, Billi aur Balli* (dir. Anon, 2004).

This paper primarily engages with the works of Claire Pamment and Syeda Batool. Pamment studies the tropes and archetypes of folk Punjabi performing arts in the modern age, focusing on the live performances of these Punjabi stage dramas, arguing that relegating the idea of folk to a pure form of the past, unadulterated by modern influences relegates the art forms and archetypes to a static phenomenon lacking innovation and evolution (*Comic Performance* 4).³ This paper builds on this idea by studying these character archetypes and motifs in their digital reception and picturization, extending our understanding of Punjabi art performances and comedy into the digital realm, which has a much larger audience than the live performances. Secondly, the paper also analyzes the way that the cinematography of these performances guides the audience's experience and how it treats the themes of masculinity, gender performance and the treatment of the female body in regard to the male gaze.

The first generic motif the paper studies is the “*Bhand Mode*,” which is an archetype of comic characters in traditional Punjabi performing arts (Pamment, *Comic Performance* 19). The first component of the Bhand Mode is the *ranga-bighla* (‘straight man-clown’ pairing) interactions. The ranga is a category of characters, which are at the center of power signifying the rigid masculinity associated with urban, upwardly mobile, high-caste men, and is positioned in these interactions against the bighla. The bighla archetype characters represent the other half of the duality; fluid, satirical and disruptive, they symbolize the marginality of rural, working-class, low-caste or *mirasi*⁴, female identities. This means that such interactions are at their core a satirical depiction of power dynamics (Pamment, *Comic Performance* 150). Next, the paper analyzes the picturization of body movement in the cinematography, primarily focusing on the movement of the characters embodying the Bhand Mode, which is characterized by heightened body movement and exaggerated mobility (12). The second section of the paper looks at the visualization of gender and sexuality, focusing on the *Mahi Munda* (‘Tomboy’ or ‘androgynist’) trope, the display of an aggressive satirized masculinity and an active sexuality by female characters (164), and the use of edits to cut out parts of the performance for mass distribution and its relation to the female body.

In my engagement with the ranga-bighla interactions, I focus on the use of camera angle and movement to study how these techniques guide the audience's viewing experience to identify with certain characters and how they depict power hierarchies. Furthermore, I study the use of long-shots and the power dynamic it creates by rendering some characters as half-bodies, semi-

³ Pamment traces the “*Bhand Mode*” of comedy in Punjabi Stage Dramas that essentially inserts the traditional Bhand in the modern genre. Bhands are wandering comedians, generally known in the Punjab as a slapstick-wielding comics, who engage in witty repartee and perform in wedding festivities (Pamment, *Comic Performance* 3).

⁴ *Mirasi* is an umbrella term for lower castes which are traditionally associated with performing arts and music (Randhawa 142).

visible or invisible. In the study of the Mahi Munda trope, I analyze the disjuncture between the subversion of the male gaze by the performer in the live performance and the camera's superimposition of the male gaze and the differential camera treatment of male and female bodies performing masculinity, power and subjugation. Finally, the paper discusses what the editing process leaves out of the screen text, and how that must be studied in ways more diverse and nuanced than a monolithic idea of censorship.

However, the process of a stage-text migrating to screen fundamentally changes the way the motifs and tropes are portrayed as visual recording alters and enlarges our attention, focus and perception, altering what we choose to look at and what we observe (Sontag 1). Filming is essentially an act of prioritizing and deprioritizing, consciously engaging with the live performance to create something new. Hence, paying attention to how each frame is constructed, how particular themes and motifs are mapped through camera techniques, and what kind of shots are used to picturize different moments allows us to not only understand how the reception and audience experience of the screen texts may differ from the live performance but also elaborates the themes and power relations within the text. This process of filming and editing adds new layers to the text which actively directs and changes the experience of viewing these screen texts (Wyver 104).

The *Bhand* Mode

The ranga-bighla interactions are structured in three parts; entrance, pairs of back-and-forth dialogues (in which the ranga sets up the power structures by evoking caste, class, or masculine power) and the exit. The ranga's entry on the stage is consistent throughout all texts observed, a male/masculine character entering the stage with a gun/weapon (which is also phallic symbol) as a tool to enforce power structures. The entrance is picturized through a mid-shot from the angle of the bighla, nearly imitating a point-of-view (POV) by using an eye-line match, where we see what the bighla sees but not from the particular spatial positioning (Branigan 7). The entrance uses the mid-shot and a focus on the gun to establish the ranga status of the character as well as the visual order in an otherwise unruly frame that is populated with multiple characters and movement.

