Reel Pakistan:
A Screen Studies Forum

Volume 4

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Introduction: Volume 4

Zebunnisa Hamid and Gwendolyn S. Kirk

In the introduction to Volume 3, we looked back at the challenges brought on by the global pandemic. As life came to an abrupt halt, and we moved indoors and shifted online, we became more reflective and appreciative of the world outside. While many of us felt lonely while enduring lockdowns and quarantines, there was some comfort in knowing we were in this together. Across the world, schools, universities, and offices stood empty as life online became the new normal. Internet traffic became more of an issue than street traffic. Cinemas shut down and streaming platforms became our constant companions. With film industries around the world having to close production, we looked towards the classics and explored films and television shows we had missed out on. Yet while we entered the pandemic together, returning from it has been less synchronised. Students returned to in person classes at different times, Covid protocols on set varied from country to country, and even in the cinemas, masking became more of an individual choice. Now more than halfway through 2022, on the surface at least, it seems that most of us have returned to our old lives.

As television, webseries and digital media continue to grow, we are still waiting to see what the full impact of the pandemic will be on cinema. This year saw several Pakistani releases, especially during the Eid holidays, and more films are in production—all of which are good signs for the local industry. However, it once again raised concerns about release schedules and competition as Hollywood films, and in particular superhero franchise films, also returned to Pakistani cinemas. At the same time, Pakistani stories and voices have found a global stage this year with the success of *Joyland* (dir. Saim Sadiq, 2022) at the Cannes Film Festival—with a planned release in Pakistan later in the year—and the release of *Ms. Marvel* on Disney+ (Marvel Studios, 2022). *Joyland* is the first Pakistani film to premiere at Cannes and win jury awards, including the Queer Palm and the Un Certain Regard Jury Prize. Meanwhile, *Ms. Marvel*, featuring the first Pakistani American superhero in the Marvel Universe, got a special three-part cinematic release in Pakistan with two episodes screened at a time in local cinemas. Yet, while people have returned to the cinema (we are happy to report that unlike at the time of the publication of Volume 3 we too have returned to the cinema!), streaming platforms pose an even greater threat to the traditional cinemagoing experience, which will bring further challenges for the local industry.

As we continue to navigate these challenges as individuals, communities, and industries, we turn towards the papers presented in this Volume, which, much like Volume 3, were written at the height of the pandemic. These papers were presented during the virtual edition of the Screen Studies Symposium in December 2020—"Pakistan Screen Studies: Widening the Frame"—which saw nearly 300 participants register from around the world and included keynote talks by Dr. Lindiwe Dovey from SOAS and Dr. Esha Niyogi De from UCLA, and featured a masterclass

with filmmaker Bilal Sami. Looking back at these papers, it fills us with pride to think about what our students accomplished when serious academic work, leave alone presenting at a conference and producing a journal volume, seemed impossible.

In this volume of *Reel Pakistan*, our writers explore the larger field of Pakistani screen cultures, often looking beyond cinema, while television remains a key interest. Rabail Faizan's paper may be of particular interest, following the success of *Joyland* as it examines the representation of transgender dancers on Pakistani screens, which includes Saim Sadiq's short film *Darling* (2020), a television drama and a music video. Delving deeper into television, Izza Malik's examination of class not only looks at its representation in popular dramas, but is also interested in the performance of class, and the corresponding role of capital in its many forms. Mahnoor Ghani Sadar's interest in television dramas raises questions on gender, morality, and sexuality. Here social media is also brought into the discussion through the interaction of content creators and audiences.

New and digital media, and audience and fan interaction through these avenues, continues to be of concern in this Volume as evident from Rimsha Saleem's exploration of the circulation of Punjabi stage dramas on digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, as online audiences exceed those in attendance at live performances. Continuing with theme of Punjabi stage dramas and digital interventions, M Balach Khan's focus on the cinematography in the recordings of stage dramas, and the implications this has for viewer experience, brings a technical and stylistic perspective to the filming and dissemination of Punjabi stage dramas, while also engaging with questions of the male gaze and the sexualization of performers.

While staying with a topic that is very pertinent to the digital distribution of content, Muhammad Faizan ul Haq's exploration of piracy looks at the distribution of pirated content, and more specifically videogames, through DVD and CD stores, which continue to operate in Pakistan. Moving from the shadows of piracy to the bright lights of Netflix, Amna Ejaz's paper highlights the role streaming platforms played during the pandemic by examining the choices viewers are making in terms of content, and the role of binge-watching and algorithms, while continuing to engage with the issue of piracy. Fittingly, the final paper of the volume is Safa Imran's discussion on Pakistan's Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). Through selected screen texts including a web documentary, television drama, and an advertisement, this paper questions the role of censorship in the construction of a national identity that is supported by the State through its control of media content.

Digital and alternative forms of viewership, along with the implications, opportunities, and complications they offer, dominate this volume. They point towards the evolving entertainment landscape and how screen cultures are developing and changing at an ever-increasing rate. These developments have only been accelerated by the pandemic and point to exciting new avenues of research in forthcoming volumes.

Yet as we look towards upcoming volumes of *Reel Pakistan* (and the challenges and exciting new opportunities presented by digital media production for this publication as well) and future screen studies symposia, it is important to acknowledge that the return to so called 'normal life'

has not been easy for our students or this platform. While we have all welcomed the return to in person classes, seeing our friends and colleagues, and being on campus, the shift back has brought with it new anxieties and difficulties. Some of the writers in this and Volume 3 have graduated. Others are entering their last year or two of university. As they venture into uncharted waters, we hope that this Volume reminds them of what they achieved during an extremely difficult time and that it gives them confidence to move forward with the knowledge of what they can accomplish. We hope that you, our readers, will join us in congratulating them and wishing them the best of luck. And, as a final note, we would also like to take this opportunity to thank our editorial assistants, research assistants, and coordinators who have put countless hours behind the scenes in preparing this and past volumes of *Reel Pakistan*.

Zebunnisa Hamid and Gwendolyn S. Kirk

LUMS, August 2022

"Nobody Looks at Our Hearts": Transgender Dancers on Pakistani Screens

Rabail Faizan

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of trans women dancers on Pakistani screens. By undertaking a close analysis of the drama *Moorat* (dir. Kamran Qureshi, 2004), the short film *Darling* (dir. Saim Sadiq, 2020), the music video *Madam* (dir. Sana Jafri, 2017), and its extended version which includes interviews of trans women, *Madam – extended version (Speaking to the Khwaja Sira Community)* (dir. Patari, 2017), this paper will discuss the multi-dimensional role of dance in the lives of trans women dancers as depicted on-screen. It explores dance as an essential element of the transfeminine identity and seeks to explain the embeddedness of dance into the lives of trans women by engaging in historical analysis. It then elaborates on the use of dance as an instrument of exclusion; how it contributes to the marginalization of trans women and prohibits their entrance and movement within the private sphere of the home and the public space of the *mohalla* ('neighborhood'). The essay also engages with literature on deviance, social inclusion, and the male gaze to understand how dance acts as a tool for the inclusion of trans women dancers in the "trans-home" where *guru-chela* ('teacher-disciple') relationships are constructed, and in the community of stage performers.

Keywords: Transgender Dancers, Transgender Cinema, Khwaja Sira, Gender in Cinema, Gender-based Violence, Discrimination against Transgender, trans women.

Introduction

The transgender community in Pakistan is a victim of social marginalization, discrimination, and ostracization. This is primarily because they do not conform to the gender binary, which disrupts the norms of morality in Pakistan wherein deviation from the gender binary is also considered to be religiously unacceptable (Khan 106). It was not until a Supreme Court ruling in 2009 that transgender persons were officially recognized as equal citizens of Pakistan, deeming them eligible for protection and financial assistance from the State (Zaman). However, despite this ruling, the transgender community continues to be pushed to the margins of society due to the social stigma attached to their gender identity. Their place in society is further worsened because of the unavailability of educational and occupational opportunities which are necessary for social and financial upward mobility.

This situation greatly restricts career opportunities for transgender individuals, compelling them into informal occupations, particularly in the sex work industry. Cut-off from other avenues of economic and social mobility, trans women in particular are forced into dancing, singing, or prostitution as a means of earning. However, on-screen depictions of trans women show how dance is particularly important for the identity formation of a transgender individual. By examining dance as a distinctive element of transfeminine identity, this paper considers dance as a paradoxical instrument of exclusion and inclusion within social spaces, relationships, and class boundaries.[1]

This paper focuses on different forms of Pakistani screen texts and analyzes the drama, *Moorat* (dir. Kamran Qureshi, 2004), the short film *Darling* (dir. Saim Sadiq, 2020), and the music video *Madam* (dir. Sana Jafri, 2017) and its extended version *Madam – extended version* (*Speaking to the Khwaja Sira Community*) (dir. Patari, 2017) which includes interviews of trans women. To deconstruct the portrayal of trans women dancers on screens, this paper is divided into sections where each discusses a different meaning attached to dance. It incorporates a close analysis of the aforementioned screen texts to dissect similar ideologies and meanings associated with dance.

Firstly, the paper contextualizes the importance of dance as a possible instrument of identity formation for the trans woman by discussing its cultural history in South Asia. Here, a historical analysis is used to understand the socio-political standing of the female transgender dancers on screen. The paper then analyzes the plot, themes, characters, and symbolism associated with dance in the screen texts. Thirdly, it incorporates an analysis of mise-en-scène to deconstruct audio-visual elements such as the sound, costumes, props, and the placement of characters in particular settings to develop the argument concerning dance as an element of inclusion for trans women into what can be referred to as the trans-home,[2] as opposed to the nuclear household, where relationships among trans women residing in a home mirrored the conventional mother-daughter or sibling relationships.

The Art of Dance and the Trans Woman Identity

The trans woman on screen is often depicted in a specific manner; adorned in bright, shimmery clothing, with her makeup exaggerated, using overtly expressive hand gestures. These trans women are predominantly shown to be involved in sex work, suggested through their dance performances, or *mujra*, at private events. However, dance is a common means of earning a living because of the widespread discrimination against the trans community which limits the possibility of other sources of income. In this way, dance largely defines the social position of a

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[1] The identity of the Pakistani transgender is evidently a sight of confusion within Pakistani media. The general understanding of the transgender or *khwaja sira* is of them belonging to the 'Third Gender'. However, there do exist multiple identities within this broad spectrum which includes transgender and intersex characters. Due to censorship and lack of conversation around sexual identities of transgender women on screen, this research focuses primarily on working-class transgender women who are grouped together mainly because of their occupation as dancers and, the general way of 'carrying' themselves as transgender women particularly through the use of language, movement and the choice of dress.

[2] The trans-home is being used here to illustrate the construction of 'home' for the trans women who have already been excluded from their original or birth homes.

Pakistani trans woman. It also thus becomes a part of the trans women's identity by being an avenue for self-exploration and a signifier of femininity within the trans woman (Sunardi 464).

In order to understand the dominance of dance as an occupation for the transgender community, it is essential to map it out historically; "when eunuchs were the mid-rung of power in the Mughal empire," they were given a high status with immense prestige and privilege in the Mughal courts (Roychowdhury). In the courts, they were trusted servants who "wielded enormous power, respect, and some managed to amass large amounts of wealth" (Gul). However, with the advent of the Criminal Tribes Act by the British rulers in 1871, the seeds of stigmatization and discrimination against the transgender community were sown. Not only did wearing female clothing become a punishable offense for these individuals but so did dancing or acting in a feminine manner. Eventually, the Criminal Tribes Act led to the systematic socio-political degradation and exclusion of the transgender community, which pushed them towards alternate avenues of maintaining their livelihood, essentially through involvement in forms of sex work and dance.

There is an overarching similarity in the depictions of trans women dancers on-screen in the way that they refer to dance as a mode of self-exploration and portray it as a move towards reclaiming their sexuality. The drama series, *Moorat* presents the story of Babra, a young trans woman. Babra, formerly referred to as Babar, is initially shown to be a young boy whose interest in conventionally "girly" activities such as dance, makeup, and playing with dolls ("Breaking the Mould") is demonstrated in multiple instances. Babar develops a deep bond with a neighbor, a trans woman named Reshma, who eventually becomes Babra's inspiration and her primary caretaker. Babra's inclination toward the transgender way of life is depicted through various elements, such as her use of effeminate body language, which is then also represented in her dance movements. This body language is expressed through Babra's overuse of elaborate hand gestures, repetition of the words *"Haw Haye!"* ('Oh, my Goodness!') coupled with a swift placement of her hand over her mouth, and her way of either walking with her hands protruding on her waist or while swaying her whole body side to side.

The drama depicts how Babra's interest in *"naach gaana"* ('singing, dancing') is complemented by her generally effeminate language as dance is not only an occupation of choice for her but also an essential element of her personality. Dance is significant enough for Babra to continue working as a dancer even to the utter dismay of her family. Babra is shown to inculcate dancing and singing into everyday activities and chores as well; even when she projects herself as a man by putting on masculine clothes, she continues to express elements of her transfeminine identity through dance, movement, and language. In one instance, Babra is shown to sweep the floor while dancing and singing simultaneously. When her mother sees this, she hurriedly interrupts her saying, *"Yeh larkon ka kaam nahi!"* ('This is not a boy's job!'), to which Babra replies, *"Mein kar rahi hoon na!"* ('I am doing it!' – using the feminine verb form). This is essential in determining how dance becomes an outlet for the expression of Babra's gender identity as a trans woman. Even when she is forced to carry on with the careful portrayal of acting like a heterosexual male, Babra is shown to begin dancing every time she enters certain spaces. Reshma's home, being one of these spaces, doubles as a "safe-haven" for the unfiltered expression of Babra's identity as a trans woman dancer as it is there that she finds acceptance among other members of the transgender community.

Similarly, the music video *Madam* depicts the story of two trans women dancers whose journey through a single day is illustrated over the course of the video. The trans women are shown to indulge in a makeover session as they change into flashy tight-fit clothing with elaborate and bright makeup, ready for their private dance performance at a wedding. They are also shown to be discriminated against through the humiliation and hindering of free movement that they face in particular spaces such as the *mohalla* ('neighborhood'). In one key scene, the trans women return to their home after a day of being actively disrespected and excluded from certain spaces. One of them brings out a picture of her family and sighs while she stares at it. It is not until the other trans woman notices this that she comes to her friend's side. After initially hugging her friend, the trans woman then takes the picture away and replaces it with a *ghungroo* ('musical anklet' worn by dancers when performing). This scene depicts the common story of trans women dancers who are forced to leave their families and friends behind in order to remain true to their trans identity, due to which they develop strong associations with dance. The replacement of the family picture with the anklet also reminds the audience of the kind of sacrifices trans women have to make to mark their place in Pakistani society. The extended version of the music video *Madam (Speaking to the transgender community)* shows the interviews of the trans women who starred in the original music video along with other trans women activists. In an interview, a trans rights activist reminisces on her relationship with dance in the following words, "Dance was not my hobby, it was my companion. When I was struggling to identify my gender, dance was the one thing that I resonated with." Hence, the importance of dance transcends its occupational or recreational status as it actively shapes the trans woman's identity.

The short film *Darling* also depicts similar instances where the transgender protagonist Alina goes for a dance audition for the female lead in a play at a Punjabi stage drama theater. The director of the dance sequence glances at Alina and explains how there might have been a misunderstanding while looking at her pictures, hinting at how he was unaware of Alina's identity as a trans woman. However, due to Alina's association to dance, she urges the director to give her a chance even though he claims that the theater is only reserved for "real girls". Even after negotiation and an elaborate audition, Alina's identity as a trans woman is marginalized as she is only granted the option to dance as a backup male dancer. However, Alina still accepts this due to her dedication to being a dancer and the need to earn a living.

Dance as an Element of Exclusion

Where dance is depicted as an element that holds symbolic value for the trans woman's identity, it also serves as an active agent for further marginalizing and stigmatizing transgender individuals at large. Paid dances at private parties and even the entire concept of private mujra(s) is regarded to stand against what is considered morally right in the Pakistani culture. Thereby, such activities are considered to be part of the informal and unregulated sex-work industry (Emmanuel et al. 29). Hence, trans women have been subjected to intense forms of discrimination and exclusion primarily because of their participation in the sex work industry. Even in their representations on screen, dance can be seen as a major reason for excluding trans women from the private and public sphere. This is largely because of the historical impact of colonial attempts to de-platform the transgender members of the Mughal Courts and the overall association of transgender with homosexuality, which constitutes them as transgressors of the norm (Pandey).

The transgender body evokes anxiety and reactionary responses because of its non-conformity to the norms that persist in society. In a focus group study conducted among primary school children by Shawn McGuffey, the concept of transgression in the face of dominant masculinity was mapped out. It revealed that members of the dominant hegemonic masculine group tend to minimize transgressions through "homosocial patrolling and stigmatizing anomalies" (McGuffey and Rich 618). Individuals who fail to be regarded as masculine in a heternormative convention, are therefore actively excluded and marginalized from the main group. This study can be used to understand why the transgender body is so heavily policed. It does not conform to the gender binary thereby, taking up "enactments of androgynous gender or by crossing gender boundaries," which leads to transgender people being ostracized and excluded from society due to this act of "deviance" (Gagné and Tewksbury 83). According to the functionalist perspective proposed by Durkheim, society is in need of social order and solidarity, which is why stress is laid upon the ideas of social cohesion and inclusion (Pope 362). Therefore, conformity to the dominant culture, which in this case will be regarded as either heteronormative masculinity or femininity, will differentiate a member of the society and a conformist from a deviant (Parent and Lewis 105). The transgender individual, due to their status as a deviant, will face discrimination in society.

In *Moorat*, Babra initially projects a façade of masculinity with the way she carries herself in front of her family. However, due to her innate association with her feminine side, Babra is shown to slip up on multiple occasions, revealing her identity as a trans woman. The primary reason that Babra attempts to establish a male identity is her fear of being excluded from the private sphere of her home and the public sphere of the mohalla. There are multiple instances when Babra's family is shown to reassure each other about "Babar's" sexuality. In a particular scene, her mother claims, *"Babar theek ho jayega, wo hijra thori hai kya!"* ('Babar will be fine; it is not like he is a transgender person!'), which indicates the tension around the idea of being a transgender person. Babra is eventually forced into heterosocial conformity by marrying her cousin Kausar. The cultural concept of the family's *izzat* ('honor') is used to persuade Babra into agreeing to the marriage as being a dancer and a transgender person is both considered to be culturally derogatory and unacceptable (Morcom 3). Babra is threatened to conform to her family's wishes based on the chance that failure to do so could get her permanently excluded from her home as her mother declares, *"Chalay jao, hum sochain gay tum mar gaye"* ('Leave, we will think you are dead'). However, when Babra shares the news of her upcoming marriage with her other trans women friends, she is informed that marriage will inhibit her ability to move forward with her career as a dancer. Knowing this, Babra thinks about stepping away from the idea of marriage entirely, but she ends up making the decision to communicate her profession to her wife, Kausar. Babra's identity as a trans woman is finally brought into the open following her confession to Kausar, and after being recognized as the trans woman dancer from a recent wedding party attended by a relative. This brazen transgression of the gender binary is met with extreme anxiety and anger along with the end of her marriage to Kausar. She is pushed out of her family home as her brother states, *"Aag laga do is hijray ko!"* ('Burn this transgender person'), and tells her, *"Tu hijron mein reh!"* ('You go live among transgenders'). As a result, Babra's deviance portrayed through her choice to be a trans woman dancer leads to her being excluded not only from her home but also from her attempt at maintaining a relationship with her wife Kausar.

Moreover, the ostracization of transgender individuals is also revealed through the depiction of their exclusion from the public sphere of the mohalla. Reshma, the elderly trans woman in

Moorat, is shown to be a *saheli* ('female friend') to those in her neighborhood; however, she is constantly reminded by the men in the neighborhood that she does not belong in the *izzatdaar* ('honorable') neighborhood because of her former occupation as a dancer. In another scene, Chamki, another trans woman, rushes to the police station in aid of her sister. Upon arrival, she is not taken seriously and is told to stop acting like a *hijra* ('transgender') and to seek some other form of "respectable employment" in order to be welcomed in such spaces. This makes Chamki break down into tears as she says, *"Allah miyan ko kaho, humein aisa kyun banaya, ismein humara kya kasoor hai?"* ('Ask Allah, why he made us this way? What is our fault?'). This depicts how transgender women dancers find themselves in a bind as on one hand they identify with dance an essential element of their identity but on the other hand, this occupation also leads to exclusion and ridicule.

Madam, as mentioned before, depicts how a picture of a trans woman's family is replaced with the ghungroo signifying how the trans woman had been excluded from her family due to her decision to become a transgender dancer. Moreover, there is also another instance where trans women are prevented from moving freely within the public sphere of the neighborhood until they pay the police officers a particular sum of money. In *Darling,* Alina is also shown to go through a similar experience as she claims, while taking off her makeup and adorning a masculine attire, that she has to look this way to go home and pray. Moreover, Alina is also not given a chance to dance as the female lead because of her identity as a trans woman and because the director claims that men only come to see "real girls" at the theater, thus constructing the theater to be a space reserved for only heteronormative women. Thereby, reinforcing how the transgender individual's deviance from the norm is met by punishment or exclusion in various forms.

Dance as an Instrument of Inclusion

Although dance does endorse exclusionary practices, it can also be seen as an enabling agent for the inclusion of transgender women into spaces where they are valued and praised based on their credibility as performers. This inclusion is enabled either through the construction of the trans-home through the *guru-chela* relationship between older and younger trans women or through the inclusion or appreciation of trans women dancers in spaces where they are valued as subjects of the male gaze.

The dominant discourse in Pakistan puts the transgender community on the margins of society where they are actively ignored and distanced. Yet, due to the human need for having social contact and to partake in collective behavior, the transgender community too seeks to establish an internal world of its own. The trans-home is constructed by older trans women to help younger trans women find shelter, acceptance, and financial support after being forced out of their homes. Hence, the matriarchal family dynamic of the guru-chela bond is formed as younger trans women are trained in the art of dance by their *gurus* ('older trans women as teachers'). Hence, this family dynamic enforces bonds of solidarity and amity forming the foundation of the trans community.

In *Moorat,* all the trans women are shown to live under one roof of the trans home where Reshma, Bijlee, Shola and Chamki take part in activities like dancing, singing, fixing each other's hair and putting on make-up. After Babra is removed from her family home, she is accepted and inducted into the trans-home without hesitation as Shola claims, *"Reshma, ab*

Babra kaheen nahi jayegi…ab Babra meray paas rahay gee" ('Reshma, Babra will not go anywhere…Babra will stay with me'). Upon her entrance into the trans-home, Babra's commitment to her identity and occupation as a dancer also increases. Moreover, due to Reshma's devotion to Babra, she soon becomes *Amma* ('Mother') for Babra who also seeks advice and assistance from her as her guru.

To further map out the trans woman's inclusion into spaces as performance artists, a deeper analysis of the idea of "male gaze" is warranted. Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze explains the objectification of women on screen as they become "bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning" (Sampson). Hence, they are not given control of any particular scene but are merely portrayed as objects for the voyeuristic heterosexual male gaze. This theory can be used to analyze the depiction of the trans woman's body as a source of similar feelings of pleasure for the male gaze. In all depictions of trans women as dancers that this paper is analyzing, they are seen as the object of male attention and praise, as they take up center stage to engage in sexual dances for men. This focus on the male gaze can be illustrated through instances of close-up shots of the body of the dancing trans woman, along with shots of men keenly surrounding and observing the trans woman's body.

This can be seen in *Moorat* which depicts several instances where Babra and the other trans women receive attention and applause for their dances which satisfy the predominantly male audience. The trans women are invited to several events such as weddings and birthdays to "set the mood" as performers at festive occasions. In a particular instance, a host for a party says, *"Acha bhaye jaldi say rung jamao, mehmaan kab say baithay huay hain"* ('Okay now hurry and set the mood, the guests have been sitting around waiting for so long') thereby indicating how the inclusion of trans women dancers would add 'color' to the occasion. Moreover, several dancing shots depict the trans woman making eye contact with men in the audience or pulling them closer to the stage either by throwing a *dupatta* ('scarf') around them or by holding their hands. Moreover, there are also several shots of the trans women dancers being stared down by the audience, shown through close-up shots of the audience. On another instance, Reshma is evidently praised for the *lachak* ('flexibility') of her body that adds to the visual pleasure of her dance moves.

Furthermore, in *Madam*, the sisterhood between the two trans women is depicted as they protect, support and counsel each other throughout the day. They are shown to live together in a trans-home where they collectively indulge in activities such as shopping, putting on makeup, or even dancing together at events they are hired for. Several instances of the video portray zoomed-in shots of the trans woman's hips and breasts while moving swiftly between a group of men. These shots are followed by images of men with their mouths and eyes wide open as symbolizers of lust for the trans woman's body. In certain instances, the video even uses low-angle shots where the male audience is completely surrounding the trans women as they dance on the floor. Hence, the trans woman's body is evidently constructed as a sight of pleasure for the male gaze, which is emphasized further when the dances are showered with money during their performance.

Similar themes surrounding the male gaze are represented in *Darling* as Alina showcases her dance moves to the director of the stage show. Here, the dim-lit theater is transformed into a bright stage with backup dancers surrounding Alina as she moves her hips and breasts seductively with the spotlight enlightening her entire frame as her body moves with the beat. In certain shots, Alina is picked up by backup dancers as she leans forward towards the camera,

singing the lyrics *"Mere Dil da Palang Waja Marda"* ('The bed of my heart makes noises') while she is placed on the last step of the stairs with her legs wide open. Hence, Alina's inclusion as a dancer is only enabled through her ability to become an object of applaud for the male gaze which is illustrated as the primary reason for stage shows; according to the director, *"munday sirf kuriyan vekhan anday nay"* ('men only come to see girls'). Throughout the film, there are talks about a "white baby goat" as according to the former lead dancer of the stage show, the new lead dancer stole the baby goat. Through this the former lead dancer hints at how the new lead dancer's place as the lead is related to her possession of the white baby goat. Although Alina is not included as a female dancer in the final dance sequence of the film, she is shown holding the white baby goat in the last shot. Metaphorically, the white baby goat symbolizes good luck, happiness, and a better future. Hence, the placement of the goat with Alina in the final shot can be understood as the inclination of a bright future for Alina as a dancer for stage shows.

Conclusion

The inextricable association of dance to the transgender body is evident through representations of Pakistani trans women dancers on screen. While there are many nuances in these depictions of trans women dancers, a general pattern of discrimination, physical abuse, and ridicule is shown to surround their stories. This remains the case because of how transgender individuals are regarded as deviants based on their non-conformity to the gender binary. This act of defiance, therefore, becomes the reason behind the ostracization of transgender individuals by society. The screen texts under study depict the multi-faceted implication of dance; firstly, as an essential tool needed for the identity formation of the Pakistani trans woman. The paper has discussed multiple instances of trans women incorporating dance into their everyday lives and referring to it as an activity that helped them come to terms with their identity. However, dance then also becomes an element of exclusion for trans women as they are forced out of their homes, public spaces and opportunities if they choose their dancing careers. However, due to these shared experiences and losses, the screen texts show the transgender women find familial bonding among each other through the guru-chela relationship, which also centers on learning and teaching activities such as dance. Thereby, the same activity which excludes them from traditional societal setups includes them into communities of trans women. However, the importance of dance is further complicated as trans women's dances are applauded in certain spaces such as private parties because they pander to the male gaze. Dance, which is essentially a part of the sex work industry of Pakistan, nevertheless continues to maintain a strong relationship with the transgender community due to the lack of occupational opportunities for transgender individuals in Pakistan.

Film Synopses

Moorat

Moorat is a Pakistani drama that depicts the life trajectory of a trans woman dancer. Babar is a young boy who enjoys playing with dolls, dancing and keeps away from his father and brother. He eventually forms a friendship with his neighbor Reshma, an elderly trans woman who was also a former dancer. As Babar grows up, he begins to work as a dancer with Reshma's friends who are also a group of trans women dancers. Eventually, Babar is shown to transition into

Babra which was initially just his stage-identity. During this time, Babar's family also marries him off to his cousin Kausar in a desperate attempt to stop Babar from engaging with his transgender friends. However, Babar's inclination towards dance remains strong and he makes this clear to Kausar as well. Kausar's mother refuses to let her daughter remain married to a hijra and takes her away, this prompts Babar's family to force him out of their home. However, Kausar returns in an attempt to fix her marriage with Babar. Soon Babar hears about Reshma getting cancer and requiring financial help and leaves his home and dedicates himself to dancing and earning money. As Babar moves into Reshma's trans-home, he completes his transition to Babra and remains at Reshma's side till her death. After Reshma's death, Babra remains with her trans-family and continues her career as a dancer while Kausar moves on and marries her maternal cousin.

Madam

The music video depicts the story of a day in the life of two trans women dancers who are hired to dance at a wedding party. These trans women are shown to start their day by doing their makeovers and heading out. They are harassed on the streets and stared down by men of all ages as they make their way through a neighborhood where they are then stopped by policemen who refuse to let them pass through without taking money from them. Then they make their way to the market where they are angrily stared down by women at a jewelry stall. The video then shows how after a day of being harassed and ridiculed, the trans women return to their home to get ready to dance at a wedding party. There, both of them are shown to be the objects of the male gaze as they dance in the middle of a group of men who try to touch and harass the trans women multiple times. At the end, the trans women gather their notes and fix their outfits as they make their way out of the group of men and leave the party.

Madam – extended version (Speaking to The Khwaja Sira Community)

This is an extended version of the *Madam* music video, and it presents the interviews of four trans women who reveal their stories about coming to terms with their identity. Two of these trans women are the main dancers in *Madam's* music video whereas the other two are trans-rights activists. They share stories about their familial relations, their hobbies, their relationship with dance and the traumatic instances that they have had to go through.

Darling

Darling depicts the story of Alina who is an aspiring stage dancer. Alina wants to uplift her career as a dancer which is why she makes her way to the auditions for a stage show. Upon arrival, the director tells Alina that she is not who he had in mind and that stage shows are reserved for "real girls". Alina urges the director to give her one chance but even after doing an elaborate audition performance for him, she is told that the only role she can take up is that of the background male dancer. While she is evidently disappointed, Alina takes up the job due to her need to earn money and also because it gives her an opportunity to dance on stage. Alina is thus forced to change her attire and hide her hair and to dance as a man on stage.

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Aspirations and Class on Pakistani Screens: An Analysis of Recent Television Dramas

Izza Malik

Abstract

This paper draws focus on how different social classes are represented and performed on television in Pakistani dramas. The screen texts studied and analysed in this essay are *Alif Allah aur Insaan* (dir. Aehsun Talish, 2017), *Mann Mayal* (dir. Haseeb Hassan, 2016), and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012). All three were produced by Momina Duraid and broadcasted on HUM TV. Drawing on these three largely popular dramas that were released across the last decade, this paper analyses how the aspirations of the middle class are depicted on screen. Building on the central tenets of class analysis by Bourdieu and Maqsood, this paper explicates how one's social class depends on the accumulation of economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and linguistic capital combined. The paper also identifies and explains how class mobility is achieved or aspired to using these forms of capital. Drawing on the depictions of social class, the paper seeks to establish and explain the critiques of different social classes, the conflict that persists within and amongst them, and how these conflicts are presented on screen. It argues that in Pakistan, television is a key medium through which Pakistani audiences find their material and positional aspirations realised. The paper explores what characters in Pakistani screen texts aspire to be, and how their aspirations are inextricably tied to the desires of the populace. This paper contributes to the discourse on the representation of social classes in Pakistan's television industry and focuses on depictions of class markers, social mobility, and class conflict.

Keywords: Pakistani drama industry, class mobility, class aspiration, class conflict, social identity

This paper examines the representation of different social classes on-screen in Pakistan, and how television serves as the key medium through which the aspirations and desires of the local audience are envisioned. Drawing on three popular, highly-acclaimed HUM TV dramas that were released across the last decade—*Zindagi Gulzar Hai/Life is a Bed of Roses (*dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012), *Mann Mayal/Change of Heart* (dir. Haseeb Hassan, 2016), and *Alif Allah aur Insaan/Alif for God and Human* (dir. Aehsun Talish, 2017)—this paper explicates how the audience seeks and expects a mirroring of its aspirations in the way different classes are

presented on screen. I construct my argument by focusing on plot analysis and character development in these screen texts.

Class aspiration is pivotal to all three screen texts that are studied in this paper. The enduring appeal of these dramas—as evidenced by their repeat broadcasts, and overwhelming views on video streaming platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion—proves that these dramas act as a vehicle of aspirational fantasy for the audience. Escoffery posits that people take interest in reality TV shows because they are unscripted and are designed in a way that reflects people's social and cultural values; people take interest in watching shows on television because they seem real (259). His observation of reality TV shows can also be used for television dramas. The dramas under study here were so appealing to audiences because their portrayal of social classes does not seem fictional. Audiences could find it relatable and relevant to their own experiences and circumstances.

While social class is a defining feature of economic, political, and social facets of life, the term itself remains largely "ambiguous" and "arbitrary" (Nayab 1). Nayab writes that "the concept of 'upper, middle and lower' class was mainly developed in sociology in reaction to the more rigid and deterministic Marxist concept of class, but the definition remains ambiguous" (1). This essay, therefore, draws largely on Bourdieu's idea of class, who writes that economic, social, cultural, symbolic, educational, and linguistic capital combined are used to perform social class (12). He describes how a person's social class influences the choices they make and argues that lifestyle choices constitute social identity (76). For Bourdieu, class is emergent, and people actively construct and interpret class through the choices that they make. The Pakistani dramas that are the focus of this paper encapsulate these ideas.

Social Class and Performance in Pakistani Dramas

Zindagi Gulzar Hai is a story about Kashaf, a girl from a lower-middle-class family. At different instances in the drama, which represent the different times in her life, Kashaf aspires for a more materially stable life. At the beginning of the drama, she is shown to live in a small house with her sisters and their mother who teaches at a government school in her neighbourhood. She aspires to get into a good university and find a job that pays her enough to support the family financially. She wants to take on the role of a man because she does not have a brother, and her father left her mother for not bearing him a son. In most Pakistani households, sons are preferred over daughters; it is widely—and falsely—believed that only a male child can carry forward the father's legacy and take the onus of his father's responsibilities when he is older (Zakaria). This unfortunate reality is woven into Kashaf's early life.

As the story progresses, Kashaf's aspirations start shifting from her visions for the future, to more material desires. When Kashaf goes to university, for example, she realizes that most people around her wear expensive clothes and shoes, travel in big cars, and come from elite households—all of these factors together contribute to her feelings of inferiority. She wants to travel in a car of her own rather than buses and taxis; she wants to live in a better house; she wants to wear better clothes; she wants to look prettier. Essentially, she wants to live the life of those belonging to higher social classes. Bourdieu explains that women feel less self-conscious about their body, speech, and beauty when they belong to the upper echelons of society (206). In the same way, Kashaf places herself under heightened scrutiny when she compares herself to

others due to her social position. As discussed below, we see similar themes emerge *in Mann Mayal* and *Alif Allah aur Insaan.*

Maqsood describes how different classes are performed in Pakistan. This includes the variance in conversation topics among different classes, the difference in localities where they live, as well as the differences in occupations that occur because of class differences (25–50). These ideas indicate that different classes hold different aspirations. Maqsood, while discussing class representation, explains that like all other forms of display, self-representation is a performative act which allows certain members representing a certain class, to speak on behalf of the entire community. In other words, self-representation allows these class members, and the audience watching them, to conjugate in a particular frame of reference (35). Social class is performed on screen in the same way it is performed in real life. Special attention is paid to the way characters who belong to different classes represent that belonging through their accents, their costumes, their living spaces, and their life goals.

Bourdieu's ideas about appearances are also relevant to such representation of class. He explains how differences in appearance are realized by symbolically accentuating certain character traits, gestures, accents, postures, and behaviours. These distinct markers of appearance are further exaggerated and used to reinforce the notions of class difference and social hegemony (192). The portrayal of wealthy classes espouses the fantasies of lower classes. Dwyer calls this phenomenon the "slum's eye view" (106). A point that merits attention here is that in order to increase their viewership, the television industry also panders to popular imagination. In that way, it does not exclusively portray class realities but also incorporates elements of how people would commonly imagine class differences.

The makers of films and television shows ensure that on screen depictions emanate not just from reality but "versions of reality" (Guthrie). Extensive research is carried out across different socioeconomic strata of society to understand audiences' consumption patterns in terms of what they are watching on television, and then content is produced accordingly (Rehman). In Pakistan, the stories that perform the best in terms of ratings revolve around domestic politics between a girl and her unscrupulous in-laws; extra-marital relationships; or even stories highlighting social problems embedded into the fabric of Pakistani society (Rehman).

The concept of performing classes also relates to indexicality. An indexical statement can loosely be defined as one whose meaning depends on its context. Lately, indexicality—a concept developed in semiotics—has come to be associated with "cinema", "photography", and "contemporary art" (Schofield et al., 175). In television dramas and films, dress, comportment, and language all index a person's social class. The images and stereotypes of the upper class and the working-class culture massively draw on the concept of indexicality. To give an example, in *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, Nazneen—the female protagonist and the daughter of a rich landlord—is shown to be brazen in her love for Basit. She runs away from home to marry the man she loves. This indexes negative morality; Nazneen yields to a desire that is prohibited in the Pakistani culture. In the same way, visual markers are also indexical. Rani's *jhuggi* ('hut'), for example, is shown to be dark and dismal. The space appears congested because of tightly framed shots. This points toward her impoverished circumstances and economic deprivation, and even paints a contrast with upper classes that live in colourful *havelis* ('mansions') in villages; or modern, urban homes in the city.

In these dramas, the upper class is shown to be bilingual, communicating in English and Urdu, especially if they live in the city. Switching between English and Urdu is a common feature of language for upper class, urban Pakistanis. The depiction of this is reminiscent of Dwyer's ideas on language in Indian cinema—the same phenomenon holds for the Pakistani television industry too. Dwyer says that this switch occurs between "words", "phrases", "sentences", or "just changing languages several times during a conversation" (85). The use of certain expressions such as "whatever" and "like" is becoming increasingly commonplace (86). This even explains the use of thank you in place of *shukriya* ('thank you'), or sorry in place of *maazrat* ('sorry'). In Bordieusian theory, "the truth of the interaction is never entirely constrained in the interaction"; words mean more than just their explicit meanings (Myles 891).

Zaroon from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* is a character that exemplifies this idea. He is the male protagonist in the drama, who belongs to an upper-class family, and calls his father "Dad", while Kashaf, who belongs to a lower-middle class family, calls her father "*Abba*" ('father'). These subtle differences are markers of class. Lower classes, in contrast, speak in a Punjabi accent, especially if they live in a village. In these dramas, poverty mostly lies outside of metropolitan cities. Rani, beggar, and Shamu, a transgender character from *Alif Allah aur Insaan* serve as examples in this context. They both live in a village in abject poverty and speak Urdu with a Punjabi accent. When Rani's social status is raised later in the drama, she loses her Punjabi accent completely. However, Shamu's accent remains the same till the end even after he moves to the city and secures a job in a high-end beauty parlour which is a rare exception. Despite English being one of the official languages of Pakistan, only a specific class has access to English-medium education and can understand and speak English fluently. When characters on screen are seen conversing in English, it indexes their socio-economic status. Similarly, when characters converse in broken English or a regional accent—it indexes their class background and economic circumstances.

Class Mobility, Marriage, and Caste

Class mobility is the desired end of class aspiration. Contrary to the reality, class mobility is usually depicted as very easy to achieve in Pakistani television dramas. There are numerous examples of the poor establishing big businesses or achieving mobility through marriage. Television dramas often portray characters who want to transcend their socio-economic status; these characters are seen embarking on paths out of poverty and out earning their parents. In reality, however, climbing the economic ladder to achieve a socio-economic status change is remarkably hard. This is particularly true in Pakistan's case where the socio-economic status of the father mainly decides the socio-economic positions of his children (Javed). People can succeed in their individual socio-economic stratum, but they rarely move into another. Most people will live their entire lives in the same economic class that they were born into, and this pattern is seen lasting across generations (Giddens and Sutton 296).

One such television drama which depicts class mobility on screen is *Alif Allah aur Insaan.* Its plot is based on inter-class interaction with a particular focus on lower classes overcoming class divisions and achieving a higher socio-economic status. In *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, several story threads demonstrate the phenomenon of upward mobility. Rani, a beggar who lives in a small shack aspires to be like Nigar Begum, a *tawaif* ('courtesan'). When Rani sees Nigar Begum for the first time on a roadside—enamored by her beauty, glamour, and high economic status—she

follows her all the way to the brothel where Nigar Begum lives. Eventually, Rani becomes a tawaif and earns large sums of money. Later, she even lands a role in a film with a well-known director. That does not necessarily mean that she achieves a better social status, but her financial circumstances improve significantly. However, being a courtesan is widely perceived as an immoral and irreligious profession in Pakistan, which translates into the way it is projected on the screen. By the time Rani becomes a successful tawaif and starts earning sufficient income, she loses all connection with her family, and society looks at her with disapproval and revulsion. When she buys an apartment in the city, her neighbours cut off all ties with her and disparage her for being a <u>tawaif</u>. She keeps moving from one place to another to try to settle down, but she is met with derision and repulsion every time. Because of the rejection from her family and her neighbours, she finally gives up and takes her own life. This depicts how social mobility comes at a huge cost in Pakistan when the structural means to achieve it, such as education, are not available, and other avenues are used to attain it.

In the same drama, Shamu—a transgender character—aspires to leave behind his profession of singing and dancing and wants to have a more respected career. He finds work at a small parlour in his village, and from there, moves to the city to work at a bigger, well-known parlor. He keeps climbing the economic ladder then. His work also earns him a lot of prestige, fame, and social status. His social life revolves around other famous and rich people—mostly actresses and other female clients from elite households—who come to him to avail his services. In the case of both these characters, Shamu and Rani, we see that from living in small shacks, they move into increasingly lavish apartments and houses, which are bigger, more spacious, and laden with furniture.

There is a similar emphasis on class mobility in the television series *Mann Mayal*. Salahuddin—Manahil's teacher and neighbour, and the man she falls in love with—aspires to achieve class mobility when he shifts from his village to the city to work at his friend's firm. In the city, he becomes remarkably successful and eclipses his parents financially. He gets a place of his own, hires a domestic helper, and becomes one of the city's elites. Contrasting this with Rani's example from *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, it can be clearly inferred that class is made up of both financial and social capital. Even though Rani achieved financial stability in her life, she could never attain her desired social status. Salahuddin succeeded in the way that he later belonged to the upper echelons of society, Rani's aspiration for social mobility was not achieved despite the improvement in her financial circumstances.

Another point worth noting here is that in most cases, only upward mobility is presented in Pakistani dramas. The characters of Kashaf, Rani, Shamu, and Salahuddin illustrate this idea. Downward mobility is less commonly depicted on screen. Another common pattern is that for most characters in these dramas, upward class mobility also means relocating from underdeveloped, rural settings, to modern urban spaces in other cities or sometimes even in the same city—as in the case of Kashaf in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*. Gomes provides insights that help in understanding how migration and identity are interlinked; when people have economic and social aspirations, they tend to move away and settle down in places away from their home city or country (91). Hence, when the characters' socio-economic identity changes, most of the time, their living space does too. This also highlights how audiences' aspirations, such as of moving into better living conditions, are realized in these shows.

In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* as well, class mobility emerges as a prominent idea. Kashaf leaves her lower-middle-class household after she becomes a successful CSS officer and gets married to Zaroon, a classmate of hers from university who belongs to an upper-class family. Her social and economic status is raised after her marriage to Zaroon. The institution of marriage can deepen or blur the lines of socio-economic divisions. Popular imaginations of marriage translate into the storylines and characterizations within TV shows. There is a narrative focus on how "patriarchal hegemony" is internalised such that women belonging to middle-class backgrounds are constantly pressured to marry (Bell et al., 129). In Pakistan however, the same holds for all classes. The idea that girls need to get married at the right age, right time, into a family that is of a higher social status is woven into the narrative of all three dramas.

In *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, for example, Nazneen, the female protagonist and the daughter of a rich landlord, is married to Shahzeb who is a landlord and a prominent, revered, and respected personality in his village even though she did not want to marry him. She was forced to marry Shahzeb because her parents thought he was the perfect match for her based on his wealthy background and social standing in the village. Instead, she wanted to marry Basit—the son of a *mazara* ('bonded laborer') and her domestic helper. As the story progresses, Nazneen divorces Shahzeb and marries Basit, but her relationship is shown to only work with Basit when he becomes financially stable towards the end of the drama. Despite her desire to be with Basit, the drama strongly implies that economic security plays a significant role in ensuring that a relationship is successful. Secondly, since Basit is from the working class and possesses a lower social status, this also shows the unwillingness of upper classes to establish ties with their domestic help or lower classes generally. Other characters like Nigar Begum and Rani—later known as Rina Begum—also have similar expectations from marriage. They expect it would grant them better social and economic status.

In *Mann Mayal*, Manahil is married to Mikaeel. He lives in Karachi, belongs to an upper-class family, and lives an elite lifestyle. Manahil's parents do not let Manahil marry Salahuddin—her best friend's brother who later moves to the city and becomes very successful—because they decide that he is not a suitable match for her; he lives in a smaller house in a village, earns little money, and does not have the same social status as Mikaeel. In sum, all men that the female protagonists marry in these dramas are rich, good-looking, live in big houses, own big cars, and possess a better social status than the girls that they get married to. Hence, when Kashaf's mother reprimands her for her repulsion to marriage, her emphasis on a husband, home, and children, depicts the ultimate aspiration for women of all social classes in these dramas.