The depiction of action on center stage through the chaotic shots is contrasted with the ranga's slow, rigid body movement shown through a slow pan shot that traces the first few steps of the character as he moves towards center stage. The ranga entrance is consistently filmed with a solo mid-shot and the use of a pan which is not used for other characters and their visual representation. This thematically coincides with the function of the ranga in the binary, as the ranga represents order, power and masculinity; in the paired dialogues the ranga establishes a premise reliant on structural power (social hierarchy). This can be observed in *Dolli Darling* as the character of the *Chaudhary*⁵ enters the stage with a rifle in hand and makes slow strides towards the center stage. Similarly, in *Ek Tera Sanam Khana*, the character of Moti Dogar *Daku* ('dacoit') enters the stage with a rifle as the camera uses a mid-shot to slowly trace his steps. The

⁵ Chaudhary is a hereditary title for landed aristocracy in Punjab, it denotes a high social status often seen as high caste, although the title itself is not a caste (Bhindar 28).

scene depicting Moti Daku's entrance increases the rigidity and orderliness of the frame as it uses a slow-motion editing effect to enhance the characteristic slow stride of the ranga.

These performances are typically shot using two cameras, one positioned on house-right (covering stage left and center) and the other on house-left (covering stage-right and center), and throughout the interaction, the camera angles itself in such a way as to privilege the perspective of the bighla. This is done by taking the shot from the house-right if the bighla is on stage-right, and vice versa, consistently aligning the camera angle with the position of the bighla. This shot allows the frame to capture a half-turned away bighla and the frontal of the ranga, allowing the audience to view the ranga from the vantage point of the bighla. An additional way to privilege the audience's association with the bighla is to frame the bighla closer to the camera and the ranga in the background. The way these shots are framed compels the audience to actively identify with one character over the other, and to interpret the situation from the perspective of the bighla.

Another technique used to control the audience's association is through the camera's movement. The ranga moves forward in the first half of the paired dialogue, intimidating bighla, but the camera is stable and does not move. Whereas, in the second half of the dialogue when the *bighla* utilizes the *juggat*⁶, the bighla moves forward, and the ranga physically retreats. However, this part of the ranga-bighla interaction is filmed differently as now the camera pans forward along with the bighla, imitating his movement. It visually privileges the moments of disruption caused by the bighla, while resisting the movement of the ranga. This visualization can be observed in the following example from *Ishq Haye Sanu Sataye*. As the rifle-wielding Chaudhary (*ranga*) moves forward and threatens the unnamed servant (*bighla*) the camera is stable, but as the servant strikes back with a *juggat* and the Chaudhary retreats, and the servant moves forward. In the second half of the paired dialogue, the camera moves, unlike in the setup to the *juggat*, in tandem with the movement of the character of the servant. There is a consistency in the usage of the pan shots; in the four selected screen texts, twelve out of sixteen pans, four from each text, selected at random used a right to left orientation. The use of right to left pans is consistent across the screen texts observed. These pan shots are also used at thematically similar moments in the narrative. I argue that this consistency must be seen as a genre-specific technique to visualize certain motifs. This highlights how the viewing experience of the digital audience is guided in a way that creates a uniformity across screen texts, a uniformity that does not exist for the live-performance audience who have a greater autonomy to view the performance with their own field of vision.

The camera's ability to create movement by employing a pan is not available in the original stage performance but adds another layer of meaning in the screen text. This technique provides a positional access to the performance from the vantage point of certain characters by combining the movement of the character and the visual perception cues for the audience, linking the audience's involvement, empathy, desire and understanding with the particular character (Branigan 10). The live performance has a degree of "distanciation"; the physical distance of the theatre audience from the performance that grants a degree of separation from the actors, allowing the retention of a unified self with a singular subjective experience (Brecht 91). The digital drama, however, creates a split self as the subjective experience is removed from the self

⁶ fluid satirical use of comedy to disrupt social power structures

and the character by the author's (filmmaker) intervention in interpreting (capturing) the subjective experience of the character. Therefore, the viewer is not experiencing their own identification with the stage character but is experiencing the subjective identification of the filmmaker, hence the subjective self is divided (Bullough 94).

The last part of the ranga-bighla interaction is the ranga's exit from the stage. This is typically done with the dismantling of the ranga's social prestige and power by the bighla (Pamment, *Comic Performance* 153). The manner in which the scene is framed is diametrically opposed to the entrance of the ranga in terms of frame construction and camera movement. Multiple characters populate the frame, as opposed to a solo mid-shot of ranga in the entrance, who moves around disrupting the visual order. The exit is filmed with a quick movement of the camera and successive cuts moving from the ranga to the bighla, as opposed to a focused pan on the ranga as he enters and moves towards center stage. The visual representation of the scene maps onto the motif displayed in the performance; the dismantling of the ranga's power in the narrative is presented through disruption of the visual motifs employed in constructing his masculinity and power.

This pattern of picturization is consistent across texts. The exit of the Chaudhary in *Ishq Haye* is done in a similar manner where the bighla tricks the police into arresting the ranga and watches as the Chaudhary is hurriedly carried off by the police. As the camera pans and reaches the end of the stage the frame shifts with a cut, showing the bighla delivering the last juggat on the Chaudhary, the camera cuts back to the Chaudhary and the frame is populated with multiple policemen and exaggerated body movement as Chaudhary exits the stage. The picturization of the ranga's exist is nearly identical in *Billo, Billi aur Baali*. After the interaction with the unnamed servant (bighla), the urban elite fiancé of the titular Billo moves towards the stage-left with his father-in-law, the camera cuts and shows the servant who serves a last juggat before the fiancé exits the stage. Here the camera is uniquely able to create a sense of disorder by shifting angles and using cuts from one frame to another. This disorder is not as visually marked to the audience of the theatre performance as their experience is not directly constructed by a camera.

This shows that the camera is not only passively filming the live performance but actively engages in constructing the codes that the audience receives, such as POV-attitude identification with certain characters, and visually encoding the text with thematic motifs such as masculinity of the ranga or the disruption of the bighla. Furthermore, the camera's visual presentation is not only linked with the thematic codes of the performance but also enhances these themes using frame construction and editing techniques, adding an additional layer of subtextual meaning which is consistent across screen texts. Guiding the audience's viewing experience to craft additional layers of meaning is not something that the stage-performance affords and is unique to the digital Punjabi stage dramas. This recalls Wyver's claim that creating screen texts out of stage performances necessarily restricts the audience's liberty of focusing or directing sympathies towards certain characters (106). Such control over audience perception is made possible as the picturization of characters through cinematography offers an authorial perspective not possible in a live theatre performance.

Punjabi stage performances are largely improvisational. The actors are expected to create their dialogues and engage with other performers without many directorial guidelines and in the absence of a script, with only a a loose plotline to follow (Pamment, *Comic Performance* 11).

Furthermore, Pamment describes the Bhand Mode as characterized by exaggerated body movements, where performers move on stage in synchrony with dialogue; gestures and emotions are played by the entire body rather than just the face of the performer (*Comic Performance* 141). In such a scenario, where the filming crew does not know when performers would engage in action, dialogue, or movement, zoom or close-up shots are minimal and used in only a few particular instances. Hence, most interactions are picturized in a wide shot, which is the most reliable angle to capture every unscripted moment and makes sure that nothing important is left out of the frame. The wide-shot also serves as a means to situate the performance for the digital audience. Since the digital audience do not have the same field of vision as the live-performance audience, the wide angle shot allows them to see the stage design and ground the performance in its original spatial setting. The constructed space of the stage is also part of the performance. That is, the performance does not happen on stage but with the stage. The landscape and the space of the performance function as an actor, making the experience convincing for the audience (Aitken and Dixon 329).

This is a shift away from the established use of wide-shot in other forms of digital media, such as the use of wide-shot as the introductory shot in feature films. The use of wide-angle shots was consistent throughout all the screen texts observed. These wide shots, quick pans and rapid camera movement gives digital Punjabi performances what Liz Czach, in her discussion of home movies, terms a “point-and-shoot” aesthetic (30). The aesthetic that emerges from these screen texts is the snap-shooter style that Zimmermann argues exists as an alternative mode of aesthetic in her study of amateur filmmaking aesthetic and Hollywood (72).

Gender, Gaze and Sexuality

The aforementioned snap-shooter aesthetic along with the wide angle shot construct a frame that is both a product of power relations and reproduces these dynamics of power and control into the frame (Aitken and Dixon 329). Farida Batool Syeda argues that such frames and shots need to be studied with close attention to visibility, power, half-bodies, and semi-visibility (11). Wide shots are frequently framed in such a manner that they cut off some performers from the frame, either completely eliminating them or rendering them only partially visible. In all of the screen texts studied, the performers who were cut off from the frame in this way were predominantly women.