In this discussion, the idea of caste is also relevant. The caste system is the longest surviving system of social stratification; a "hierarchy" of endogamous groups that is ascribed to people at birth (Olcott 648). Olcott especially draws attention to the fact that a class differs from a clan or social class in being endogamous (648). He describes how a person's socio-economic status is determined by their caste (649). If a contrast is drawn between Pakistani and Indian dramas—it becomes apparent that in Pakistani dramas, the facet of caste from a marriage relationship is conspicuously absent. Mankekar explains how the upper-caste and lower-caste identities are negotiated in the space of Indian television. With a few exceptions, lower-caste characters usually evince unfaltering devotion and loyalty toward their upper-caste rulers (202). And in addition, lower castes are also portrayed as "primitive", in stark contrast to the "civilized" and "learned" Kshatriyas and Brahmans (202). These casteist ideas dominate the landscape of Indian television and film. In Indian shows, many important family names such as Kapoor, Chopra,

Malhotra, Khanna—names that represent higher castes—are repeatedly heard and referred to (Dwyer 97). In sharp contrast, in Pakistani dramas, this element is by and large missing. It appears that class serves as a stand-in for caste in these dramas, and even generally in other Pakistani dramas.

It is a misnomer that these casteist ideas only pervade Indian society. In the November 1957 Presidential ordinance of Pakistan, almost 32 castes are listed as "scheduled castes" (Patel). Prominent examples include Meghwars, Bheels, Kolhis,and Baghris (Patel). In Pakistan, caste dismissal is commonplace because of the Muslim belief that caste does not have a place in our society and is not condoned by the Quran (Patel). But even then, in Pakistan, caste influences the choices that people make—including in their romantic and marriage relationships. According to a study conducted at a university in Lahore, all students that were interviewed were aware of their caste background, and caste played a deep-seated and active role in their lives (Patel). This shows that even though caste has a prominent position in the lives of common people in Pakistan, it is not depicted on screen in the same way. The landscape of the Pakistani drama industry is overwhelmingly dominated by classist ideas instead of casteist ideas.

A Critique of Upper Classes

Class conflict is another important dimension of socio-economic classes and aspirations within those classes. In all the screen texts under analysis in this paper, there is an evident critique of the upper classes. Escoffery contends that sometimes the portrayal of different characters on screen is detached from reality. He writes that "television, as a fictional, contrived world, could not, by its very nature, be real. Viewers are caught between what 'is' and what 'could be'" (182). It can be argued then, that the presentation of different classes on screen is not an exact replication of reality. While audiences may find certain depictions that they could relate to, the complexities of their lives and emotions simply cannot be mirrored on screen.

Although the upper classes in Pakistani dramas are shown to represent the desires and aspirations of common people, they are also critiqued on their lifestyles, attitudes, and exploitation of the lower classes. It is clear from the screen texts under study that despite their material wealth and financial security, upper classes have their own problems. These range from being discontent with their family life to being morally suspect;being amoral, indecent, and irreligious. In this context, Maqsood's discussion on modernity and piety is quite relevant. She says that the middle class has certain aspirations about modernity and piety; the group of people belonging to this class wants to be upwardly mobile, dominate urban life, be well versed in western culture and language, yet it also aspires to reach the ideals of piety and is visibly more religious (2). The concepts of modernity, piety and social class come together in the screen texts that I am focusing on in this paper.

Maqsood argues that while people may have certain "modern" aspirations in terms of their clothing preferences, place of residence, schooling, the language that they speak, and social interactions, they want to achieve these aspirations while participating in the larger culture of "religious consumption" (8). Maqsood emphasizes on middle class groups constructing themselves as *khandani* ('family-oriented'), but this assumption holds for most other classes too (9). For example, a large number of women wear a headscarf or a veil, while men keep beards (8). These middle-class groups try to differentiate themselves from other class groups by drawing

out new markers of class divisions along the shadowy lines of religiosity and piety. Such markers lend a sense of moral and religious superiority to those belonging to this sub-section of the society.

In the screen texts being discussed however, mostly the lower classes are shown to possess this kind of involvement in religious life and they are also depicted as morally superior and virtuous. For example, in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Kashaf and her sisters wear seemingly modest clothes and cover their heads with a scarf, and it is implied that they are khandani. In contrast, Kashaf's class fellows at university wear western clothes and a lot of makeup. The drama depicts Kashaf as a morally upright person despite belonging to a lower middle-class household. On the opposite hand, her friends at university belonging to rich households are depicted as morally bankrupt. These small facets of class distinction such as clothing choices, appeal to the Muslim identity. Even though there are widespread concerns regarding progress and class mobility, they are threaded into the larger context of religious identity and piety. Hence, a person's participation in religious life and piety are also presented as differentiators of their class background.

It is repeatedly shown and established in the screen texts that wealthy classes present a paradox. Materially they have everything, yet they have their own problems. In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, this becomes visible at several points. In the initial episodes, Zaroon is shown to have a strained relationship with his mother. She focuses all her attention on her work and neglects her children. This is a critique of working women; although there has been progress over the years, Pakistan's society is largely disapproving of working women. Thus, Zaroon's mother being a professional is shown to have a profound impact on her relationship with her children who feel distant from her. Similarly, Zaroon's sister Sarah's revealing, fitted clothes are also presented as a problem specific to her socio-economic class. Kashaf, in glaring contrast, is always fully wrapped up in her *chadar* ('shawl'). In Pakistan's patriarchal society, girls' clothes are commonly attributed to their morality and modesty. The narrative that pervades the Pakistani society is that decent girls do not wear revealing clothes. This also explains the repeated critique of Sarah's seemingly fitted, revealing clothes by her father and brother in the drama.

There is a similar trend in *Mann Mayal*, wherein Manahil's upper-class husband is involved in gambling, drinking, and womanizing. He comes home late every day, neglects his family and is discourteous to his parents. All his flaws are ascribed to his social and economic status. In contrast, Salahuddin—who belongs to a lower-middle class family—is shown to be very humble, down to earth, honest, and caring, even when he becomes rich. Salahuddin's case can also be compared with Shamu from *Alif Allah aur Insaan* and Kashaf from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*. All three of them retain their values and morals despite progressing into a higher class. This suggests that those who achieve upward class mobility remember the values that they were raised with while those born elite usually lack those values in the first place. Mikaeel from *Mann Mayal* and Zaroon from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* are cases in point.

Similarly, in *Alif Allah aur Insaan* as well, certain facets of upper-class life are critiqued. Shahzeb, for example, is a pious and religious man, yet he still visits a brothel with his friends, emphasizing that rich classes are morally and religiously corrupt in spite of their outward displays of morality and religiosity. Nazneen is shown to be stubborn, insolent, and disrespectful toward her parents. She looks disdainfully at people belonging to the lower ends of the class spectrum. Again, her behaviour is ascribed to her socio-economic class. At various points in the drama, she is shown to misbehave with her domestic help with impunity and without any

consequences. As she is the daughter of a rich and powerful landlord, it is implied that she can get away with anything. She also defies her parents and secretly marries Basit. In Pakistan, there is great emphasis on a woman's honour. When Nazneen brazenly marries the man she loves, her parents feel distraught and cut off ties with her. Nazneen's trajectory implies that by making an independent decision against her parents' wishes, she violated her and her family's honour. In their rage, Nazneen's parents lose all sense of their morality and kill Basit's parents. Basit is not around at the time, but if he were, they would have killed him too. They do not believe Basit's parents when they say Nazneen does not live with them and murder them in cold blood. This depicts that when rich people have power, they can misuse it for their personal agendas. Hence, the critique of the upper class, depicted as morally bankrupt, is a conspicuous theme that manifests repeatedly.

Articulations of Social Class

Lastly, another facet that comes to the fore in these screen texts is the way certain classes talk about other classes, and how that translates into these shows. While people do not tend to indicate their own class placement directly, for instance by claiming I belong to the upper class or the lower class, it is voiced in the way they speak of themselves in relation to their position with other classes, or in the way they comment on social markers of class. In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Zaroon—who belongs to an upper-class household—says while talking about Kashaf when he first meets her, "*Na presentation, na baat karnay ki tameez, na koi class*" ('She does not have any sense of presentation, no manners in speaking, no class'). On the other hand, Kashaf—who belongs to a lower-middle class family—while talking about her university fellows says, "*Mein un kay saath kya muqabla karoon*?" ('How can I compete with them?'). What she means is that she cannot compete with them in her looks, clothes, and her overall appearance because they are rich, and can afford better things.

Similarly, in a scene in *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, Samina—Nazneen's domestic helper—calls Nazneen "*chalaak, hoshiyar, aur ziddi*" ('cunning, sharp, and stubborn'), when she realizes that Nazneen has fallen in love with her brother, Basit. Here we see that she feels disdain for Nazneen and blames her alone for the affair and not her brother. Her contemptuous remarks suggest that Nazneen is spoiled and lacks a conscience because she belongs to a family with a higher social status. Her statement indexes a critique of Nazneen's social and economic status. She does not directly say that because Nazneen is rich, she exploits her domestic help to her benefit but implies it for the viewers to understand. Again, the element of the critique of the upper-class unfolds here. Yet at the same time, it also appears that the working class realises that its place is to provide support to the upper classes (Guthrie). In *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, Samina's father admonishes her for speaking so rudely about Nazneen and says, "*woh maalik hain humaray, hum un kay jootay uthanay walay naukar hain*" ('They are our masters, we pick up their shoes as their servants'). This statement clearly illustrates that the working class understands its position on the class spectrum in relation to higher classes. Even in *Mann Mayal*, Salahuddin's family addresses Manahil's family as "*baray log*" ('important people'). When Salahuddin asks his mother to take his proposal to Manahil's house, she outrightly refuses him saying that Manahil's family would not even spit on them given their financially strained circumstances. Manahil's family, on the other hand, thinks that Salahuddin only wants to marry her because of her money. Her aunt, in reference to Salahuddin's interest in Manahil, says,

"*Paisay nikaalnay ka acha tareeka nikaala hai*" ('He has found a good way of making money'). These are just a few examples that demonstrate how language plays a part in solidifying class lines in these dramas and how class identities are shaped up by the way people articulate their positions.

In conclusion, the three dramas—*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, *Mann Mayal*, and *Alif Allah aur Insaan*— depict common people's aspirations and imaginations of different social classes. These are highlighted through the specifics such as appearance, costumes, language, accents, and living spaces. All these different elements that distinguish one class from another come together in these dramas as visual depictions of the audiences' class aspirations. These dramas also commonly depict characters attaining upward social mobility which is extremely difficult to achieve in reality. They put forth the idea that if people are determined and work hard, they can cross class lines and enter a higher class. The characters of Kashaf, Shamu, and Salahuddin achieve social mobility and out-earn their parents within a span of a few years, which is in glaring contrast to what ordinary people experience in their life. Mostly people tend to last in their parents' class for several generations. Lastly, even though the upper classes in these dramas represent aspirational fantasies of the people watching, they are also critiqued based on their attitudes, lifestyles, and amorality. The lower classes are depicted are virtuous and pious, while the upper class are depicted as rude, irreligious, and morally inadequate. The class critique thus depicts a mixed attitude in which upward social mobility is desirable so long as it clings to the morality commonly associated with those from humbler backgrounds.

Film Synopses

Zindagi Gulzar Hai

Zindagi Gulzar Hai is the story of Kashaf Murtaza and Zaroon Junaid. Kashaf belongs to a lower-middle-class family, while Zaroon belongs to an elite family. Kashaf lives with her mother, who works at a government school, and two sisters in a small house. Her father abandoned her mother years ago because she could not bear him a son. He married another woman instead and had a son from his second marriage. Kashaf and her family had to face difficulties all their lives because of her father.

Kashaf secures admission in a prestigious university on a scholarship. At the university, she meets Zaroon. Initially, Zaroon only wanted to befriend Kashaf to hurt and defame her. Kashaf finds out about this and feels repelled by him. Later however, after Zaroon's engagement to his best friend Asmara falls apart, and his sister's marriage comes to an end, he feels increasingly drawn toward Kashaf and wishes to marry her.

As the story proceeds, Zaroon and Kashaf become government officers. They meet at work and Zaroon tries to reconcile his differences with Kashaf, but Kashaf gives him a cold shoulder. Kashaf believes that he is still flirty, arrogant, and insincere like he was at university. Zaroon then turns to his former teacher who is a mentor to Kashaf and confides in him about his feelings for Kashaf. Kashaf rejects Zaroon's marriage proposal the first time but later, she accepts and marries Zaroon. In the end, they have twin daughters and live happily ever after.

Mann Mayal

Mann Mayal is about a girl named Manahil who lives in a joint family in a small town. She falls in love with her neighbour and teacher Salahuddin. Manahil and Salahuddin do not get married because Salahuddin's social and economic status does not match Manahil's. Instead, Manahil's parents marry her off to Mikaeel, a rich but irascible and bitter person. Mikaeel mistreats Manahil. He is abusive, shows little interest in Manahil, gambles, and comes home late every night.

Salahuddin goes to Karachi to work at his friend Ifti's firm. In Karachi, he meets Ifti's father Rehman and starts taking care of him because his daughter-in-law and domestic helper do not look after him. Later when Rehman dies, he leaves his property to Salahuddin. Salahuddin uses that money to establish a big business empire. He is successful in his venture within a year. Later, Salahuddin employs a new worker named Jeena. She falls in love with Salahuddin and takes care of him despite being repeatedly brushed off.

After some time, Salahuddin's and Manahil's paths cross and Salahuddin realizes the misery she is in. He falls deeply in love with her again despite Jeena's repeated attempts to make him fall in love with her. This time Manahil rejects him, and he realizes the mistake he made all those years ago of letting Manahil go with Mikaeel.

Alif Allah aur Insaan

Alif Allah aur Insaan has several story lines running simultaneously. Shahzeb is a rich landlord who falls in love with Nazneen at his friend's wedding (who got married to Nazneen's sister). At the same wedding, Nazneen insults Shamu and his clan of transgenders for dancing at the wedding. Shamu curses her and says that she will lose everything one day. Eventually, that does happen and Nazneen suffers because of her arrogance and stubbornness.

Rani is a beggar who sees Nigar Begum—a *tawaif*—at the roadside one day and follows her to the brothel where Nigar Begum lives. Rani wants to be like Nigar Begum because of her beauty and wealth. Rani heads over to the brothel and meets with Nigar Begum. She asks her to keep her as her helper. Nigar Begum invites Rani to stay and changes her name to Rina Begum.

It is slowly revealed in how that Shahzeb once visited the brothel with his friends and saw Nigar Begum perform there. Nigar Begum fell in love with him then. When she professed her love to him, he turned her away. Nigar Begum cursed him and said that may he be rejected the same way one day.

Shahzeb proposes marriage to Nazneen, but Nazneen is not interested in marrying him. She wants to marry Basit who is the son of her domestic helper. She falls in love with Basit when she moves to the city to finish college and where her father appoints Basit to take care of her. Eventually, Shahzeb divorces Nazneen when he finds out about her love affair with Basit.

Shamu becomes a successful beautician and starts earning good money. Rani's situation worsens and despite seeing a few highs as a *tawaif*, she later falls into the life of misery and takes her own life.

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Filmography

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Negotiating Morality in Pakistani Dramas

Mahnoor Ghani Sardar

Abstract

This essay seeks to explore the nature of Pakistani television dramas and their role in shaping the discourse around gender, morality, sexuality in the context of the rise of media in general and new media in particular (social media). It focuses particularly on the blockbuster *Meray Paas Tum Ho/I Have You (*dir. Nadeem Baig 2019*)*, penned by Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, due to its recent success and massive popularity across the country. With the proliferation of television dramas addressing a diverse range of social issues, dramas can be agents of social change. This essay adopts an exploratory, paratextual perspective to argue that dramas in Pakistan open avenues for a more complex interaction of various social groups, including actors, drama-makers and audience, who negotiate and navigate their ways through questions of gender, morality and sexuality. This interaction is also shaped by media platforms and online interactions among different social groups which concretize and frame their reception of these dramas.

Keywords: Gender and Drama, Gender and Morality, Paratextual Analysis, Audience reception, *Meray Paas Tum Ho*

Preface

I vividly remember a telephone conversation with my friend in which she was adamant to convince me why *Meray Paas Tum Ho (MPTH)/I Have You (*dir. Nadeem Baig, 2019*)* was worth watching: it "raised the bar for men", particularly men who caught their wives/partners cheating on them. I was suddenly intrigued about the phenomenon, *MPTH*, given that everyone around me was jumping on the *MPTH* bandwagon. I binge-watched the first few episodes which had already been run, and within a few days caught up with the fresh ones. Suddenly, the memes circulating on Twitter and Facebook began to make sense and I could make informed opinions about the memes and social media posts. I could also make sense of the insights that my friends, acquaintances or even strangers exchanged about the drama. I had too many questions—for the writer, for the men and women on Twitter, and for my own friends and family who would openly comment on the plot, the drama, and the memes in casual settings. Gradually, with the ending of *MPTH*, I wanted to engage with multiple layers of subtexts that it surrounded.

Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, the author of this drama, had been enjoying generous airtime on morning shows, news channels, and in online interviews during the run of the show. He had divided social media and his viewers on what came to be known as his 'sermons' on morality, in which he elaborated on his notions of the 'good' and the 'bad' woman prototypical dichotomy.

Many lauded him for his "intellectual genius" whereas others called him out on his misogynistic and problematic views. Some labeled him as an 'extraordinary' playwright, who had mastered the art of weaving human emotion into poetry or prose. Qamar later engaged in an explosive argument with activist Marvi Sirmed on national television because, according to Qamar, she fit the "bad woman" trope and therefore did not deserve *izzat* ('respect,' 'honor')*.* He hurled verbal abuses at her which aired uncensored on national television. Qamar was not stopped from speaking by the production team, and rather given extensive airtime by the host of the show. This video exploded on social media and Qamar was consequently repeatedly summoned for follow-up interviews in order to seek clarifications regarding his behavior.

Even after *MPTH* ended, its audience engagement continued, and it had a lasting impact on the television landscape in Pakistan. The cheating trope has repeatedly and more frequently than before, been brought up in dramas in various different forms, such as in one a story where a girl marries her brother-in-law after an extramarital affair with him in *Jalan/Jealousy* (dir. Aabis Raza 2020), a girl who marries her best friend's fiancé after an extramarital affair in *Qurbatain/Proximity* (dir. Kamran Akbar Khan 2020) and yet again, the woman ends up alone, punished for being a liar, manipulator and greedy. The male protagonist, on the other hand, is forgiven by his wife and they are given a happy ending. Similarly, in *Khwaab Nagar ki Shehzadi/Princess of the Dream City* (dir. Syed Ramish Rizvi 2021) shows an extramarital affair between the male protagonist and his hired female domestic housekeeper.

These are a handful of examples, however, and the scope of conversation around taboo subjects has also broadened with the introduction of a new medium in Pakistan, that is the digital web series with a greater degree of creative liberties from the national censor board. In the summer of 2020, a one-of-a-kind Pakistani web series titled *Churails/Witches* (dir. Asim Abbasi 2020) was released. Among many other taboo subjects that its plot boldly addressed, it started off with the premise that problematized adulterous men whose actions have been normalized by patriarchal societies for too long and pressed for their accountability. The show and its cast members claimed that it was a series made to celebrate agentive female characters, as well as feminism—something that is difficult on mainstream television. The show seemed to be a response to the narrative put forth and normalized by *MPTH* and other similar dramas on mainstream television as evident from its timing and premise. This also shows that texts also interact with, and even confront each other, in their narratives and conversations, and this intertextuality contributes to the discourses surrounding them.

Introduction

This paper takes a paratextual approach to understand how a drama extends beyond its text and its meaning is constantly negotiated by audiences. The pioneer of paratextual research, Gerard Genette principally divided paratext into two categories of peritext and epitext. Paratexts, broadly, are media and texts that surround a book or a film and could be further extended to any other literary genre (qtd. in Klecker 402). His definition primarily explored texts both inside and outside a book that are not part of the main narrative of the text but still develop as its derivative. Within that definition, epitexts constitute interviews, critic reviews, and so on. Peritexts, on the other hand, entail elements contained within the book, albeit outside its main text. These could

include the preface, footnotes, author's note et cetera. Based on this classification, the paper will concern itself with the way that the audience interacts with the epitexts of *MPTH*.

In the case of a film, or perhaps any other visual medium, the distinction between text and paratext is vague. Dialogues are part of the text of the film, whereas subtitles (in different languages) qualify as peritexts. The theme song or an Original Soundtrack (OST) also merges into the text of the drama or film when it plays as diegetic music. However, if it plays with the ending credits or the title track, OSTs classify as epitexts.

Drawing on Genette's peritext-epitext dichotomy, epitexts are more relevant for the case of *Meray Paas Tum Ho* (qtd. in Klecker 402). Epitexts of *MPTH* involve, but are not limited to, interviews by the cast and crew members, its author, trailers of its episodes and the social media discourse surrounding the drama. Author interviews rarely ever take a front seat in television shows or film promotions, where the focus is usually on actors due to their strong fan following. Occasionally though, famous directors or writers may enjoy the spotlight.

In the Pakistani television drama industry, authors, and scriptwriters (many of whom are female) enjoy prominence and popularity. Writers such as Farhat Ishtiaq and Umera Ahmad are household names. However, the popularity Qamar garnered during *MPTH* promotions, despite being a male writer, is still unprecedented in the Pakistani television landscape, and therefore relevant to the study of the paratexts of *MPTH*. Qamar has scripted several other films and dramas, such as *Pyarey Afzal/Dear Afzal* (dir. Nadeem Baig 2013), *Zara Yaad Kar/Just Remember* (dir. Amna Nawaz Khan 2016*)* and *Sadqay Tumhare/May My Years Be Added To Yours* (dir. Mohammed Ehteshamuddin 2014), to name a few but he shot to popularity when *MPTH* aired. While the episodes of *MPTH* ran on television, he was frequently invited to morning shows, news channel interviews and even web interviews. His controversial statements regarding the status of women in society frequently caught media attention and fed into his increasing popularity as he would be summoned for more interviews which probed for further explanations or clarifications regarding previous controversial statements. Such statements can be termed as foundational paratexts supplementing the viewership experience of *MPTH*.

Paratexts are, therefore, crucial to the study of popular culture, and literary works need to be studied in relation to the complex interactions between their creators, audiences, fanbase and wider masses as all of these are relevant stakeholders in narrative formation. Viewers are simultaneously able to generate reactions to dialogues of the drama, interact with each other and even its cast and crew members to form a complex web of paratextual information. Stuart Hall expounded at greater length on this view in his seminal essay, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular". He argues that a film, book or a television show shares an interlocked relationship between what is represented, and how it is perceived. Hall rejects the idea that popular culture consumers (audiences) are merely "cultural dopes" (qtd in Duncombe 186) or passive audiences. He contends that they actively perceive and process cultural information in often complex, multi-directional ways against the backdrop of authorial intention which is reflected in the organization of a particular text, and diverse interpretations of fellow audience groups. As a consequence, this paper explores the ways audiences generate, interact with, and react to the paratextual information provided to them and then zooms in on the case of *MPTH*.

The Pakistani television audience is a diverse group, with a melange of views and insights coming together about its content. They are divided in their opinions about whether these dramas

are worth watching. Sabahat Zakariya, for instance, unpacks some of the most common tropes in these dramas which include stereotypes of a good women versus bad women and romanticization of women's suffering ("Feminustani Decodes Pakistani Drama"). Many others echo these concerns. However, Pakistani dramas are also increasingly lauded by viewers for bringing social issues to light through issue-based storytelling. Hall argues that audiences are neither "blank screens" where cultural information can plainly be imprinted or fed, nor do they possess complete agency in determining who is represented, when, where, and how. He terms it as a constant struggle where narratives are constantly "throned and de-throned" (qtd. in Duncombe 187) and some groups win while others lose in a constant tug of war. It is an ideological battlefield without "once-and-for-all victors" (187). There are competing narratives, moments of domination as well as subversion for various actors.

In case of Pakistani audiences, for instance, social media commentary on the drama and interviews of cast and/or crew supplement the perception process of the main text of the drama. The ways certain characters are represented (or intentionally erased) seeps deep in their cultural memories with substantive implications. Some people, for instance, relate with the treatment or representation of a certain character while others could despise the same. In other cases, characters are explicitly created and portrayed in hues of black and white and stark contrast to one another, for audiences to contextualize them in a certain light. Audience interpretation of the content of a drama still takes place in more nuanced and layered ways where actors, playwrights, or directors are capable of adding their own voices (and interpretation) to varying degrees. This allows for alignment of meanings audiences derive from characters and stories by narrowing them down to what the authors or directors intend to transmit to the audiences.

Literature Review

Various scholars have expanded on Genette's notion of paratexts and have illustrated the functions of paratextual elements in media such as television and film. Some have focused on the role of paratexts as organizational and marketing tools (Klecker 405; Brookey and Gray 108) while others have theorized how they establish initial audience expectations about a film or a story before they watch it. Jonathan Gray diverges from Genette in that he states how audiences are constantly making sense of texts and "para" elements around it in tandem—the two cannot be separated and distinctly categorized (Gray). This is particularly relevant for films where there are so many creative influences in producing the final product; directors, multiple screenwriters, authors, and actors, all have varying degrees of influence over how the audience perceives the film, and what meanings are deliberately attached to it by various stakeholders in the creative process.

Other authors such as Deborah Alisson and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer have lent greater attention to opening credits, which serve to set the mood of a film or a television show and foreshadow the experience (qtd in Klecker 408). Sometimes, narrations, which are not part of the plot itself, albeit not outside the film, assist in the reiteration and reinforcement of intended messages, and align audience reception with them. Scholars such as Roy Sommer have focused on reviews, posters, interactions with cast members, and interviews in establishing audience expectations and influencing the process of interpretation of a film or a drama (qtd in Klecker 406). Drawing on this discussion further, this essay focuses on audience reception and

continuous engagement with a web of paratextual information. Paratexts have framing functions with which drama audiences continue to interact actively and use to associate with like-minded people especially through digitized media, in order to respond to narratives around in the text itself.

Paratexts develop in relation to social, cultural and religious contexts. Interactions with paratextual elements become active sites of cultural negotiations. Advertisements, films, games, magazines, and television dramas are all gendered spaces where traditional gender stereotypes are routinely negotiated. Suzanne Scott has argued that toys and other collectable objects for fans could be seen as paratexts in the case of the Star Wars franchise. She elaborates how fans are assisted in attaining hints regarding the plot through such objects. In the case of the launch of Star Wars toy collection, fans reacted to the absence of the main female character's toy which sparked the #WheresRey campaign (Scott 141-142). This signifies how makers of the film and managers of franchises assume such series to have a predominantly male fan base, gatekeeping their female audiences through paratextual erasure of female lead characters—female toy figures in particular. A visual text communicates across different contexts through advertisements, promotional activities, cast interviews. These paratextual elements which surround the actual text, signpost for audiences whether they are invited as viewers or not. In Pakistan, dramas are evidently advertised for a largely female audience and hence become key areas for negotiation of questions around gender and morality.

Paratextual analysis of a Pakistani drama thus calls for unpacking gendered questions. Most storylines in Pakistani dramas revolve around the good woman versus bad woman dichotomy, while dealing with female morality and sexuality in different ways. These dramas have continued to romanticize an ideal woman, focusing on concepts such as izzat or honor of the woman, her status and sanctity as a wife, a mother, and a sister. Sadaf Ahmad, analyzing the depiction and role of rape in Pakistani cinema, finds that rape is instrumental in showing a bad woman her fate, acting as a punishment for violating the sanctity of womanhood, for being too greedy or too Western (Ahmad 395). In a similar way, the *MPTH* plot also shows how the female lead, Mehwish, suffers and is punished for being an ungrateful wife.

Paratexts and Audience Reception

MPTH enjoyed extravagant promotional campaigns by its channel, ARY Digital, celebrity cast interviews and cinema screenings. The playwright, Qamar, remained at the forefront, participating in the televised conversations that centered around it. However, it is unclear whether it was the celebrity actors who were able to amass the audiences and ultimately fed into its massive popularity, or was it the popularity which, in turn, rendered its cast members and the production team more visibility in the media. Nonetheless, it was Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar who played a principal role in framing not only the text (drama), but also its paratextual narratives for a massive audience. His commentary on its central theme, female infidelity, played a crucial role in framing the debate regarding controlling women's morality and behavior through social and religious norms.

Narratives that emerge from a particular drama, especially one with widespread popularity transcend its own paratexts, and influence the ways future content will be produced. When a drama gets high ratings, becomes a household name, or generates public expression on social

media, it sets the content creators into motion. What kind of content is being appreciated, how it is being perceived and interpreted by the audiences, and the kinds of narratives sold the most are important questions production companies routinely deliberate on with the help of directors and scriptwriters. In addition to this, such deliberations also shape the process of how the drama would be watched and interpreted, which kind of audiences it would attract, and what conversations it would stir. Drama creators and producers can use these trends to identify popular and profitable narratives. Their paratextual analysis additionally provides insight into the nature of the reviewing publics. How the audience interprets questions of gender, morality, role of religion, conformity and social norms occurs in relation to how these themes unravel on television through the script, cast members, and insights provided by other stakeholders involved in its production. More specifically, all these factors shape the portrayal of questions of morality and gender or television, and consequently in what light the audiences interpret this cultural information.

The last episode of the drama *MPTH*, was screened in cinemas nation-wide, owing to the massive popularity it gained in the span of a few months. The last time a television drama enjoyed similar levels of popularity and success in becoming a household name, was *Humsafar/Companion* (dir. Sarmad Khoosat 2011), written by Farhat Ishtiaq. However, having the concluding episode of a blockbuster drama screened in the cinemas had so far been an unprecedented move. One factor, though, could be significant in explaining why this happened. Bollywood, or Indian cinema, has a sizeable audience in Pakistan. However, owing to rising political tensions between the historically hostile neighbors, Indian (Bollywood) films were banned for screenings across Pakistan, and with its own domestic film industry being in a relatively weaker position in international film arena, the local cinemas suffered a blow. These single-episode cinema screenings, hence, translated into an opportunity for these local cinema houses to attract consumers. However, the cinema screening of *MPTH* cannot be explained merely as a marketing strategy for cinema businesses. Garnering massive popularity, it was "throned" as Hall would argue, as the first drama in Pakistan whose concluding episode was granted cinema screening. More than being barely a marketing strategy, it speaks to the nationwide popularity of the drama and even legitimizes *for* the audiences what is worthy of being watched and what is not.

Elaborating on *MPTH's* paratextual elements and why they warrant attention, its writer Qamar remained on the frontlines steering his own narrative on his script. Its dialogues also gained a lot of attention, especially on social media, and sparked intense debates. One such instance was a phrase *"do takkay ki aurat"* ('a two-bit woman') used to describe the character of the cheating wife, Mehwish. Many lauded him for his creativity that awarded a greedy woman exactly what she deserved – being abandoned by a living husband and son– a life of loss of loved ones, loneliness, and shame. Others criticized it for its misogyny, as men were not held accountable by writers in their scripts, and their acts of infidelity in dramas were routinely trivialized, shrugged off, and forgiven as mistakes.

Qamar's views regarding women's morality legitimized and concretized the notions regarding women who transgress social bounds as being worthy of graver punishments than men. This sentiment was visible through audience engagement in the form of comments on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Although social media posts overwhelmingly supported Qamar's message in the drama, there were still plenty of people who resisted and actively criticized him. All such voices were building a diverse body of paratexts around *MPTH*. An interview on Samaa

TV, a popular news channel, featured Qamar along with the women's rights activist and Women's Action Forum member, Tahira Abdullah on the panel ("Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, Owais Touheed debate gender issues"). Abdullah confronted Qamar on live television, criticizing him for his inaccurate assumptions and reductionist notions regarding women in general, and feminism in particular.

Audiences problematized his conduct in varying capacities – through articles, social media comments, satirical videos, and social media posts. However, the degree of attention that he enjoyed was substantial, and he repeatedly made appearances in various interviews on both social and traditional media. He would be questioned by various journalists or interviewers regarding traits that ought to characterize 'good woman' or a woman worthy of respect. In response, he frequently emphasized on chastity, loyalty and submission to religious norms and values as being key traits of a 'good woman'.

In addition to the author's interviews, the celebrated cast of *MPTH*, many of whom shot to fame only after its success, were repeatedly invited for interviews. Interviewers would ask them to define what disloyalty or infidelity constituted in their opinions, and what kinds of punishments culprits deserved for such acts. These culturally loaded conversations reinforce the relative fates of each gender in society as well as their acceptable moral codes. Perhaps the popularity of problematic narratives and sensational storytelling serve as evidence that such interviews with popular cast and crew members act as valuable marketing and promotional strategies— in a context where content aligning with gendered and religious norms and reductive notions of morality sells as it resonates with popular views in Pakistan. In many instances, these interviews turned into moral "sermons" as to what a man and a woman ought to act like in order to deserve a respectable position in society. The legitimacy *MPTH* enjoyed fed into its popularity, while at the same time, was reflective of how the narrative was internalized by audiences. These conversations, especially those with Qamar, entrenched the idea that an unfaithful woman is unworthy of redemption and has to lose all respect as a mother, wife, sister, and ultimately as a human, whereas a man in a similar situation merely errs, can be morally rehabilitated, and deserves another chance. Apart from passive framing or subtle messaging by the drama, epitexts in this case clearly flagged for the audiences their take on issues of male and female morality.

Apart from interviews, other diegetic and non-diegetic elements also help directors or screenwriters in framing intended messages, Costume, lighting, music, and the lyrics of the original soundtrack (OST) direct the way the content is perceived by the public. In the case of *MPTH*, the lead protagonist Danish, the husband who is cheated on, enjoys long, deliberately sermonized, poetic dialogues that elaborate on archetypes of a morally upright and chaste woman. The most prized dialogue was the "*do takkay ki aurat*" ('two-bit woman') in the twelfth episode, which is what Danish refers to his wife as when speaking to Shehwar, the man with whom she has an extra-marital affair. Danish says, "You were offering me 50 million for this two-bit [cheap] woman". During the scene, Mehwish, who silently stares at Danish, is shown to be a passive object on the screen and her reactions are brief. Through the dialogues, the music that plays in the background and the positions of the characters within the frame of the camera, she is particularly targeted, though Shehwar, a married millionaire, is also present. She is portrayed as greedy, materialistic and objectified for her flawless beauty as she 'transgresses' from her prescribed role to the extent that she leaves her eight-year-old son behind. In shots where characters are silent in the aforementioned sequence, the OST plays in the background, which sarcastically congratulates Mehwish for her disloyalty. Many of *MPTH's* dialogues

immediately began to trend on Twitter, or shared on Facebook, and exclusively targeted Mehwish for her infidelity while Shehwar's character was never held accountable.

Another such dialogue is one of Danish's friend, Mateen, who puts the onus of infidelity entirely on Mehwish. He says, "A woman is not naturally capable of infidelity and if she does cheat, she is unworthy of being a woman". Only a low-volume instrumental plays in the background with the camera zoomed in on Danish and Mateen's facial expressions. The conversation resembles a sermon, as if it is Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar reiterating his own views on female morality and sexuality through the voice of the character. Mateen's character never once mentions the married man, Shehwar, she cheats with, almost absolving men of any culpability even if they are also married. This illustrates how disloyalty to a partner or cheating in a marriage is deliberately turned into a gendered 'sin' that only the woman has committed who transgressed in the role of a wife, mother and a homemaker in *MPTH.*

High TRP ratings or excessive social media engagement with its dialogues did not just reflect *MPTH*'s popularity, but in fact, also fed into its hype. It allowed audiences to engage with the drama through social media interactions or discussions on traditional media, and more people would then turn to watch the drama after they witnessed the hype around it. For instance, commenters under episodes of *MPTH* on YouTube or on other platforms frequently mentioned that they had been drawn to the drama after its popularity. Even after the drama neared its end, many would express that they came to view it after they heard any one of the cast members, Qamar, or even after a small clip of dialogue caught their attention. Such comments under old episodes, for instance, would have been written months after the airing date of an episode. More specifically, popularity of dialogues such as "two-bit woman" or scenes, such as Danish's death scene or even the humor which surrounded the drama in the form of parodies and memes on social media was, in turn, actively framing the interpretation process *MPTH* and streamlining the narrative it had already created on themes of marriage, female morality, religious or gendered norms. ("Best Mere Pass Tum Ho Memes Will Make You Laugh."). Many instances would serve as moments in which those certain narratives were in Stuart Hall's words "throned" and "dethroned". In a larger framework, it serves to place women and men in their respective positions and illustrate the consequences of what would follow if one dare violates them.

Social Media as a Site of Negotiating Gender and Morality

Although paratextual information plays a crucial role in influencing how audiences make sense of the cultural information being conveyed to them, especially through framing techniques, there are moments of resistance in spaces that various groups create to express and consolidate their identity against the dominant paratextual discourse. Digital space, particularly social media, opens new avenues for expressions of religion, morality, social norms, class, and gender. Jonathan Gray expounds how social media has the potential to turn into site of "organizational system" for people to flock together, generate reactions to a media text even before it is released and create filters for the way it would then be viewed post release (Brookey and Gray 104).

Chris Julian extends Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital to the digital space and considers online interactions as extensions of one's online existence and a new form of "digital social capital" (10). Most of the dialogues that trended on Twitter or Facebook from *MPTH* were then discussed in tweets, statuses, and memes. Some people criticized the script, while others

exchanged remarks on consequences for a cheating woman. The memes or parodies were sometimes exaggerations of the actual content of the drama, which were, in turn, a site of cultural reproduction. The memes' popularity was dependent on the degree or extent of resonance the audience felt towards a certain aspect of the drama in order for it to be shared further. Juliana Brunello explains that humor, specifically meme culture, is a form of expression of shared knowledge of individuals through which narratives prevalent in society are molded, exaggerated or even regressed in memes in order to express one's own position on social media. According to Heyligha, memes represent shared "habits, ideas and traditions" (qtd in Brunello). Heyligha further argues that people who repeatedly share and re-share the memes or watch the parodies form solidarities around shared norms, values, and certain gendered codes of society – or an aversion and evasion of them in a way – to either reinforce them or critique them through employment of humor and satire.

Debates on social media have also highlighted ideological divisions within gender groups. Such divisions also emerge in the web of *MPTH* paratexts. Most prominently, women who oppose traditional gender stereotypes were at odds with the ones who support them, as the latter are perceived to have internalized misogynistic and patriarchal values. The former is the group of women who actively criticize the narrative advertised by the drama on social media. They expressed that *MPTH* is demeaning towards women and called out the actors and the writer for their misogynistic portrayal of adulterous women without the same treatment for the male character. On the other hand, it is the latter group of women who are usually seen to be lauding the dialogues which serve to remind women of their fate in society if they dare to cross socially prescribed limits that are encoded in gendered norms. Conversations on social media turned into how women should rightfully be punished more severely for infidelity or greed because they violate the sanctity of motherhood. Simultaneously, there are both men and women who carve out their own spaces to express alternate views. Therefore, the reason a dialogue from *MPTH* begins to trend on social media is not only the drama or the opinions of its spokespeople, but also the voices of people opposing its rhetoric.

These voices can sometimes present diverse opinions and add meaningful angles to the existing paratextual discourse. For instance, in actress Sonya Hussyn's web interview with Iffat Omar, Hussyn claimed that she was initially offered the lead role of Mehwish in *MPTH*, which she rejected, as she disapproved of the way a woman was being represented in a society where she already struggles for equality and is routinely belittled. She was also of the view that when it comes to televised representations of women, actors should assume responsibility towards storytelling and should serve as agents of progress. Similar sentiments have been expressed by actors such as Sania Saeed, and Haseena Moin, a celebrated television writer of the decade of the eighties. They expressed in their interviews that women need to be portrayed as individuals in their own right, as agents who progress and become an inspiration for women to overcome their personal and social constraints.

Further, in these interviews, both Saeed and Moin expressed their discomfort with the current on-screen portrayal of women as passive individuals, subservient to the male lead and deprived of any agency in plots. They also criticized the glorification of female suffering, romanticization of weeping heroines who are submissive, and weak. Moin fondly spoke of the headstrong, career-driven, and passionate female characters she crafted, whose characters had nuanced arcs and layered emotions, and were primary agents in the plot (Haseena Moin). Similarly, one of the female cast members of *MPTH,* Rehmat Ajmal, posted a statement on her Instagram handle

distancing herself from the project on grounds that she was previously unaware of the problematic views its celebrated author held ("Rehmat Ajmal Distances Herself").These aforementioned examples manifest how all these women formed the counter-narrative for drama within its paratextual landscape despite pronounced reinforcement of a certain narrative by its creators.

This paratextual counter narrative emerges from a recognition that most female characters are shown to be objectified and flag bearers of honor– dehumanized in the process and stripped of subtlety and gradient in their character arcs. For many others, it is easy to disregard these notions and the drama separate from reality without problematizing regressive tropes. This latter group is likely to perceive television dramas as harmless, innate and inconsequential for the material realities of life. Hence, memes, statuses, or even tweets perhaps, are expressions of antagonism and can act as avenues for otherization of groups of people which, in turn, could polarize them as in the case of *Meray Paas Tum Ho*.

As a result of the Sirmed versus Qamar argument on television, audiences on both social and traditional media took different positions and formed solidarities through the act of re-sharing different social media posts. Falling on either side of the narrative or its converse, audiences formed a complex network of interaction where groups of men and women negotiated questions of morality and religiosity. Social media became emphatically polarized where these questions were in constant contestation. They reacted to Sirmed chanting the feminist slogan "*mera jism meri marzi*" ('my body, my choice') on live television and Qamar hurling verbal abuses at her in return. This slogan, amongst many others from Aurat March, the women's protest held annually, was interpreted as provocative and vulgar by many in Pakistan. The debate that followed went beyond just two people indulging in a heated argument on live television. The situation was interpreted in regard to what it means for a woman to be chanting this slogan, and how it represents groups of women who have morally transgressed and turned away from socio-religious norms in Pakistan. Bodily autonomy was reductively equated with nudity which violates religious boundaries legitimized by the society as well as the state in Pakistan. Many women reacted strongly to Qamar's misogyny, moral righteousness, and hostility towards women in the interview. These discussions directly influence the way the audience maintains engagement with multiple facets of cultural information and contextualize it and the drama itself in a certain light. Hence, there is an interplay of actions and reactions to the content of the drama and its paratexts in such an intrinsic way that the former cannot be separated from the latter.

Nature of the Television Dramas and Reviewing Publics

Portrayals of moral codes in Pakistani television drama arena, particularly those regarding loyalty and chastity have an evident double standard for males and females and have implications for how they would be publicly perceived . The common denominator for the 'good' woman prototype is one with an upright, moral character, a responsible mother, solely committed to preserve and spearhead the sanctity of the house.To exemplify this further, the paper will compare the the gendered treatment of the theme of infidelity put forth by *Bewafa/Unfaithful* (dir. Aabis Raza, 2019) and *Meray Paas Tum*. *Bewafa* began airing on the same television channel, ARY Entertainment as *MPTH,* which is one of the leading drama channels of Pakistan with big budget productions released throughout the year. The first episodes

of these two dramas aired a month apart. However, the audience reactions and their reception have been vastly divergent despite their plots following similar underlying themes.

Bewafa is a suitable comparison for the paratextual analysis of *MPTH* because both plotlines revolve around the stories of a cheating partner in a heterosexual marriage. In *MPTH*, Mehwish's character is a cheating wife, whereas in *Bewafa*, the unfaithful partner is the husband, Ahaan. Infidelity of a married partner is the central plot device in both stories. Yet, the way the two stories unfold, the way their dialogues are written and delivered, and treatment of characters is starkly different. The two dramas deal with questions of morality, obligations in a marriage, and conformity to social norms. However, both dramas answer these questions following strictly gendered patterns. In both cases, the onus is laid on the woman, who digressed from social norms and is thus responsible for what the man does. In the case of *MPTH*, the unfaithful wife had been disobedient, ungrateful and greedy, and violated the sanctity of marriage, home, and motherhood. Whereas in *Bewafa*, the onus of cheating fell on the 'other woman', Shireen, who became Ahaan's second wife after being his extra-marital love interest. His first wife, Kinza was also not also free of culpability. She was written and portrayed as an excessively intrusive, skeptical, and invasive wife who would frequently check his phone and question him due her distrustful nature. Therefore, she was served a lesson and spared a chance to mend her ways. Shireen, on the flip side, was a prototypical villain in the story; she was a liar, a manipulator and greedy in search of a rich husband. She manipulated Ahaan into falling for her, who was portrayed as an unhappy husband craving mental peace and escape.

In *MPTH*, Mehwish was not rewarded any chance of redemption, and her former husband Danish dies of the pain which his disloyal wife had inflicted on him. However, *Bewafa* sees a happy ending. Ahaan is forgiven at the end by Kinza and his mother, and he is brought back by Kinza's persistence to save their marriage and home towards the final episodes. She is repeatedly told by her mother-in-law that Ahaan has been manipulated by the cunning Shireen and Kinza should win Ahaan back through her patience and loyalty. Ahaan's disloyalty is disregarded as a temporary digression and an error, whereas Mehwish's act of cheating is termed as *gunnah* ('sin') and even *shirk* ('polytheism') by her ex-husband. Even towards *MPTH*'s conclusion, Shehwar's wife forgives him and regains her rightful place at home which was temporarily snatched by Mehwish. Gunnah and shirk are religious terms which are selectively employed as seen in the two cases, only to hold the woman accountable. In a conversation between two of Mehwish' two friends in episode 19, the characters discuss why a woman's act of infidelity deserves wrath. The claim it is because she violates the sanctity of a home, violates a social contract, *nikkah,* ('marriage') and becomes a violator of a sacred bond between the two partners in marriage. No such conversations take place to hold the men accountable or to remind them of their duties as a partner in either of the dramas. Thus, cheating and disloyalty become a question of gendered morality and also a means of keeping women confined to socially constructed bounds of correct behaviour, particularly using a religious narrative.