The camera prioritizes the male performers over their female counterparts. I argue that this happens due to the role each plays in the drama. The logic of the performance is primarily comedy; the screen texts rarely cut out parts of the performances but where it does happen, it is to remove parts where the improvised comedy of the performer did not receive a response from the audience, cutting to the next comic interaction. Since these plays also are seen as primarily comedic performances with improvisational comedy from the performers, characters who are playing the Bhand Mode are usually prioritized. Syeda has carried out extensive field work in the distribution and production industry of these performances and explains that the producers of these performances (who also get the performances filmed) see the female performers merely as dancers who act as crowd-pullers, with little improvisational skill and hence not useful as comics (Syeda 22).

The camera's gaze also reproduces power relations in the way that women are filmed in these screen texts. One instance of this is the presentation of the Mahi Munda trope. The Mahi Munda is a female character who performs traditionally masculine traits, such as carrying the gun, asymbolic phallic object, to display power and authority over other performers, especially men. Power and masculinity are constructed in Punjabi stage dramas through the ability to control and inflict violence (Syeda, interview). The trope gives agency to female performers to take control of the stage and subvert the patriarchal norms and structures by emasculating the male performers by juggats and threats of violence. In the phallogocentric diegetic world of the performance, it is only by acquiring the phallic object (gun) that female characters get to negotiate their agency and presence on the stage (Mulvey 7). The Mahi Munda predominantly appears as a female daku, performing power and masculinity but still very clearly a woman, with a host of men under the female performer's command. Using these male bodies as props subverts the usual treatment of men and women on stage as it shows women having control over men and male bodies. The Mahi Munda performer also performs sexuality differently than other female performers, projecting an active sexual persona rather than being a passive object of male desire. These female performers elicit male desire and then reject it, by actively displaying their sexuality but also remaining out of reach for the men in the audience and the male performers on the stage, therefore, subverting the male gaze (Pamment, *Comic Performance* 146).

However, viewing the Mahi Munda this way is limited to the live-performance audience, as the gaze of the camera works to superimpose the male gaze on the Mahi Munda performer. Even in its portrayal of the Mahi Munda, the camera's treatment of the female body does not change as the camera acts as an agent of the male gaze (Syeda, interview). In a close study of the selected screen texts, a general pattern appears in how female bodies are treated in Punjabi stage dramas, digital or otherwise, which align with Mulvey's framework in several ways. First, even though most of the plot is moved by the absent figure of the female, whenever the female body appears on the stage there is a break from the narrative and the plot progression slows down. The most explicit example of this treatment of the female body is the Mujra performances; the highly sexualized and erotic dance performances by women in Punjabi stage dramas which pause the progression of the story. Secondly, in the selected digital Punjabi stage dramas, zoomed-in and close-up shots are used only in the portrayal of female bodies. The female body is cut up with zoomed shots and close ups which serves as a means to satisfy the scopophilia of the voyeuristic male spectator (Mulvey 9). This treatment of the female body does not change even when the female performer is playing the Mahi Munda; with the use of zooms or close shots, the camera superimposes the male gaze on the female body. This means that the digital audience experiences the scopophilia even in instances when the live-performance audience experiences a subversion of the male gaze.

This contrast between dismantling the gaze on stage and imposing it on screen leads to a form of the male gaze that elicits new desires and male fantasies. The gaze is an instrument of ownership for male audiences. In the viewership of the digital drama, it is not just the submissive feminine woman who is objectified but also the domineering woman who performs masculinity. I argue here that the audience's experience of viewing is not one that Mulvey outlines as narcissistic ego which sees the male image as an externalization of ego. Instead, the digital male audiences see themselves as different from the emasculated male performer, and uniquely the only one who has access to the scopophilic pleasure of viewing the female bodies cut-up and up-close. The desire here is one of owning and dismantling the power of a sexually empowered and dominant woman.