Bewafa and *Meray Paas Tum Ho* tell similar stories, with the main difference being the gender of the disloyal character. The male is not censured for infidelity, rather the onus is thrown on the woman for leading an otherwise innocent man astray. The two dramas can reveal important insights about the storytellers and the audiences through the extension of Genette's paratextual framework. *Bewafa* did not garner the same public attention or audience reactions, and male infidelity was normalized in the narrative of the story. The fact that it did not receive the same amount of marketing by the television channel, as well as engagement by the same audience

illustrates to some degree the way male disloyalty in a relationship is viewed as mundane – and such stories treated as run-of- the-mill . The drama *Bewafa* also lacked its own paratextual engagement of the same level as *MPTH*. The latter's paratextual landscape also reveals that the way the plots and the characters unfold on-screen and the way these are interpreted by the audience shows that infidelity or disloyalty becomes a problem when the person committing it is a woman. More specifically, it is the woman's act of transgression which becomes a question of morality for society and the behavior is thus deemed worthy of retribution.

Conclusion

To sum up, this essay has argued that we cannot definitively say whether dramas are agents of change or solidifiers of a patriarchal status quo. It is perhaps a complex negotiation taking place at different times, amongst different actors who are storing pieces of cultural information being provided to them and reacting to diverse sources of paratextual information as fans, viewers or even as observers. The essay has shown how audiences interact with the messages (intended and unintended) emanated in the form of both texts and paratexts by storytellers, actors and different groups within the audiences, in order to develop their own social, cultural and religious narratives. Further, the debates surrounding *MPTH* show how dramas and their paratexts are equally important in stirring important conversations which are culturally coded and interact with the wider socio-political climate in Pakistan.

Film Synopsis

Meray Paas Tum Ho

The story revolves around a middle-class couple, Danish and Mehwish. Mehwish leaves Danish for a wealthy man Shehwar and their marriage ends as a result of her ungrateful and greedy nature. Distraught at his wife's infidelity, Danish, who is an honest man and a passionate civil servant, decides to invest in the stock exchange market to avenge his rival Shehwar and ends up making money through the help of his childhood friends. Towards the end, Mehwish deeply regrets her choice to leave her marriage after Shehwar's wife, Maham, learns about her husband's affair. Shehwar is arrested by the police after Maham accuses him of financial fraud and Mehwish is left without a shelter. Mehwish is not awarded any redemption in the end as Danish dies of a heart attack in the last episode, and she is left with a lifetime of regret and guilt for her behavior.

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Digital Afterlives of Punjabi Stage Dramas

Rimsha Saleem

Abstract

This study investigates the fan communities around Punjabi stage dramas as they circulate on online spaces, in particular YouTube and Facebook. It explores the construction, negotiation, and performance of transnational Punjabi identities in these online spaces with a particular emphasis on gender, spectatorship, and fan culture around Punjabi dramas. These stage dramas, which are recordings of live performances in Pakistan, have such a massive following that it exceeds in-theatre viewership. On average, these dramas have over 5 million views, 20 thousand likes, and hundreds of comments each. For the purpose of this study, more than 500 comments on 3 popular Punjabi stage dramas have been analyzed. An overview of the comment section reveals that almost all the comments are made by male viewers, and they are mostly positive. Many of the commenters identify themselves as residing outside of Pakistan, such as India and the UK. These patterns and trends are further analyzed by employing exploratory qualitative data analysis techniques of text mining. The findings will be represented in word clouds and frequency plots to observe trends and patterns in the comments. This study provides insight into the digital afterlives of these performances and how they resonate with Punjabis through time and across borders in online spaces.

Keywords: Fan communities; Punjabi; Punjab stage dramas; Diaspora; Social media

Introduction

Punjabi stage dramas are comedy, theatre performances popular in the region of Punjab, Pakistan. The live recordings of these stage dramas circulate widely on social media and video sharing websites such as Facebook and YouTube. Typically staged in a drawing room setting, the dramas regularly feature sexual innuendos and suggestive dance performances. Due to this, these popular stage dramas are considered "anathema to legitimate theatre, roundly dismissed as lowbrow" (Pamment 133). The live theatre performances of these stage dramas are generally popular with the lower socioeconomic classes. However, their recordings can also be seen entering middle- and upper-class homes (147). Moreover, the recordings of these stage dramas on YouTube have become increasingly popular in Indian Punjab, and with the Punjabi diaspora based in the UK and Canada. On YouTube, these performances have a massive viewership, and YouTube has become a popular medium for the consumption of these dramas with millions of subscribers and viewers. McLuhan famously said that "the medium is the message" implying that how the content is perceived will depend on the medium (qtd. in Giddens 3). Hence, it is
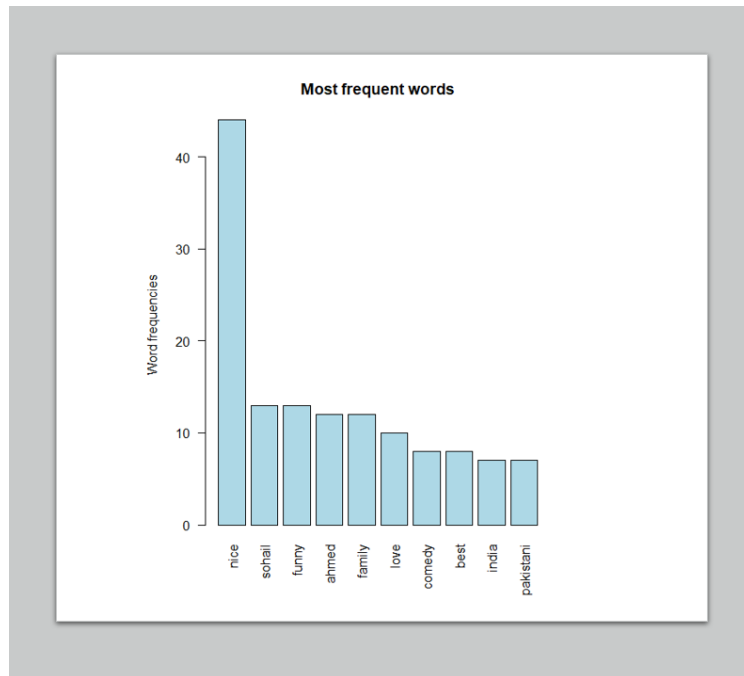
important to pay attention to the medium itself. This study investigates how the fan communities of the Punjabi Stage Dramas have interacted with the content and each other as these dramas circulate on online spaces like YouTube, exploring the themes of Punjabi transnational identities, with a particular focus on gender and fan culture and their perception of these dramas as being family friendly entertainment.

With the onset of digital media, the medium is no longer restricted to cinema halls, so only conducting participatory observation and ethnographic accounts is no longer sufficient (Jenkins, "The Cultural Logic" 34). This study will look at how digital audiences receive and respond to Punjabi stage dramas. To determine this, the paper will focus on the comments left by viewers under the Youtube videos of these dramas. These comments can be seen as supplements to the main dramatic text, and it is important to analyze these "accompanying productions" (Klecker 403) to understand how the digital reproduction of these dramas has expanded the dramatic text's meanings and possibilities across regional boundaries. To undertake this analysis, Google API was used to extract the YouTube comments of a few selected stage dramas. The following elements were extracted: timestamp, comment author name, comment content, comment likes, and comment replies count. A major limitation was that YouTube does not record the gender and location of the author of the comment. Consequently, for analysis, the gender of the commenter was assumed from their profile name, and location was only considered in case the commenter chose to reveal their location in their comment content.

More than 500 comments were extracted from three popular Punjabi stage dramas: *Ek Tera Sanam Khana/Your Place of Idols* (dir. Awan Jee, 2003), in which male actors employ cross dressing techniques to condemn the inordinately masculine political and social structures of Pakistan; *Shartiya Mithay/Guaranteed Sweet* (Anon., 1990s), wherein the father of two blind sons wants his son to become beggars and the sons want to get married; and *Feeqa in Amrika/Feeqa in America* (Anon., 1990s), in which Feeqa, who is neurodivergent, is considered to be a burden until he goes to America. These three dramas were chosen because of their popularity on YouTube as gauged by the number of views, likes, and comments. The comments were sorted in descending order with respect to the number of likes on each comment to observe which comments had the most engagement and identify recurring themes. The patterns and trends in the comments are further analyzed by employing exploratory qualitative data analysis techniques such as text mining in RStudio. A word cloud and a bar chart were generated to reveal the words that were most frequently used by the comment authors. This aided in identifying the major themes from the audience reception of the screen text.

As mentioned earlier the limitation of this study is that the gender of the comment author is assumed from their user handle. Gender is not binary and not necessarily indicated by the name. So, using the names of the comment authors to assume the gender is an imperfect measure. Moreover, the owner of the YouTube channel might have deleted negative or offensive comments from the comment section noticeable through the fact that there were very few negative comments in the comment section, which would limit our understanding of how these dramas are received. However, it is of little concern as this study aims to explore the fan culture around these stage dramas.

Stage Dramas and their Digital Reception

A stage drama typically starts with an upbeat Punjabi song. Usually, a stage drama features three dance performances: in the beginning, middle, and at the end. These dance performances are not included in the recordings of these stage dramas and are uploaded separately on different online spaces for their consumption. The curtains usually open to a drawing room setting and the plays begin with a "loose situational premise that pits prosperous and powerful high-status characters against cheeky and chattering low-status characters" (Pamment 134). The comedy of Punjabi stage dramas lies at the intersectionality of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability, and physical appearance.

An analysis of the comment section underneath the Youtube videos revealed that certain words were used very frequently (Figures 1 and 2). These included appreciation for the humor ("comedy", "best", "funny"), acknowledgement for the family-friendly nature of the videos ("family", "clean"), and geographical references ("India", "Pakistan"). The following themes were identified in the comment section of the YouTube videos of Punjabi stage dramas: transnational Punjabi identity, gender, fan culture, and the perception of stage dramas as family friendly.

Word Cloud of the Comment Section

Figure 1: Word cloud of the comment section.

Most
Frequently
Used Words
by Comment
Authors

Figure 2: Most Frequent Used Words by Comment Authors

Transnational Punjabi Identity

It seems that there is construction, negotiation, and performance of transnational Punjabi identities in these online spaces, particularly YouTube. Traditionally the content of these stage dramas was produced for local consumption but with the advent of social networking and video sharing websites, these stage dramas became increasingly popular with the Punjabi diaspora based in India and the UK. The term 'diaspora' is defined as "a desire to feel at 'home' in the context of migration" (Brah 17). Brah argues that "home is both 'lived' and 'imagined'" (Brah 20) and constituted through "multiple (lived and imagined) relationships with people and places" (Mallett 76). In the age of high globalization, home has become an excessively a-spatial phenomenon, a concept pertinent to the Punjabi diaspora (King and Christou 462). Furthermore, Taylor et al., argue that "home is often represented as offering complete familiarity and comfort, a place that we either leave and long for, or we move towards, for security and identity" (224). The comment section revealed this "homing desire" (Brah 180) among the Punjabi diaspora as many appreciated these stage dramas because they depicted the family dynamics and how things typically work in a Punjabi home. The comment authors praised the content because of its portrayal of the reality of a Punjabi household. This provided the Punjabi diaspora with a chance to feel at 'home' and cherish their Punjabi identity despite being geographically scattered.

This shows how the fanbase of these stage shows has transformed into a transnational community over time. Taylor et al., claims that Punjabi diaspora can be viewed as a part of a wider transnational community and defines transnational community as "groups based in two or more countries that engage in recurrent, enduring and significant cross border activities, which may be economic, political, social or cultural in character" (222). One cannot necessarily identify viewers' location by name, but the comment section of these stage dramas included a lot of

Hindi names which do point to high viewership outside of Pakistan. Some commenters chose to reveal their location and mentioned that they belonged to Indian Punjab or the Sikh communities based in the UK. Some of the comments left by people from India read, "Love from Punjab, India", "*Bohat khaas* love from Punjab" ('Very special love from Punjab'), "*Bohat sohna drama*" ('Very beautiful drama'), "Love your play from India", and "East or West Punjab is the Best". Moreover, these were the top comments as they had the most engagement based on the number of likes and comments. These comments had more than 300 likes on average and multiple replies whereas other comments which just appreciated the content of the drama had an average of 4 or 5 likes.

From the aforementioned observations, it can be concluded that the comments which indicated association with an international Punjabi community gained higher levels of engagement. The Pakistani audience would have been happy and proud to see that their stage dramas were being appreciated by an international community and the platform seemed to have provided them with a space through which they could develop bonds. It seems that the political tensions between both the countries have not prevented people from actively streaming and watching these dramas. Governments of both countries have banned the exchange of content, but a Punjabi identity and its roots have surpassed these restrictions. This has been made possible by social media which fosters new forms of electronic communication that work as an alternative for real-life interactions, which may not be possible due to geopolitical barriers such as border restrictions.

Furthermore, Taylor et al. assert that there are four vital meanings of home: "firstly, a geographical space or material home; secondly, a site where everyday life is lived, the 'lived home'; thirdly, a nucleus of social relationships and a point of identification, a cultural home; fourthly, a 'desired home'" (224). Their study concludes that "meanings of home, as part of diasporic identities, can be context-dependent, dynamic and intrinsically linked with how processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances" (223).

Punjabi cinema became a huge trend because of its appeal to the masses of common people which makes the content more relatable for the viewers. It is probable that a popular Punjabi film, *Chal Mera Put/Let's Go Son* (dir. Janjot Singh, 2019) has helped introduce the international audience to Pakistani stage dramas. The film is based on the undocumented migrant workers based in UK and explores the theme of Indian and Punjabi migrant workers struggling and learning to live together. Similarly, these stage dramas are very old school and deal with traditional tropes and themes. These dramas are staged in a common drawing room setting and explore the everyday struggles of the working class of people. This helps in understanding the appeal these dramas have for the working class and migrant laborers abroad. These dramas have helped in building an imagined community of Punjab that is accessible on both sides of the border. This is the power of Punjabi stage dramas as it has allowed people from two rival countries to bond over these stage dramas.

Gendered Analysis

Punjabi stage dramas are produced, written, and performed by men and only target them as their audience in Pakistan. These dramas are targeted towards the male audiences and have a stigma attached to the consumption of stage dramas due to their reputation for vulgarity.

Analysis of the comment section on YouTube reveals that more than 99% of the people who have engaged with the content have usernames that suggests they are males (Figure 3). This is in line with the in-theatre viewership, and online spaces such as YouTube seem to have little to no effect on changing this viewership pattern. Both gender and class are significant in determining whether a film or a drama is considered appropriate to watch and for whom. Kirk examines a linguistic hierarchy in Pakistan, where English is dominantly perceived as the language of the upper classes, followed by Urdu. Punjabi is the regional language of Punjab and is the most widely spoken language in Pakistan. Regardless of this, it is associated with the lower class because it is considered to be crude. This perception is reflected in the audience consumption, as the Punjabi theatre is

Figure 3: Frequency of comments by gender.

popular with the working-class (7). However, even the women belonging to the working class, are supposed to stay away from such content which might be considered normal for the male members of their household. This is evident from their absence in the theatres. But even with the privacy provided by the digital medium, there has not been any significant increase in female viewership. This is due to the societal narrative which perpetuates that "good" and "decent" women need to stay away from this kind of content.

The gendered dynamics of Punjabi stage dramas are not only limited to its viewership. Even the women working in contemporary Punjabi theatre are deemed as "bad girls" and are accused of promoting "obscenity" and "vulgarity" in the society (Pamment 3). Female stage actresses have to face verbal and physical assault on and off stage. Nargis, a famous stage dancer, was brutally assaulted by an "ex-police officer" who "cut her hair, shaved off her eyebrows, and inflicted 39 wounds on her body" ("Nargis alleges torture by ex-policeman") when she threatened to expose "the elite government officials who had been enjoying her dance performances in the privacy of their homes" (Pamnent 148). In *Kuch na Kaho/Don't Say Anything* (dir. Ilyas Kashmiri, 2016),
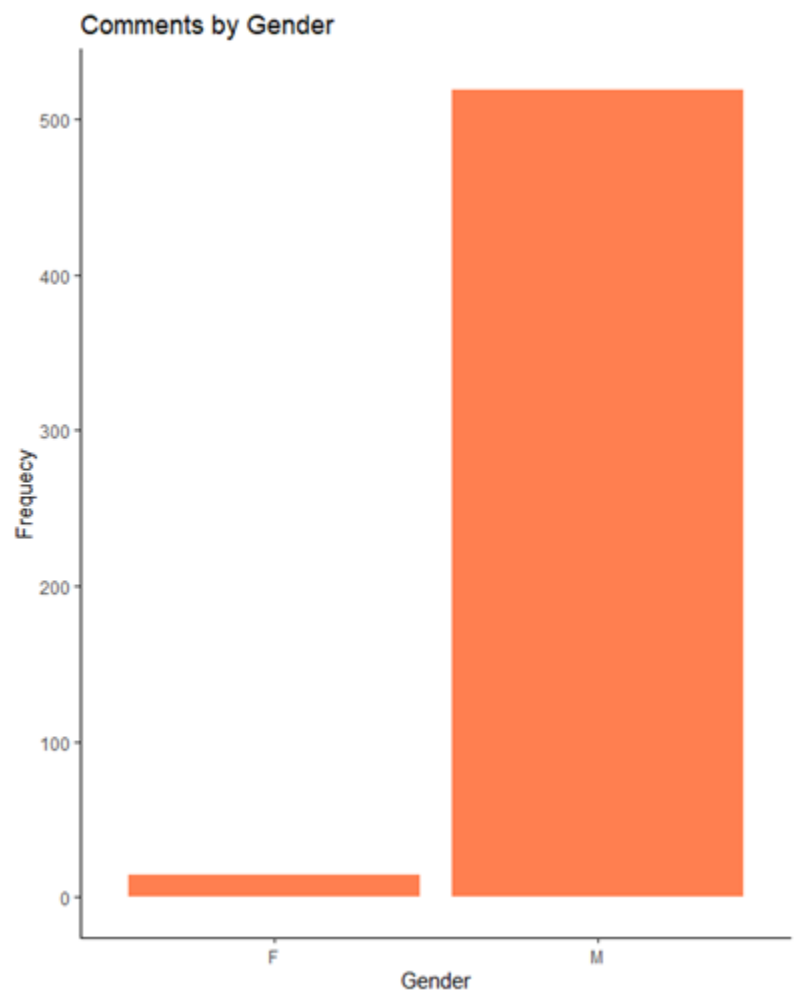
another stage drama, a girl reveals to a male servant that she loves dancing. The servant recommends something "you are a good girl. You should have a wedding" (Pamment 149). The theatre thus highlights the skewed gender balance in our society and depicts the degree of patriarchy and misogyny prevalent in Punjabi society.

Furthermore, it is evident that the content of these stage dramas is structured to appeal more to the male audience. Most of the humor is centered around polygamy, women's morality, and explicit references to sexual intercourse. Laura Mulvey claims in her essay that "film language is both controlled by men and designed for the benefit of male pleasure, which is inextricably linked with looking, voyeurism, and the objectification of the female image" (10). Mulvey further argues that "film only serves to perpetuate a type of male-driven patriarchal language that facilitates male visual pleasure and female spectators have no access to it other than through the male gaze that consistently objectifies the female spectator's onscreen counterpart. Therefore, the only pleasure that female spectators derive from it is masochistic (the pleasure in one's own pain)" (10). These stage dramas are created for the male audience by the male producers, directors, and actors, and female performers have little to no part in the main plot and their performances serve as peripheral items (Pamment 201). A major critique leveled against the Punjabi stage dramas is the abundance of misogynist *juggat* ('disparaging remark') and lack of narrative (Pamment 135). The popular practice in Punjabi stage dramas of "making women the target of jokes in a very vulgar manner" has been condemned by the theatre activists (Pamnent 145). Serving as passive sidekicks to the male comedians, women ultimately became targets for misogynist humor. The women characters present in the stage shows are normally of ill repute and this is made very clear through the insults they get from male actors. The "comedians explicitly play to their audience's male gaze, crudely reducing [female counterparts] to sexual utility" (Pamment 146). The comment section of these stage dramas on YouTube is filled with people asking the names of the female actors and praising them for their physical appearance. On the contrary, male comedians are praised for their comedy and performance. Hence, the misogynistic content of these dramas and society's disapproval might help in explaining the absence of female viewership.

Fan Culture

The fan culture around the Punjabi stage dramas in the online spaces can be analyzed as an important part of modern consumer culture. It can tell a great deal about how stage dramas function both as a source of entertainment and an art form. So, it becomes pertinent to talk about the fan culture that exists around these stage dramas as they circulate on YouTube and Facebook. In online spaces, fans are defined as "individuals with a relatively deep positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous [who] make use of digital tools and communication technologies to discuss, share, create, or otherwise respond to a public performance" (Duffet 18). Fans may not be the "cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers that they have been labeled" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 231). Rather, "fans are able to digest the media texts that they consume so as to produce their own artworks and be creative on their own terms" (233). Fans are considered a dedicated and active audience, so it is important to study them in media sociology. Recent digitalization of live performances has allowed fan culture to become more widespread and more accessible. Digitalization for online spaces such as YouTube has allowed a virtual community to be formed. A virtual community is defined as

"social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 67). In this case, the community seems to be based on mutual admiration for stage dramas.

Virtual spaces like YouTube and Facebook provide a particular freedom to the audience in viewing stage dramas, indulging in discussions around them, and acknowledging they like and dislike. Media platforms have enabled viewers to express their opinions in new ways and Punjabi stage dramas consumers have used these online spaces to create a discourse that is political and religious. Fan groups for Punjabi stage drama are very popular on Facebook and YouTube, however, there is a stark difference in the discourse surrounding these dramas in both these spaces. Facebook and YouTube differ in terms of their audience, content that is shared, and the way the community interacts with that content. On Facebook groups, *mujra* ('sexual dance') videos circulate which are not present in the drama recordings that are made available on YouTube. Furthermore, the content that is generally shared on these Facebook groups by its members hardly has anything to do with the stage dramas themselves with people sharing random pictures which they think will get a lot of. Facebook groups for these stage drama groups have an abundance of unrelated religious and political posts; pictures like *Allah* ('God') written in a fruit and posts praising the Pakistan army are common among these Facebook groups.

New digital technologies have been central to understanding how the notion of piety and religious identity is constructed among Muslims today. Charles Hirshckind analyzes that in Egypt, religious identity and notion of piety is established through listening to popular audio cassette sermons of religious texts that connect the listener with his larger sense of piety. Hirshckind explores ways in which these sermons have penetrated the public sphere to the extent of a constant sound emanating from everywhere (Syeda 14). Hirshckind's arguments regarding piety can help explain how digital media technologies are being employed in Pakistan to create religious identity in the Facebook groups of these stage dramas. On the one hand, YouTube has created a transnational space with people across borders watching and mutually appreciating the family-friendly content of Punjabi stage dramas. On the other hand, the audience on Facebook seems to be interested either in the clips of sexualized performances and double entendre, or ironically, using the space to further religious and political discourse Hence, each platform facilitates a different kind of fan following due to things like the nature and privacy of the interactions, and the platform's own censorship and regulations.

Family Friendly Entertainment

Another prominent theme that emerged from the comments left on these stage dramas was that these dramas were considered as a family friendly form of entertainment by many comment authors on YouTube. Many comments said that the stage dramas are family friendly or "*Parivaar ke beech main beth ke dekhnay wala*" ('Can be watched when sitting with family'). Family friendly entertainment means that it is appropriate to view with children. These comments are paradoxical given that stage dramas have a notorious reputation for vulgarity and obscenity due to not only crude language but sexually provocative dance performances.

The sexually provocative dance performances are termed as mujra. Mujra is a kind of sexual dance performance by a woman. Such performances play a huge part in the popularity of live

performances. The live theatre performances rely on these sexually suggestive dance numbers appealing to the 'male gaze' to entice the audience. Mujra dance performances in stage dramas feature a "female performer in a sexually charged and powerful situation who needs to be satiated and desires a male for her satisfaction" (Syeda 6). Hoek has defined obscenity as "the representation of sexuality in ways that are considered socially and morally unacceptable" (3). Following this, these dramas are notorious for obscenity and vulgarity because of these erotic dance performances. In Pakistan, these dramas are certainly not considered family friendly, which is evident from the predominantly male crowd present in live theatre performances.

Thus, there is a huge inconsistency between the reputation these stage dramas and their performers have in Pakistan versus the reputation they have in the transnational community on YouTube. In Pakistan, the stage dramas and their performers have a very negative reputation, and these dramas are perceived as an immoral form of entertainment. Khalid Abbas Dar, a senior stage actor, reported in an interview that his dying father said, "I have no regrets in life except your performances" (Pamnent 138). Then a question arises: why is someone sitting in India claiming that this is a family friendly form of entertainment with dozens of people agreeing with it? The live mujra performances, which are an integral part of live Punjabi stage dramas, are cut out from the recordings of the stage dramas that is made available on YouTube rendering these stage dramas "clean" for their viewers. Therefore, the international community does not get to view the sensationalized and sexualized aspects of these dramas since they do not make it to YouTube. Hence, it is probable that due to the lack of sexual dance performances in the recordings of the stage dramas, people deem these plays as family friendly. Although the stage dramas are full of sexual innuendos, these dramas are still regarded as family friendly form of entertainment by its male viewership.

Another reason that these Punjabi dramas are considered family friendly by their fans might be because these dramas are very traditional in their plot. The stage is usually set in a domestic setting and the plots revolve around finding humour in mundane situations. Even though these dramas may include the topics of marriage and flirtation, they do not include themes like 'modern' dating which means they resonate as family friendly to Punjabis.

Conclusion

New media has allowed these stage dramas to reach a wider audience greatly replacing the older forms of consumption that are live theatre performances. These dramas have a massive fan base on YouTube. However, there is a huge contradiction between the reputation these stage dramas and actors have in Pakistan versus the reputation these dramas have with the international community on YouTube. The mujra performances which are a huge part of live performances do not make it to YouTube due to which the international community watching these dramas do not perceive them as immoral, which is how they are commonly perceived in Pakistan. Additionally, due to the absence of the mujra performances, these stage dramas are claimed to be a family-friendly form of entertainment by the viewers on YouTube. Still, even with the privacy provided by the digital medium coupled with the "clean" perception of these dramas, they have been unable to increase the female viewership or engagement with the content. In this way YouTube has helped in the formation of a transnational Punjabi community around these stage dramas. On the contrary, Facebook groups include even more sexualized and sensationalized content than in

theatre performances. On one hand, YouTube has brought the Punjabi diaspora together and provided them with family-friendly entertainment in their mother tongue while on the other hand, the Facebook audience is appreciating the raunchy side of humor. Hence, not all online spaces have worked in a similar manner and the different reception of Punjabi stage dramas in their live context, on Youtube, and on Facebook goes to show that the medium really is the message.
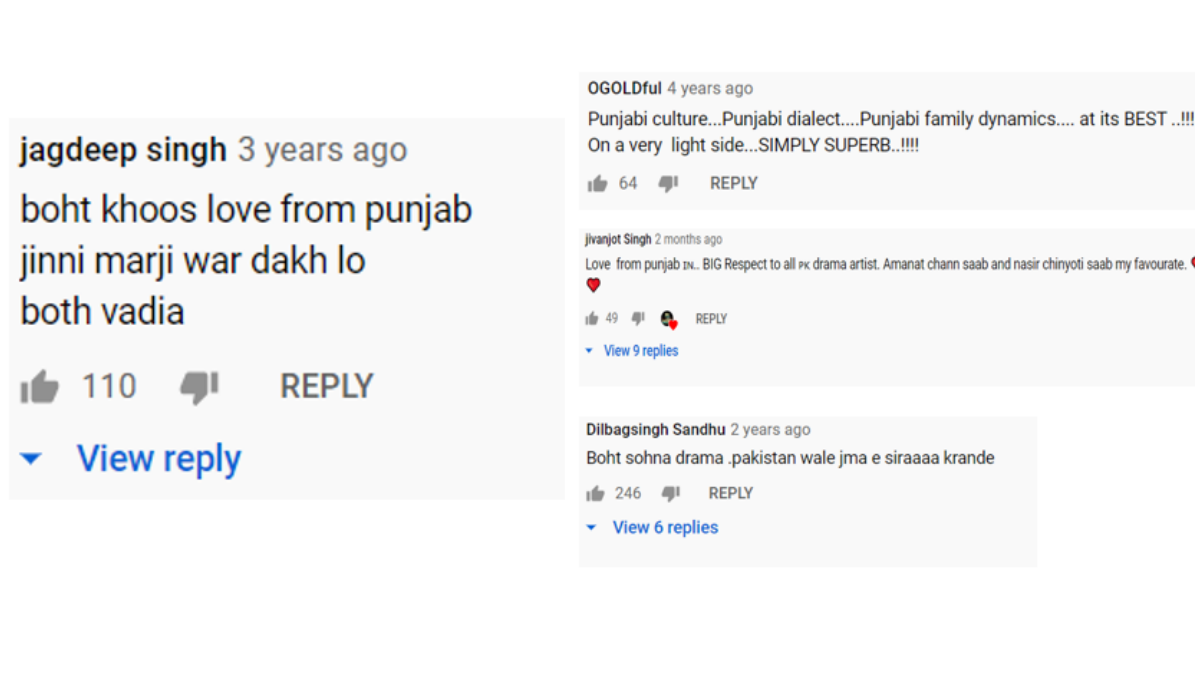
Appendix

Figure 4 Comments on Punjabi Identity

Figure 5 Comments on Stage Dramas being Family Friendly

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Filmography

Chal Mera Put/Let's Go Son (dir. Janjot Singh, 2019)

"Feeqa In America New Pakistani Stage Drama Full Comedy Show" *YouTube,* uploaded by
        Mooncdcorner, 9 April 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cAbLWntAHk

"Ik tera sanam khana full stage drama" *YouTube*, uploaded by Umer Mehar, 24 October 2018,
        https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGpOmE7mW9s

Kuch na Kaho/Don't Say Anything (dir. Ilyas Kashmiri, 2016)

"Shartiya Mithe (Full Drama) – Sohail Ahmad – Best Pakistani Comedy Stage Drama" *YouTube*,
        uploaded by Hi-Tech Music Ltd, 1 January 2016,
        https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb1G7uakTOY

Vernacular Visual Aesthetic: The Genre of Digital Punjabi Stage Dramas

M Balach Khan

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-

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[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

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[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

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[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 phallocentric 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 phallocentric 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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Pirate Creativity on Pirate Screens: The Localization and Distribution of Pirate Media in Pakistan

Muhammad Faizan ul Haq

Abstract

Though DVD stores are in decline today, historically they have been and, for many people, continue to be the dominant mode through which Pakistani consumers access films and other media. In *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, which this paper draws heavily upon, Lobato analyzes informal distribution systems for film and other media by approaching them "as a complex of networks with their logics, strategies, and ambitions" (3). This paper attempts to analyze the system through which film and other media is distributed in Pakistan – its structure, working, and limitations – by closely examining the role played by Pakistani CD and DVD store owners in producing and distributing pirated content, as well as the practices adopted in the Pakistani film industry to respond to the widespread presence of piracy. Using interviews with Pakistani DVD store owners and a case study of a videogame modification available in Pakistan called "GTA Karachi," this paper studies piracy in Pakistan by examining the extent to which it is a formalized system, and its legal status. It analyzes how pirated content is transformed through the distribution process as it suffers audio and visual degradation, and as additional paratextual elements inform the ways in which it is interpreted. Finally, the paper looks at the potential for content to be created uniquely in the Pakistani pirate distribution system through a case study of GTA Karachi.

Keywords: Piracy; paratext; GTA; Karachi; localizing; audio; video; distribution

Introduction

Despite limited access to internet and technological innovation, there is a vast audience for international audio-visual content, including films, television shows, music, and games in Pakistan. A lot of such content is consumed through its pirated versions. Yet, piracy in Pakistan remains a largely understudied phenomenon. This is of concern given its sheer prevalence. In a country with median income too weak to allow the purchase of original content for a majority of the population, the distribution of significantly cheaper, pirated content remains widespread. From computer softwares to movies and television shows, pirated content is widely consumed in Pakistan (Khan). However, the pirate distribution process has its own implications for all media that passes through it. Such media is changed in the process, and the audience consuming it is

subject to an experience that is vastly different from that of the consumption of original media. Given that DVDs have been the main medium through which pirated content has been distributed for the past decade and a half, this paper seeks to advance an understanding of the structure of pirated DVD distribution in Pakistan and theorize the ways the pirated object is transformed. The paper will also investigate the unique potential for creating creative content that exists within pirate distribution.

Much of mainstream discourse on piracy starts with the premise that piracy is illegal, working to either theorize new ways to combat it or understand the reasons for its prevalence. A recent meta-analysis of research done in piracy, for example, preoccupies itself with explaining the motivations of individuals who take part in digital piracy while citing "possible revisions to antipiracy measures" as its main contribution, which could aid in "confronting the global threat of piracy" (Eisend 659). However, very little attention has been paid to the study of piracy as a distribution system with its own merits. There is also a dearth of work on the structures and mechanisms of pirate distribution systems, and their implications beyond financial loss for intellectual property right holders.

However, many scholars have attempted to theorize and understand informal film distribution. Lobato's *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* studies the merits of informal film distribution without the previously mentioned focus on piracy's illegality. Lobato introduces the notion of a "shadow economy" which exists in relation to the formal structure, a concept that this paper will develop in the context of Pakistan's pirate distribution system. Furthermore, Brian Larkin provides a history of media in Nigeria in "Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria", focusing on the introduction of radio broadcasting and cinema, and the creation of a local film industry, supported by the infrastructure of pirate film distribution already present in the region. The last few sections of this paper analyze a similar creative potential in the pirate distribution structure in Pakistan. Additionally, works like *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution And Cultural Production in the Global South* and Ravi Sundaram's "Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism" analyze the cultural implications of piracy as well as the way it assists societies in the global south in accessing global modernity.

Methodology

The research in this paper is based primarily on visits to five different stores in Islamabad that stock and sell pirated media. The stores are located in different areas of the city. At these stores, I collected observational data about the products available, their quality, recent changes in the store, prices, and also conducted interviews with the employees. At each location, I tried interviewing the workers who were in charge of the sale of pirated DVDs. These interviews were semi-structured. The data collected from my observations and interviews informs my argument in the "pirate intermediaries' section" and "enmeshed context" sections of this paper. For the latter part of this paper, I downloaded and played "GTA Karachi" (a modification of GTA San Andreas, released by Rockstar Games). Since I was already familiar with the original games, I spent several hours going through each to spot and document changes. I compared this with screenshots found on the game's Facebook page and data given out by the developers to complete a comprehensive list of changes made.

Locating Piracy in Pakistan

The distribution of pirated media, while clearly illegal under Pakistani law (Naqvi), is rarely enforced for most of the pirated media distributed in Pakistan, claimed a DVD store owner. The result of this is that the sale of pirated media (including films, music, software, and video games) happens in brick-and-mortar stores across Pakistan; each sector in Islamabad usually has one present in its marketplace, for example. In no way do these stores attempt to hide their sale of the pirated product either; they are openly displayed on shelves that often run from floor to ceiling, visible from outside. In Pakistan, piracy is not something that needs to be hidden away. In fact, it is mainstream to the point where original or non-pirated versions of some content are rarely available, limited to only a few stores where special DVD box sets or original copies of certain video games are available.

There is no separate formal sector which solely distributes non-pirated or original media. Rather, it is the distribution of original media which is rarely present in the spaces where pirated media is sold. An exception to this is the sale of video games for the seventh generation of consoles, including the PS4, Nintendo Switch, and Xbox One. One shopkeeper reported that there are little to none pirated copies of games for those video game consoles which were released in the last decade and a half and predicted this to be the future for videogame console piracy. This seems to be the future for videogame piracy in Pakistan, given that recent videogame consoles are equipped to resist the hacking that enables software piracy on consoles (Husain). Additionally, the interviews revealed that most pirated DVD stores in Pakistan get their supply from the same location: Rainbow Center in Karachi, which mass produces pirated DVDs. This center is widely known, and in contact with DVD stores in every major Pakistani city. The DVD stores get a steady supply of pirated DVDs from Rainbow Center through a bulk order that is shipped across Pakistan, starting from Karachi and steadily moving up North through Lahore and then Islamabad. For the DVD stores, there is a set expectation of when each order will arrive, and what each order might contain based on new movie releases or specific orders that have been requested due to consumer demand. In this sense, there is a level of stability and structure to the distribution process across the entire country and the expectation that the supply will remain constant. These are all hallmarks of a system that is somewhat structured and formalized across the country.

These stores, despite technically taking part in illegal activities through the sale of pirated content, are almost never investigated by law enforcement and can thus exist within the public sphere with impunity. This gives the DVD stores, present on almost every street corner, a sense of normalcy and security, which does not exist in economies with a stronger formal sector when it comes to pirate distribution. DVD stores do not advertise whether they sell pirated DVDs or original DVDs. The implication that most, if not all, material will be pirated is obvious and unquestioned. Piracy in Pakistan is hence almost entirely a banal act, outside of the discourses of copyright laws and illegality which have dominated media and mainstream discussions of piracy globally. The act of purchasing a pirate DVD is as innocuous as that of purchasing groceries. One shopkeeper doubted whether any consumer in Pakistan cared about copyright infringement at all. He stated that the vast majority of people can afford pirated content because of the flat fee shared across all the pirated content sold which is just rupees 100 for a DVD, and rupees 150 for a videogame.

Unlike with foreign content, the piracy of Pakistani media can still be regulated as film and television producers do have a degree of control over their copyright enforcement through the release of official DVDs. Dramas produced by Hum TV, for example, are produced and sold in Pakistan with official box sets that can cost upwards of double what pirated DVDs would cost for the same, though this is still not comparable to the price a US imported DVD would have in Pakistan. 200-500 rupees worth of an original Hum TV disc set vs. the $10-$40 cost of the former, which would translate to 1500-4000, by a shopkeeper's estimate. Official DVDs are typically released right after a film finishes its theatrical run, as happens in countries such as the US. DVD store stocks are often checked by the publisher to make sure they have not acquired a copy of the DVD yet, pirated or otherwise. The interviewee also informed that after the DVD set is shipped (which can take years after the run of a Pakistani television show), the publisher continues to check on DVD stores to ensure that they are not stocking pirated copies of the content released by them. This means that the publisher is at the same time willing to overlook all the other pirated content stocked by DVD stores. Hence, even though copyright laws are present, they are only enacted to crackdown upon the piracy of Pakistani films and teledramas; all other pirated content – including Pakistani music – is freely distributed.

Lobato makes a distinction between formal and informal (which he uses interchangeably with shadow, i.e.: formal economy vs. shadow economy) systems of distribution. He identifies formality as "the degree to which industries are regulated, measured, and governed by state and corporate institutions" (4). He defines informal distributors as those that exist outside this sphere, "or in partial articulation with it" (4). Beyond this, he provides a list of features that identify each category, with formal films involving "revenue-sharing business models, complex systems of statistical enumeration and a 'windowing' releasing pattern driven by theatrical premier" with the informal/shadow sector primarily being characterized by "handshake deals, flat fee sales, and piracy" (4). However, Lobato warns against applying these definitions universally and intends the use of the terminology as mentioned above to be more of a heuristic device rather than a strict definition. This is in recognition of the many diverse ways in which informal media economies operate around the globe.

This warning is apt for Pakistan, where pirate distribution exists in a unique formulation between formality and informality. Its status as an illegal practice by the law which qualifies it as an informal distribution mechanism is complicated by the lack of policing and sheer normalcy with which piracy operates in Pakistan. The fact that a structure of countrywide distribution exists which allows DVD store owners certainty in terms of their supply, and the lack of a separate formal sector which deals exclusively in unpirated content make it appropriate to consider Pakistan's informal distribution system a complex, well-developed system of its own, regardless of its legal status.

Paratexts and Interpretation

This section and the one that follows broadly argue that the changes in the pirated object, as well as the para-texts created and modified by pirate distribution, affect the way that the audience interprets the pirated object. It affects the context in which the interpretation happens, the social-cultural connotations attached to the object, as well as the different features of the object. For media, this means that the larger social context and the specific situation of consumption heavily

affect how a text is interpreted, and that multiple different interpretations are possible. Jonathan Gray argues that paratexts guide the audience towards a particular interpretation. According to him, "paratexts often tell us how producers or distributors would prefer for us to interpret a text, which audience demographics they feel they are addressing, and how they want us to make sense of their characters and plots" (72). Paratexts give you the information about a text which is used in the process of interpreting it. He emphasizes the impact of the aforementioned in reference to how advertisement, trailers, online discussions, and reports from the set affect the way people consume and understand a text. He argues that "such entities change the nature of the text's address, each proliferation either amplifying an aspect of the text through its mass circulation or adding something new and different to the text" (3).

The transformations that piracy brings out in the media hence affect the process of interpretation; piracy results in original contexts being entirely dispelled or reconfigured. The succeeding section analyzes different ways in which the pirated object is transformed and how the original paratexts change as the process of pirate distribution attaches new paratexts and meanings to the object.

The Transformation of Media Under Pirate Distribution: Audiovisual Degradation

When a picture is copied multiple times, each subsequent copy is likely to lose some detail, resulting in lower quality with each copy. If done enough times, you can end up with a picture that is different from the original. Similarly, with piracy, each step of the distribution process alters the media in some way. This process occurs on multiple levels at multiple stages during the process of piracy. Larkin argues that pirated videos have their own particular aesthetic which is "marked by blurred images and distorted sounds" (14). These come together to create a "particular sensorial experience of media marked by poor transmission, interference, and noise" (14).

This loss of quality can be very literal. Official DVD releases have a set format and high quality. The high video and audio quality as intended by the directors and producers is preserved in the DVD release. Pirated films, however, are typically available in several different "prints", a DVD store clerk in Islamabad revealed. The word "print" here, as used by DVD store owners, refers to varying audio and visual qualities of a pirated DVD of the same content, with high-quality prints being closer to the version in the official DVD. When a film first releases in the cinema, pirated DVD producers immediately supply the first print even before the film has an official DVD release. This is colloquially referred to as the "cam" or "camera" print as the video file in these pirated DVDs is a recording someone has made from their camera while viewing the film in a cinema and then shared online, typically to a P2P file-sharing site. This is the lowest quality of the prints available. Given that it is recorded on a camera, a lot of visual detail is lost. The colors change massively; the darks become darker, the vibrant colors become more vibrant, often more painfully so. The original resolution of the film is completely ruined; first, the distance between the camera and the screen limits how much of the film's detail can be captured, second, the camera used to record has low resolution. This means that the picture is less sharp, its edges less defined, and any text harder to read. The fact that you are viewing a recording of a congregation with other people is obvious too; it is common for people to walk in front of the camera and

block the screen. Sometimes the heads or shoulders of people are visible throughout the movie even when they are seated, obscuring parts of the cinema screen.

Besides this, the audio quality tends to suffer immensely since the camera is not only situated far from the cinema's speakers but because the sounds of the audience are recorded too. Often, the sound of applause drowns out the audio of the movie during key scenes. Even with a quiet audience, sound quality is lost. Cheap microphones attached to cameras fail to capture detail in the sound and often miss out on low volume sounds completely. High volume sounds – such as gunfire or explosions often become distorted. Sounds of the lower end of the frequency spectrum (such as the low thud of a kick drum or the bass track in the movie's soundtrack) become muddy, while higher-pitched sounds turn shrill. The acoustics of the cinema do the sound no favor either, adding a lot of reverb and echo that is reproduced and increased whenever the recording is replayed on any other speaker.

The experience of watching a low-quality print can be seen as a degraded viewing experience, given all the audio and visual distortions mentioned above. Yet, quite a few DVD stores reported that many consumers impatiently await the release of a camera print since the excitement of seeing a highly anticipated film trumps the aforementioned concerns. Eventually, a "master print" is released. This happens when the film or television show gets its own official theatrical release which tends to have the same video content and quality as the official DVD release since the suppliers get their hands on the original video file and begin to produce copies, a DVD store employee explained.

Other issues exist where the pirated DVD may fail to play in a DVD player, likely due to encoding issues with the video file, incorrectly burned discs, or discs getting scratched and damaged in the process of transportation. Thus, the purchase of a film is always accompanied by the question, "*Kya yeh DVD chalegi*?" ('Will this disc work?'). It is very common for DVD store owners to bring in policies to mediate issues customers may have with DVDs not working, where they allow customers to replace any non-working disc with another for free. Often, DVD store owners have a small TV screen setup along with a DVD player and any necessary video game consoles to test DVDs before they're sold. This process is also often futile since pirated discs may work differently in different DVD players. In this sense, there is a constant source of anxiety attached to the purchase of pirated media in Pakistan. People in Pakistan may frequently purchase pirated media, but they do not always trust it.

The Transformation of Media under Pirate Distribution

Piracy results in the removal of media from the numerous paratexts and contexts in which it might originally have been understood. In this section, I analyze how pirate distribution removes or changes different aspects of the context and paratexts of media content, thereby influencing how we interpret them.

The cover art of the original DVDs is not only a clear indication of the content that is promised inside, but it is also a carefully curated product in and of itself. It is carefully constructed to help in "creating a life, character, and meaning for all manner of products and services" (Gray 4). For example, the DVD cover of any software would illustrate the purpose of the software, its

features, and the contexts in which it is used. The cover of a video game or movie might indicate the kind of experience one can expect using stylistic elements like the font used on the cover, the characters represented, the color scheme used, and other aspects of its design. Pirated DVDs in Pakistan often alter this experience completely, sometimes featuring creative attempts by the producers to create cover art of their own to sell the pirated content.