To illustrate, in the screen text *Billo, Billi aur Baali*, Nargis (the female performer) plays the Mahi Munda towards the end of the performance and enters the stage according to genre conventions wearing a loose plain men's *kurta* ('long shirt'), as opposed to previous costumes that are brightly colored, decorated with sequins and particularly highlight the breasts to draw attention to the female body. As she points a gun at the male performers and enters with power and agency on stage, the camera gives a close shot of her upper body, digressing from the use of wide angle shot typically used to capture interactions on stage, and even the male performers are at times left out of the frame to solely focus on Nargis's body. The invisibility of men in this scenario is different from leaving female bodies out of the frame as this happens at moments of dismantling male agency and accommodating the female in the phallogocentric world of the performance. By excluding the male performer at this moment, the camera bars the digital audience from experiencing subjugation to female agency and reinforces the male gaze at a moment when the live-performance audience is experiencing the dismantling of the gaze. This also illustrates how the gendered treatment of bodies is embedded within particular generic techniques and in the genre of the digital stage drama, the viewing experience of the audience is shaped primarily through filming and camera techniques.

The gendered treatments of bodies are not only manifest in how bodies are viewed, but also in what is not seen in the screen texts: the *mujra* dances. This is due to what Pamment terms the "obscenity discourse" in Pakistan; the discourse around what is moral and fit for public consumption translates into the gender politics and legal policies of the country ("Split Discourse" 114). This discourse has led to popular female stage performers being arrested or attacked for alleged vulgarity, theaters being banned or raided, and a ban on female dance performances in Punjabi stage dramas which was also instated during the rule of Pervez Musharraf (Pamment, "Split Discourse" 120). The *mujra* dances, one of the highlights of the live performances, are edited out of the digital recordings that are made available for mass public consumption (on TV and YouTube). I extend the understanding of this phenomenon by drawing on Nakassis and Weidman's work on respectability, representation, and performance in Tamil cinema. These *mujra* dances are not representations in the diegetic world but are performances that emphasize particular attributes of popular performers beyond screen texts (Nakassis and Weidman 123). Pamment traces the differences in dance and performance styles for some of the popular *mujra* dancers in the industry. This means that the association of immorality in these performances is also non-diegetic and extends to audience's view of performers in the real world. Syeda traces the particular depiction of female bodies and the male desires elicited by *mujra* videos. In her study she highlights that the content sometimes includes partial nudity and borders on pornography (Syeda 16). This makes it difficult for female performers to allow the circulation of these parts of the Punjabi stage dramas for wide-access distribution. Reading the exclusion of *mujra* performances from screen texts only as part of state-censorship is simplistic and taking into account the obscenity discourse in tandem with cultural ideas of respectability present a far more nuanced picture of why these particular performances are not available on wide-access digital platforms.

A comparative analysis of the filming techniques employed by Punjabi stage dramas across several screen texts reveals a consistency in the way visualization is employed to guide audience experience of the digital performance, while also grounding the themes of the performance in its cinematography. This affords an opportunity to look at these texts as a genre which allows for a deeper inter-textual study of how certain performances may follow or subvert generic

conventions and expectation. The study further finds that the camera aids the performance in subverting class dynamics by making the characters on the margins the audiences' reference point to the performance. Furthermore, the camera functions to distance the audience reception of the live performance by granting relational access through some characters, giving the genre a snap shooter aesthetic. The paper also highlights how notions of gender and sexuality are integral to the body politics of these performances; the cinematography, as a process with authorial intent, reproduces the patriarchal power structures of society (even when the live performance aims to subvert gendered power dynamics) while deconstructing the power dynamics around class. The analysis on gender further highlights how the treatment of male bodies differs as compared to the female bodies, where the subversion of male power is erased by the camera, which chooses to focus on the powerful, agency-exercising female body as just another object of male fantasies. Lastly, the paper also widens the current understanding of the censorship of mujras beyond the obscenity discourse to look at the phenomena through the lens of respectability. This allows us to understand how the limited access to mujras in digital portrayals allows the performers to exert agency and retain liberty to keep performing within the restraints of a patriarchal society. This affords a more nuanced understanding of female agency and sexuality outside the diegetic world of the performance.

These findings and conclusions open an avenue for more questions and further research on the subject matter. Why does the camera aim to prioritize the characters on the margins as opposed to allowing audiences to experience the performance from the vantage point of characters at the center? If the genre creates gendered fantasies for its male audiences, then why not create fantasies of power, social status, and class? Why is it that the digital dramas reinforce certain power structures (gender) while subverting others (class)? Due to the scope of this research and a lack of access to filming crew and audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, this particular research cannot answer these questions, but it builds the foundation on which further studies and work can investigate and probe into these questions.

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