Figures 1 and 2 show the front and back cover of a pirated compilation of software. The front cover is radically different from the typical advertisement style for Adobe Photoshop and VLC media player; none of the original logos are present, and there is no obvious attempt at communicating the individual function of each software package. However, that is not to say that there is no original attempt at marketing the product. It announces that the product being sold is of "Public Demand," of the "ultimate typing series," and of the latest variety, "2018" (the year in which the CD was likely produced).
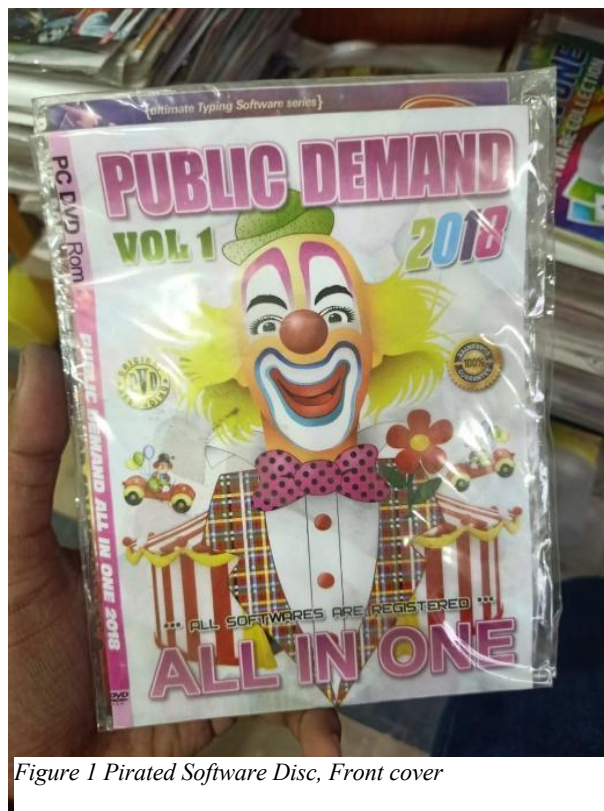

Figure 1 Pirated Software Disc, Front cover

Figure 2 Pirated Software Disc, Back Cover

The software on this pirated DVD are advertised as being "publicly demanded." Here, the designer of the cover art is not communicating the purpose of the product as the original producer might have, who may have felt the need to differentiate the product from its competitors and encourage the use of Adobe Photoshop versus other image editing programs, for instance. In contrast, the designer of the cover art for the pirated product knows that using pirated Photoshop is already the norm, as are all the other programs included in the disc. If there are any alternatives, they are included too in the disc. The phrase "publicly demanded" is a very apt description, then. In this way, piracy also creates a new and innovative product since software packs like this are not typically sold internationally. The software is also described as all registered, which implies that each software has an additional third party "crack" included that modifies the installation to ensure that each installed software behaves like an original or a registered copy and not a limited or unregistered one which would have limited functions.

It is a little harder to make sense of some of the other phrases and images on the cover of the pirated DVD shown here, since they refer to things that may not directly relate to the product. However, they still serve to create associations for any potential buyer. The tagline "ultimate typing series" indicates that the software included in the DVD require the use of the keyboard, which communicates to potential buyers that the word processing programs included here, for example, are typically those associated with typing intense tasks. The ESRB sticker on the cover is also part of this attempt at creating familiarity as videogames are typically rated by the ESRB content advisory board based on the maturity of the content included to ensure that children stay away from adult content. Anyone who has purchased a videogame is familiar with ESRB symbols. By attaching an ESRB symbol here, the creator of the cover art tries to increase the credence of this original packaging of software by advertising it as an authentic product. With the core information conveyed with text, the clown completes the cover art. If nothing else, the animated imagery of the clown makes the product stand out in comparison to similar pirated software packages and lends the surrounding text and disc jacket an vibrant color scheme as well. Thus, there is a clear logic in the inclusion of what may seem like very disparate elements initially. The paratext is completely changed from the original to something decidedly more creative, and one which can speak to its consumers' associations.

Even if the pirated DVD directly copies the box art of an original film or software, the complete content promised on the cover is rarely found on the pirated DVD. Original DVDs typically include a few extra features, such as subtitles, trivia games, behind-the-scenes, interviews of the cast and crew, and so on. These are meant to make the purchase of a DVD worthwhile even for consumers who have already seen the film in cinemas but these features are rarely present in pirated DVDs. Pirated DVDs will often include a menu that allows the selection of the film, but any options for bonus content likely do not work. The fact that this content will not be present is common knowledge. DVD store owners and clerks widely acknowledge that these extras will not be present. This includes instances where certain parts of the film may be missing too, such as an advertised "director's cut" of Star Wars turns out to be the original cut mistitled, or the promise of "One Tree Hill's Fourth Season" on the DVD cover falls short with a disc that omits the last few episodes or has the last few episodes that are corrupt. In each of these cases, there is a discrepancy between what you intended to view with the purchase of a DVD advertising content of a specific kind, and what you end up getting. These differences can be drastic, for example, if a television season is missing episodes, it could change the way that the linear narrative or the plotline is perceived, or they can be relatively marginal, for instance if some scenes are cut or

different from the cut that was advertised on the DVD. In either instance, though, the viewership experience is transformed.

In conclusion, in the purchase and viewing a pirated film in Pakistan, the consumer is made to interact with its pirated nature, as the form and content of the media changes as a result of the distribution process. As Ravi Sundaram argues, pirated media goods in Urban Delhi "took on a life as counterfeits, fakes, or copies, or in popular language, the 'local' or 'duplicate' (106). Pirated media in Pakistan takes on such a life of its own as well.

GTA Karachi as a Case Study of Pirate Creativity

Video game modifications (colloquially referred to as "mods") are separate from complete video game releases. The creation of modifications, or modding, as it is called, can cover a wide range of actions. Any "process of altering, adding to, or deleting video game code to change the way that a particular game is played" qualifies as video game modding (Scacchi 3). Modifications can be of many kinds. Some of them can change a game completely, creating new and diverse user experiences. Others may change only small things about a game. Change as small as user interface changes are enough to qualify a mod.

GTA Karachi is a modification of the popular Grand Theft Auto (GTA) videogame series, published by Rockstar Games. It is part of a group of other modifications with similar titles such as GTA Punjab, GTA Lahore, GTA Dera Ghazi Khan. All of these are modifications of the Windows releases of GTA games released between 2000 and 2008, especially GTA San Andreas and GTA Vice City (since these tended to have graphical requirements low enough to be able to run on most computers).

These were not extensive gameplay-changing modifications; the game was still played the same way, and the story did not change. Rather, these mods were "reskins" of the original game. A mod that works by reskinning the game does not change any of the game's code or gameplay mechanics. They change the game's artwork with something designed by the mod maker. This means that certain objects and entities in the videogame world take on a new appearance even though they may act the same way they did before. So, for instance, you could make an AI car programmed to appear driving down the road seem like a different car, or you could change your own player model, or the signs and advertisements you might see driving down a suburban road (Scacchi).

The cost of producing a video game modification is far lower than the cost of actually making a video game from scratch since modification still uses the engine programmed for the videogame, especially if the modifications are small-scale. This is especially true for reskin modifications, where the changes may just relate to the creation of artwork and music with minimal coding.

The modder who made GTA Karachi is not affiliated with an organization and it is hard to discern who made the game at all. There is no clear mark of ownership, in-game or online. The game is freely available online, and numerous video tutorials exist that guide its installation. There is also a YouTube channel that has a video depicting a "teaser" of the game as well as the

name that might as well be of the modder ("GTA Karachi: Teaser"), but it is hard to definitively say who the author is due to the lack of any verification.

Piracy is helpful to the modding community in this regard. Piracy makes the software needed to create artwork and reprogram games readily available at affordable rates, so the production of mods is possible. Moreover, piracy presents a unique opportunity in Pakistan, where it also makes the distribution of these modifications possible in a manner that allows modders to gain a profit. In the US, modders are not allowed to earn a profit from the modifications that they produce. The law dictates that the mods produced by users are owned by the publishing company. Modern End User License Agreements signed upon the installation of video games also confirm this. In Pakistan, selling a DVD can be as simple as handing over a supply to a DVD store for a flat fee, who make it available to the customer. There are no legal processes the modder has to go through in order to publish their game for sale, nor do they have to worry about a cease-and-desist order since international publishers do not look to Pakistan for profits in video games anyway.

Thus, similar to Larkin's argument that the infrastructure of pirate distribution systems allowed the creation of a video film industry in Nigeria, where the media technologies "are more than transmitters of content [as] they represent cultural ambitions, political machineries, modes of leisure, relations between technology and the body, and, in certain ways, the economy and spirit of an age," I argue that a similar potential exists here in the production and in the game structure of GTA Karachi.

The Experience of a Virtual Karachi

The changes between GTA San Andreas (the original, unmodified game) and GTA Karachi are mostly only reskins. The mod skips the original game's introductory sequence, so there is no introduction to the original plot or context of the game left. It starts with the main character in the fictional US state of San Andreas but with some very clear differences.

They are all aesthetic changes, likely inspired by the lived experiences of the modder as a resident of a Karachi neighborhood. The clothing of the characters is changed to match things that seem more recognizably Pakistani or typical of Karachi; the normally blue-clad policeman of San Andreas now sports the black shirt and khaki pants of the Sindh police while ordinary bystanders wear green. Political slogans are also present here, on a character's T-shirt and graffitied on to the back of a store. The high-quality portrait of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder, edited into a building in the game gives a way a hint of the modder's nationalistic pride as well. A roadside vendor advertises cheap burgers with his sign rendered in Urdu, while a woman in a kurta stands tall next to a Habib Bank sign.

These visual elements are things that an ordinary person living and commuting in Karachi might see on the daily. The modder does not focus on including visuals of landmark monuments, instead including objects that are more mundane and recognizable. This is a deliberate choice. The GTA games are designed as "open-world" games that use the mechanics of an "open-world" as part of its structure. This means that players are not forced to linearly experience certain parts of the game before others and are free to approach virtual cities and landscapes as a sandbox and

do as they please. By inserting symbols that signify the everyday life of someone who lives in Karachi into the cityscape of San Andreas, the modder creates a virtual Karachi. Though it is not an exact replica of the city, but perfect replication of an original has never been the essence of piracy. This replica is still effective in creating a sense of familiarity between the user and the virtual world.

James Paul Gee argues that video games, especially those offering choice and exploration, feature the interplay of three different kinds of identities. There is your real identity – who you actually are as a person playing a game, your virtual identity – the identity of the virtual character you inhabit, and your projected identity – your virtual identity seen as a projection of your real identity. The actions a person chooses to take with their virtual actor provide them with a new history, identity, and context; these are all part of their projected identity (54). In any ordinary GTA game, your virtual identity would be that of a gangster exploring and committing criminal acts in a Western city. This is a context that is recognizable because one may have seen it in movies, but nevertheless not a Pakistani context that a Pakistani gamer would be able to connect to. GTA Karachi thus serves a localizing function. The projected identity of a Pakistani user playing GTA Karachi would involve the creation of an identity that is far closer to home, that is identifiable through the clothing you wear, the signs you see driving by in the street, and the uniform of the policemen you come into conflict with.

Conclusion

Piracy in Pakistan can thus be seen as in existing a state where it is illegal yet so normalized that the illegality ceases to be a defining characteristic. Besides this, piracy in Pakistan has characteristics of a formal business structure. In addition, piracy transforms objects as they are transported through pirate distribution systems, which in turn influences how people interact with and make sense of pirated objects as new paratexts are created and as the media suffers audio and visual degradation. Piracy in Pakistan also inheres it in a special potential for creativity, as has been realized by the maker of GTA Karachi, creating a unique experience that is far more localized. Given the sheer prevalence of piracy in Pakistan, this paper helps provide a complete picture of the Pakistani viewership experience, something that piracy as a system inevitably shapes.

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Netflix in Pakistan: Navigating Evolving Screen Modalities Among Young Adults

Amna Ejaz

Abstract

Of the many lasting changes that the COVID-19 pandemic bought across the world, whether destructive or innovative in nature, one major change was that it compelled people to restrict themselves to their homes. During the lockdown period, the cinema experience of young adults in metropolitan centers of Pakistan underwent a stark shift, with their screen time sky-rocketing. It was also a time when young adults began consuming a lot more video content from their subscriptions to Netflix. This article explores the changing screen culture in Pakistan after the coming of Netflix, an American streaming platform, to Pakistan in 2016 and how its arrival affected the content choices that young adults make. I majorly focus on an audience-based study, relying on interviews and surveys, to understand what is common to these Netflix subscribers. What are people watching, and why? What determines these choices? How does the Netflix platform enable binge-watching? With this data as its foundation, this article delves into a detailed discussion on Netflix algorithms, its features such as subtitles, and the user experience to understand how it blurs the "global" and "local" divide in an "online viewing universe" (Evans et al. 409). The recurring reference to the convenience that Netflix brought about for these users is also then analyzed to understand patterns of binge-watching and the illusion of control that the platform invokes in its users. Specifically, for the Pakistani experience, this article discusses issues of piracy, the traction of online streaming websites and what this means for the users as well as for the content creators.

Keywords; Young Adults, Netflix In Pakistan, Netflix, Screen Culture, Online Streaming, Transnational, Globalization, Screen Choices

Introduction

Netflix has become widely popular in Pakistan. Its popularity is evident not just in the widespread use of the Netflix application but also its advertisements which can be seen across social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. The sound that is heard when the Netflix logo appears, followed by a sponsored trailer of content that Netflix knows would interest the viewer, is very familiar for the Pakistani audience nowadays. This American streaming platform made its entry fairly recently into Pakistan. While Netflix came to Pakistan in

2016, it was not until 2018 that "Netflix partnered with PTCL [Pakistan Telecommunication Company Ltd], bringing the global internet television network to Pakistan for the very first time" (Mahmood and Masud 23). On the day of its release, company shares rose by a record breaking "8.5% to \$116.85, their highest one-day gain in more than four months" ("Television giant Netflix comes to Pakistan").

Fast forward to the end of 2020, Netflix has become a very common phenomenon amongst urban youth and adults alike, who are now increasingly turning to this platform to fulfill their demands of cinema and screen content. Turner writes of similar occurrences in Australia as well where there was a mass migration of domestic audiences from live broadcasting to online streaming services. Spearheading this change, Netflix completely changed the Australian conception of television within 2 years of its release (224). In this vein, this article builds upon the prior research on Netflix, using it to see similar patterns in Pakistan, particularly how content viewership and screen choices have changed for the Pakistani audience with the arrival of Netflix, probing deeper into the reason for these changes. I first start off with discussing who the respondents of this study were and how they represent the demographic with infrastructural access to Netflix, media consumption prior to Netflix, trans-national content viewership and increased globalization due to this platform, and lastly, the patterns of binge-watching in line with Netflix algorithms.

Methodology

In the course of this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with young adults between the ages of 18 and 23. During the covid-19 pandemic, Netflix was a hugely popular entertainment source for young adults in Pakistan. The respondents were students from the following universities in Pakistan: Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST), Habib University, NED University of Engineering and Technology, National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), and Bahria University. All of these universities are located in major metropolitan areas of Pakistan including Islamabad, Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Lahore. Almost all the respondents belonged to affluent families with an urban lifestyle who self-categorized themselves as "middle-class".

Because of the pandemic, my research was conducted remotely, and this online modality lent itself well to the study. This, in fact, exponentially increased my virtual connections, which might not have been possible in a pre-COVID-19 world. The sample population was approached through snowballing and in total I conducted 30 in-depth interviews via call where each interview lasted between half an hour to an hour. Before each call, I sent out a brief message to each recipient, introducing myself and the topic of the research. To ensure ethical practice, each interview commenced with a short introduction where I covered the objective of the research, how the data from this interview will be used, where it will be used, how it will be stored, and reiterated the respondents to opt out from the research at any point in time. All this laid the foundation for a rather engaging interview where the respondents and I talked in-depth about their experience with Netflix in Pakistan.

Discussions during these interviews revolved around the users' experience of the platform, such as how they first joined the platform, the modalities of their subscriptions particularly regarding sharing screens with others and whether they were skeptical that someone might see their watch history. Many of them tended to discuss in detail their experience of consuming media before the launch of Netflix, and the way that Netflix has changed not only how they watch, but also what they watch. This entailed a description of their viewing choices on Netflix, and what influences these said choices. Almost all of them mentioned spending the majority of their time in the lockdown, and otherwise, binging on TV series on Netflix. This became a gateway into understanding this phenomenon better because we could delve into the role of the platform in aiding such screen viewing practices. This essay will build on this primary data while also including secondary work done by authors around the world on varying aspects of Netflix within their own particular contexts and about the platform in general. My work will expand these debates to the uniqueness of the Pakistani context, and locate Pakistan in the spectrum of global viewership patterns around Netflix.

This essay will engage with broader, global debates on the Netflix phenomenon and work to connect these practices and trends with the Pakistani context. For instance, Jenner writes a detailed study into the way the platform is organized around viewership patterns, user data, what "prized content" is, and the ways such content is consumed through strategic programming (141). Her work on binge-viewing, and its connection to users navigating their choices and opening gateways to increased trans-national viewership helps connect the data and viewing patterns that I came across in my study. I engage with her work to understand the infrastructural access required to be a Netflix user in Pakistan, the ways in which international screen content engages with the Pakistani audience, and the effect Netflix algorithms have on viewing practices.

On the topic of Netflix algorithms, Hallinan and Triphas write about the "The Netflix Prize"; a competition amongst programmers to come up with the most effective algorithms. This inadvertently led to "incentivized research about movies and television shows but also about people, suggesting new models of cultural identity latent in the dataset and, presumably, the social" (124) which connects to my study by explaining the factors which influence the choices that people make while selecting the title to watch on Netflix. Furthermore, Turner contextualizes the disruption brought about by the Netflix culture in the landscape of Australian media consumption in the way Netflix completely altered the way audiences consumed television. The is a very similar pattern to what the Pakistani middle-class and upper-class are experiencing as well. The paper will also discuss the "Netflix Effect", a term coined by Matrix to explain the social media practices of the youth, binge-watching, and their interactions with media. Following this research, my study also works to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic complicates these media consumption practices.

Finally, my analysis is grounded in Susan Buck-Morss's theory of dreamscapes; phantasmagorical spaces that are basically consumer playgrounds (5). She builds on Walter Benjamin's work and describes the huge Paris arcades of the 19th century as "the original temple of commodity capitalism" where there are aisles after aisles of commodity displays serve as small icons, ready to be consumed. She discusses these physical landscapes "of techno-aesthetic, a dazzling, crowd-pleasing dreamworld that provided total environments to envelop the crowd" (8). The paper analyzes Netflix as a similar dreamscape of the twenty first century, allowing the users to indulge in similar forms of consumerist utopia. The dream world of Netflix is not unique

from those Paris arcades and discussion further delves into how the glamor and convenience of the platform is a façade and an illusion of control for capitalistic means.

The Netflix User

Due to expense as well as infrastructural limitations, not all Pakistanis have equal access to Netflix. In this study, the respondents all belonged to universities located in major urban centers of Pakistan. Respondents were of similar socio-economic backgrounds, mostly self-identifying as middle class. They all had regular access to internet service and good broadband speed, and all had either a personal mobile or laptop device as well as the personal space to watch Netflix content. To be able to subscribe to the streaming service, one needs to make an account by deciding on a username and password. Within this account, Netflix presents multiple options and packages wherein the user can buy up to four screens under every user's own personalized name, all with their separate personalized recommendations options and watch histories. While one needs a password to sign into the account, there is no separate password required to log in to someone's screen. One of the common findings in the interviews was that many of these respondents had subscriptions with four screens and shared these with their friends or family members with each person having their own personal virtual space. This also meant that they needed at least one person who was above eighteen years and had a debit card to be the account holder and pay for the subscription. They may decide to split the cost amongst themselves, or in the case of family, the cardholder alone bears the cost.

Moreover, access to Netflix is further limited by infrastructural facilities. In some cases, this is a set of "restrictions placed on the provision of content by territorial licensing" or "state-based-geoblocking", which are key determinants of who gets to access the content within Netflix (Evans 409). In other cases, it may simply be limited by internet speed and availability. In Pakistan however, having high speed internet may no longer be a requirement to use Netflix. As per PTCL official press release, in 2018 when PTCL paired with Netflix, Netflix became cached in Pakistan. This meant that Netflix was now optimized for slow internet connections with minimal buffering issues, even when connectivity is slower and/or interrupted on all other mobile devices in the house. This optimized performance has been a great advantage for Netflix in Pakistan. This allows viewers with slower internet connections and low bandwidth to watch content available in premium visual quality and range.

The infrastructural availability is not the only factor determining access to the media content. It is also determined by a smaller key demographic within the larger sphere of Netflix subscribers who, as Seiter and Wilson describe, gets to decide what the "quality" is (140). Jenner also describes the same demographic and labels them as those determining what "prized" content is and how this judgment of content quality is defined from a certain aesthetical moral sense. It is this audience who becomes the gatekeeper of what Bourdieu termed as "cultural capital" (142). This audience largely comprises the urban middle and upper classes who have a certain degree of disposable income to spend on technology and leisure.

Another key advantage that Netflix users have is the freedom and ability to personalize their screen as they deem fit. They have a certain level of intimacy with the screen, with the screen

coming into their private space: on their laps or in their hands. This engagement is also enacted in the way that they can now control when to start or stop playback, or even change the speed of playback; a degree of control not available on traditional television or cinema technology. One of the respondents from LUMS commented on how they have a separate screen just to watch reality television and they would not watch this on their main screen since they did not want reality TV related suggestions and recommendations. This shows their ability to demarcate separate spaces for themselves.

Matrix argues that the option to privatize screens grants a great deal of creative customization for the user (121-123). She further highlights how the availability of choice and the exchange of recommendations allows for a conversation to emerge (121). Viewers exchange their recommendations and must-see lists, which is something they might have lost out on if they were consuming scheduled broadcasting television. It is this conversation that then gets to decide what is trending and what is part of one's cultural capital. The modality of choice in Netflix enables these conversations to a greater degree. When asked about how they decide what to watch on Netflix, many mentioned following up on friend's suggestions, or watching closely on what is part of conversations on social media websites like Facebook and Instagram. One mentioned how they usually see memes circulating, often on Facebook, and to be able to understand or relate to those memes they decide to watch that particular title. There are even specific Facebook pages based in Pakistan and worldwide, titled 'Netflix recommendations' where like-minded people keep posting what they liked, what was overrated according to them and what others must see. Youth belonging to the middle and upper classes become part of this key demographic that then dictates what the prized content is, and so this content is then perused by others based on suggestions or is actively pushed by Netflix to other users who have had similar watch histories.

Media Consumption Before Netflix

Before the advent of Netflix most of the interviewees relied on television, popular online pirated streaming websites like 123movies, fmovies etc., video-on-demand options from their local cable provider, original and pirated DVDs, or torrents. With their migration to Netflix, almost all of them described one key word that has come forth with using this platform: convenience.

This convenience that they describe is in contrast to their experiences of media consumption before Netflix. Users describe how they would have to constantly close pop-up ads when they were using online pirated streaming websites, or how they had to spend time finding a compatible and healthy torrent to download and then wait overnight for the file to download. This was usually done at the risk of computer viruses or hard drive corruptions due to such problematic file downloads. Problems of unnecessary buffering and browsing endlessly searching for a good quality high-definition version from multiple unauthorized websites is also something that Netflix has mitigated. Netflix has brought about an endless array of items to be shopped, all available in HD and high-quality sound, with seamless surfing and easy browsing.

When Netflix penetrated the Australian audience, similar patterns of migration were noticed. This was a "relatively sudden migration within domestic spaces of a significant proportion of the Australian television audience from broadcasting to streaming services" (Turner 223). This

migration in Pakistan was felt even more drastically because of the preexisting traction of online streaming. Many of these respondents were already using other pirated streaming websites before Netflix. Most of them also did describe their childhood days spent in front of the television watching scheduled cartoons shows, or as they got older, popular TV series and movies, both local and foreign, on various channels. Some of them mentioned how the television, which in most cases is kept communally in the lounge, was only a device that the elders in the house used to consume broadcasted media, or exclusively controlled what everyone watched. The respondents' media consumption has shifted from the sofa in the lounge to the comfort of their rooms and their laptop. Even if they had to see local television dramas, one respondent mentioned choosing YouTube over the TV if that particular drama had not been released on Netflix, solely because of the greater flexibility and control over playback that streaming websites promise.

Buck-Morss describes a very particular feeling that people would experience in the huge Paris arcades cum shopping malls: a feeling of euphoria (5). With the accessibility that Netflix offers, there is a certain convenience that one feels while consuming media content. While this convenience is comparable to the euphoria of a shopper, it is also a means of monetization for creators and owners of the platform. Buck-Morss describes these arcades as places of magic, places that brought joy to the flock of people visiting them. Many users that I interviewed spoke of the time in which they watched Netflix as their relaxation period, the time that they looked forward to the entire day, as they could lay back and feel content in slowing everything down, only watching the moving characters on a show on Netflix. The magic of the dream world of Netflix is that it brings joy, and this study of joy and convenience ties into the Pakistani audience's experience of Netflix during turbulent times of the pandemic. The phantasmagoria prevailed in such a manner that some also called Netflix a means of trouble-free escape from the traumatic news surrounding them.

Blurring National and International Boundaries

Netflix gained unprecedented significance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the news of fear, disease, and death, there was *La Casa de Papel*/*Money Heist* (dir. Álex Pina, 2017), which took the internet by a storm. The fourth season became the most popular show in the world within a week of its April 4th, 2020, release date (Katz). The success of this series hinged on the popularity of the platform that aired it. Katz writes, "Netflix has capitalized on this strong demand and leveraged its international platform to catapult the series into a truly global hit". *Money Heist* did not leave Pakistan untouched in its global footprint. Though it is not new for a non-English show to receive such traction in Pakistan, the massive fan-following that this Spanish show received was quite unusual.

The respondents of this study commented that with the increase in accessibility to screen content, the range of choices available has also widened due to Netflix. Many reported viewing more international content then they would have if they had to actively search for the title on PirateBay (a popular torrenting portal) or 123movies (a pirated streaming site). Spanish films and television dramas, such as *Baby* (dirs. Andrea De Sica and Anna Negri, 2018), or *Money Heist*, Turkish serials specifically *Diriliş: Ertugrul/Resurrection: Ertugrul* (dir. Metin Güna, 2014), as well as a

recent wave of Korean and Japanese dramas, have all gained a share of the digital audience in Pakistan. The question of accessibility also led to the popularity of Netflix since it provided access to otherwise restricted content. Given the ban on Indian films in cinemas and Indian TV channels on the national cable, Netflix became a prime spot and the only legal way for the Pakistani audience to consume content made and produced in India. However, very few respondents reported that they viewed Indian content. The ones that did so mentioned having watched recent Indian series, predominantly in English, namely *Indian Matchmaking* (dir. Smriti Mundhra, 2020) and *A Suitable Boy* (dir. Mira Nair, 2020). Both of these featured in Pakistan's top 10 during this year. One of the respondents even gave a small derogatory laugh when asked about whether they watch Indian content, suggesting that this is not something that fits into the cultural capital of the key demographic that determines what prized content is.

While American and British television shows and movies were already highly popular before Netflix, respondents reported increased consumption of this content as well. Pakistani films and dramas on Netflix, particularly dramas by HumTV or documentaries were not so popular amongst them. A few, however, did report having seen Pakistani TV serials like *Humsafar* (dir. Sarmad Khoosat, 2011) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012) with family on television when they were aired live. The increased proliferation of international content in urban Pakistani homes allows us to see "how tensions between 'global' and 'local' manifest within an increasingly digitized media landscape" (Evans 409). Expansion of the film and media industry into the online domain has hence allowed for a more "boundary-less media mediascape" (Evans 409) that resists the limitations of geographical space and of time to make content available worldwide. This however also means that US-based corporations like Netflix must compete against local broadcasting channels, and locally produced media content must compete with global productions.

This kind of viewership and consumption is enabled by some of Netflix's inherent features such as the presence of subtitles. In previous viewing modalities, subtitles were not commonly available for films or TV serials in foreign languages. They had to be downloaded separately as an .srt file from torrent portals and then had to be opened on a VLC Media Player. At times, many of these subtitles were incomplete or did not sync with the characters' dialogues on screen. Cinema screenings also hardly ever included subtitles for content in English. Netflix, on the other hand, made subtitles an in-built option for each and every title available on the platform. For young users in Pakistan this gave them the option to consume a lot of international content. Spanish shows like *Money Heist* were quick to reach the Top 10 of Pakistan, as well as *Diriliş: Ertugrul* which, despite some issues with the subtitling, ranked number 1 in Pakistan consistently for many weeks. While *Diriliş: Ertugrul* was also available on YouTube and was dubbed in Urdu and aired on television, a large fan-base also used Netflix to watch the series in its original Turkish language.

To some viewers, the unfamiliar language was an incentive to watch global media, rather than an obstruction. One of the respondents mentioned a preference for watching content in its own original language since it gave them the option to learn a few words of an unfamiliar language and then perhaps use them in daily life. They mentioned how they now frequently use Japanese words they learnt from anime amongst their friends who watch the same content. The new fan-base for Korean dramas and Japanese animations is increasingly growing. These are widely

available on Netflix, showing up in recommendations for people whose algorithmic preferences are similar. These are based on similar watch histories or browsing patterns that the user has.

The availability of subtitles has not only increased the viewership of non-English international content but also that of American and British TV. Despite English's status as an official language of Pakistan, which is rooted in its colonial history, many Pakistanis are not fluent in English and may especially have difficulty understanding diverse and non-standard English accents. Many respondents described watching a great deal of British historical dramas on Netflix that they otherwise would not have seen because of the "thick" accent used by the actors. Not only that, sometimes the dialogue delivery is quite fast for non-native English speakers to be able to comprehend it right away. One of the respondents remarked that the dialogues that Benedict Cumberbatch delivers in *Sherlock* (dir. Paul McGuigan, 2010) are relatively high-paced and they are laden with information that ties into the crime and mystery, which was very hard to decipher without subtitles.

Western popular culture is therefore much more accessible to Pakistani audiences through high quality subtitles on platforms such as Netflix. Masud and Mahmood examine the diffusion of American pop culture in Pakistan and how this soft power is a means of disseminating American ideals and culture into a global audience. "Social media platforms and online subscriptions such as Netflix have made it possible for Pakistanis to stay up to date with what's happening around the world and have access to the most popular movies" (Mahmood and Masud 28). In this regard, Netflix becomes an agent of its own, disseminating American content and with it, American culture, all around the world. At the same time, it also widens the palette for American viewers that can now easily enjoy and absorb content made all around the world. The term "cultural hybridisation" which Masud uses, is used to describe the mixing of different cultural elements (Crothers 25), something that happens when international content is made available to Pakistani audiences. This is not to say however, that local viewership cultures of Pakistan are rendered obsolete, rather that they are altered in order to make space for the new inclusion of American pop culture.

Binge-Thirst, Consumption, and the Black-Hole

Respondents also described the way Netflix allows them to multitask while watching. One of the respondents described how she would first find a title to watch and then eat the food. The priority is finding a nice, or what she describes, a mindless show with loads of drama and romance that would provide background noise to her while eating. Another person described how the new feature of descriptive audio, allows for a person to not even look at the screen in order to consume screen content. They merely have to plug in their earphones and even though they might be traveling, or multi-tasking in a way that prohibits viewing the physical screen, they can continue to consume Netflix content. It is subtle yet powerful ways like this that the true power of Netflix algorithms can be felt.

While torrenting and other pirated online streaming websites required one to know the name of a show in order to search for it, Netflix's powerful algorithms suggest titles for the viewers based on what they enjoyed in the past. Many respondents posited that they usually do not rely on

popular media for recommendations. Rather, they allow Netflix's algorithms to select shows that they might not have even heard of before. The artificial intelligence (AI) behind Netflix aggregates these consumer choices and amplifies them by relying on algorithms that present a precise and calculated "suggested" or "more like this" section which is designed to keep the viewer in front of the screen. This also works to promote Netflix's in-house content. When one opens the Netflix homepage, amongst the neatly organized rows of titles suggested based on similar serials that you have watched, or asking you to continue from where you left off, there is a row of Netflix Originals on the top of the screen. This row has icons and movie/ TV series posters that are greatly bigger than the rest of the icons. Such advertisements do not just take place on Netflix but also on popular social media websites like Facebook and Instagram, where Netflix advertisements pop up after every few videos or posts that you scroll. One of the respondents mentioned how they learned about some shows after they saw a 10 second trailer of it in the start of a YouTube video. This is the content that Netflix algorithms push to viewers, and at many times it becomes unavoidable because there is no other way to bypass these ads except by paying premium charges .

Through the continued use of Netflix by its audience, the platform learns what people value and favours the growth of television in specific directions. Jenner has described the re-invention of television through online streaming, arguing that "as Netflix gains more subscribers and more algorithmic data becomes available, it is hardly surprising that the kind of content Netflix invests in changes" (139). While Netflix does track the viewing patterns, it also carefully monitors the browsing patterns of the users and their likes and dislikes to present a title with a "95% match," a title the user wants to click to see and if not to see then to at least read the description and add to My List. Matrix describes this as "The Netflix Effect," an enveloping algorithm that thrives on your desire to binge, "not just about convenience and customization . . . but also about connection and community" (121). To relate to the community and to the current fads of what's popular, content is pushed by Netflix into the viewers' social circles where Netflix is increasingly becoming more common. It is this need that the user feels in relating to pop-culture that compels them to consume more. Many of these respondents felt a pressuring need to be up-to-date with the most recent shows, to be able to connect with their friends who are discussing scenes or characters. It becomes this way of connection with the community, which one craves to be a part of and is so compelled by these social forces to consume the popular content.

Another factor that aids the binge-watching viewership patterns is the way that Netflix acts as a phantasmagorical space of consumption where one experiences a certain sensory overload and what Buck-Morss describes as a shock (8). Just the design of the platform with a suggested title spanning the landscape view and automatically playing its teaser, the multitude of titles all organized spatially in vibrant small boxes of color, create what Buck-Morss would describe as a feature of the almost dream-like space of Netflix. Features like these compel one to give in to consumerist instincts and be taken away into watching episode after episode. One of the respondents mentioned how Netflix was her daily aid in helping her fall to sleep. She would get into bed a few hours earlier, tune in to a series she was watching and just lays back because the episodes keep rolling without her having to interact with her keyboard at all, until she finally falls asleep and shuts the laptop down.

Change in Screen Content

One of the instrumental ways in which Netflix changed the way screen content is designed, consumed and circulated is the huge shift from "appointment viewing" of watching an episode on TV once every week to to "binge viewing". This "grew out of Netflix's analysis of viewing data, which showed its streaming customers tended to watch several TV episodes back to back instead of one at a time" (Hallinan and Triphas 130). The way Netflix does not release single episodes at scheduled times, instead releases the entire season at once alters the way the audience engages with the content. From having to wait a week on a particular cliffhanger when one would watch content on television or, how one would have to close the screen of the VLC player when torrenting to open the next title from the downloads folder, or clicking "next episode" on unauthorized online-streaming platforms, triggering an array of multiple advertisement tabs to open up, Netflix has changed the way a viewer goes on to the next title. To describe the 5 second Netflix countdown after every episode before the next one plays automatically as "ease" for the audience, is an understatement of its multi variant functions. The aforementioned engagement and personalization one feels with this platform can be juxtaposed with the lack of engagement of not having to click or press anything and just lay back because Netflix would just play the next title five seconds later. The engagement required now is not to watch more content, but an intervention will be required to actively stop the next title from playing. And even if one decides to leave the show in the middle, the Netflix app remembers what you watched, saves your place, and displays that title at the top of the screen next time you log in to remind you to continue from there. This is so because the model of persuasion that is implied in the engineering of the artificial intelligence behind such a platform, is designed to keep the eyeballs glued to the screen. This is because Netflix revenues depend on this continuous viewership and engagement of the audience's attention. The "euphoria" that respondents described in now being able to use Netflix while eating, working, or even going to the washroom, all speaks to the way the platform keeps them glued to the screen through effective use of its algorithms.

The shift to binge-viewing also dictates the way screenwriters are making and designing content. Since episodes were primarily aired on television with frequent commercial gaps, episodes were designed around commercial breaks strategically arranged after suspenseful moments in order to ensure audiences would wait for the episode to continue. Moreover, every episode had to have a cliff-hanger at the end in order to pique the curiosity of the audience to make them tune in to the next episode. Finally, another feature of such shows would be lengthy recaps to remind the audience of the episode of last week. Netflix actively promotes binge-watching when it displays an option to skip this recap which becomes unnecessary for the viewer. Shows designed for the Netflix audiences like Netflix Originals eradicates all 3 of these features because the viewers no longer need a recap of what they watched merely 5 seconds ago. An example of this is the recent reality TV show, *Next In Fashion* (pro. Robin Ashbrook, 2020), wherein the two show hosts Tan France and Alexa Chung refer to the Netflix features that enable binge-watching like the 5 second timer. At the end of each episode, both these hosts sit on the sofa and talk about clickbait features for the next episode, and then point to the viewer's right side of the screen just in time for the timer to appear and urge them to click next. Moreover, there is also no need for frequent cliff-hangers in the middle of the episodes as well (Rose). What matters however, is the cliffhanger at the end of the season because here the audience must be left in anticipation of what might happen next.

The Future of Netflix

While Netflix has gained significant traction in Pakistan, the future foresees many other competing partners as well as threats of digital regulation by the local government. Netflix faces competitive threat after the advent of Hulu, ESPN Plus and Disney Plus with predictions that in the next four years Disney Plus might have more streaming customers (Low). In Pakistan, however, there has been a slow and minimal migration of audiences to Amazon Prime which these respondents mentioned as the prime contender, while local streaming services like Iflix by PTCL or other small-scale services by private cable providers have not gained the same following that Netflix has. There has been news however, that Pakistan is to launch its own version of a streaming service similar to Netflix ("Pakistan to launch own version of Netflix"). If this pans out, and even if it does not, Netflix in Pakistan runs the risk of government regulation and censorship fears, something it had bypassed till now. This is quite similar to the situation in the neighboring country of India (Ellis-Petersen) where controversies have arisen there around the scene in *A Suitable Boy* where a kiss is shown between a Muslim and a Hindu inside a holy temple, which sparked the Hindu nationalist to call for a boycott of Netflix (Toh and Mitra). India has also witnessed similar claims from the Indian air force to withdraw certain scenes of Anil Kapoor depicting foul behavior while wearing the force's uniform as it "does not conform to the behavioral norms of those in the Armed Forces of India" (qtd. in Som and Bhasin). One of the questions towards the end of the interview was about this possibility, asking the respondents what they would do if Netflix was regulated by the state for Pakistani viewers. While all of them remarked on how this is disappointing and should not happen, only one talked about how this was necessary since sexual content like *Dark Desire* (dir. Pedro Pablo Ibarra, 2020) and *Cuties* (dir. Maïmouna Doucouré, 2020) is against the Islamic norms followed in Pakistan. However, none of the respondents mentioned withdrawing from Netflix even if such regulation was to occur. This claim itself is a strong marker of Netflix's immersion into the Pakistani landscape and portrays how the audience negotiates and hangs on to the platform's convenience despite its illusion of control and binge tactics.

This research places itself in a web of scholarship that focuses on the content of the viewing experience and takes that further by including the importance of the platform that audiences are interacting with. The audience's engagement with the platform heavily influences the way the content is experienced, and this paper maps out the experience of a global streaming platform in Pakistan. Not only has Netflix been a companion in times of physical isolation amidst the global health crises, but it has actively changed the choices that young adults in Pakistan make when selecting what to watch. With the easy accessibility of subtitles, there is a greater immersion of international cinema into the daily lives of the audience. Their range of choices has grown from just watching English language shows to including more Korean, Japanese, Turkish, Spanish and others from global cinema. This also allows for a more immersive experience with English language shows now that audiences can read each dialogue and decipher any accent that they might not have understood previously, making it possible for more pop-culture references to reach the audience and seep into their cultural capital. The way the platform arranges itself is distinct from broadcast television. It gives the audience the illusion of being more in control by holding the power to stop or play whenever needed, or restart where they left off. It also gives them the convenience of not having to search for options since Netflix provides them a selection they would be interested in. However, these algorithms enable an endless cycle of binge-watching where the audience loses control over their urge to keep going on to more episodes and

so it glues the audience's eyes to the screen content for longer hours and maximized monetization. Regardless, audiences in Pakistan risk the fear of government regulation and censorship which could limit their choices on the platform. However, they still intend to keep their memberships despite the wave of newer streaming services like Amazon Prime or the local Iflix.

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PEMRA's Overreach: Exploring Censorship and State Anxiety

Safa Imran

Abstract

Is there a commonality in the screen texts that appear to challenge the Pakistani state and the media regulatory institute Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA)? This paper presents a critical analysis of selected screen texts that were either banned or issued threats of censorship, spanning across a variety of mediums. The web documentary *Among the Believers*, (dir. Hemal Trivedi and Mohammad Ali Naqvi, 2015) drama serial *Udaari/Flight* (dir. Mohammed Ehteshamuddin, 2016) and the Gala Biscuit advertisement (dir. Asad-ul-Haq, 2020) are all discussed in order to identify patterns in themes or depictions that provoke censorship from the regulatory body. The paper posits that censorship is a means through which PEMRA, which is an arm of the state, strives to uphold the ideological norms and values that the state holds to be a fundamental part of the national construct of identity. The paper will also explore what exactly is the construction of identity that the state is vested in creating, and also protecting from any media portrayals that pose challenges to it. Moreover, ideas are additionally drawn upon from seminal texts by Ayaz Naseem that explore constructs of citizenship and nationality in the educational curriculum under the theoretical frameworks of nationalism, religion and gender, and these are applied to the screen texts under consideration in order to determine how these screen texts challenge normative constructs. Lastly, this paper also reflects upon the possibility of this state control of media loosening with the advent of the digital age which has allowed for media content to be widely available over the internet.

Key Words: Media Censorship, Identity, Pakistani State, PEMRA, Anxiety, Regulation

Introduction

This paper will examine how various screen texts in Pakistan are censored. For the purposes of this paper, the process of censorship can be best conceptualized as "a controlling force of authority" (Panday 7). This control by the state and its authorized institutions is not a benign process as it transcends beyond merely implementing media regulation laws. It betrays the palpable anxiety of the state to control content especially in a digital age where screen texts are

widely circulated online. The process of regulation often appears to be arbitrary; the legislative criteria set for what qualifies as objectionable content is so broad and vague that any screen text can fall victim to censorship. In practice, however, this censorship is invoked in order to curb the spread of any material that can be perceived as oppositional to a carefully curated, state-manufactured, and homogenized ideal of Pakistani morals, cultural values, and lifestyle. Thus, this paper posits that the broadness of its legislative rules and regulations are a deliberate manufacturing in order to allow regulatory institutions to carry out state interests.

Furthermore, this paper explores the censorship of screen texts in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the role of Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). It argues that criteria for this censorship is not as straightforward as the perceived notion that PEMRA arbitrarily bans whatever is considered "anti-state" or "vulgar" under its regulations. The content that is either banned or threatened to be censored is often diverse in thematic concerns; it only needs to be perceived as threatening to the national identity in order to invoke a reactionary response by the regulatory authority. This response can be supported by its wide range of statutes. I analyze a variety of screen texts, namely the television drama series *Udaari/Flight* (dir. Mohammad Ehteshamuddin, 2016), the documentary *Among the Believers* (dir. Hemal Trivedi and Mohammad Ali Naqvi, 2015) and the Gala Biscuit advertisement (dir. Asad-ul-Haq, 2020), in order to showcase how the anxiety to preserve a national identity manifests itself over a multitude of screen texts.

State Anxiety to Regulate

Before examining how institutions regulate representations of cultural and national identity via censorship, it is important to consider where the need to establish this regulatory authority stems from. The answer can be found by looking at the historical context within which the nation was born; a violent extrication from a newly post-colonial Indian subcontinent. For a postcolonial and post-Partition Pakistan, it became fundamental to create an identity distinct from both its neighbor India and the relics of British colonialism. This nation-building project is one that is vested with "an uneasy trajectory characterized by unfulfilled aspirations, subdued identity assertions and conflicting notions of national authenticity and purity" (Dryland and Syed 43). According to Dryland and Syed, a post-colonial, post-partition state needed to develop a homogenous and collectivizing national cultural identity free from the influences of its past (43). Today, one can observe the state's anxiety to uphold and maintain this identity even within the realm of media, notably through regulatory bodies such as PEMRA.

PEMRA's Institutional Powers

PEMRA was established in 2002 by General Pervez Musharraf's military regime in order to "facilitate a growing broadcast media industry in the country" (Rasul and McDowell). The growth occurred due to General Musharraf's media liberalization policy to modernize the country in line with the economic models based on the "neoliberal agenda of developed nations" on whom the country relied upon for aid and assistance (Gul and Obaid 37). As Gul and Obaid

evidence, a significant "boom in the market" occurred when "television channels increased drastically from three to ninety" within a decade (37). This transition from the state-owned Pakistan Television Network (PTV) being "the only television channel available to the masses until the early 1990s" to a growth in the privately-owned media industry and a diversification of media content being produced also called for increased scrutiny, as the bourgeoning industry would ultimately pose a challenge to the ideological norms and values of the Pakistani state (38).

According to Section 4 of the PEMRA Ordinance of 2002, the Authority is meant to "be responsible for regulating the establishment and operation of all broadcast media and distribution services in Pakistan established for the purpose of international, national, provincial, district, local or special target audiences" (PEMRA [Amendment] Act 2007). Moreover, according to a notification on the PEMRA Rules published on 12th December, 2009 by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, there is a specified code of conduct mandated for media broadcasters or cable TV operators. This code of conduct has numerous sub-sections which elaborate upon what exactly disqualifies a program from being aired, such as:

>   (b) contains anything pornographic, obscene or indecent or is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality;

>   (g) contains aspersions against the Judiciary and integrity of the Armed Forces of Pakistan;

>   (i) is against basic cultural values, morality and good manners;

>   (1) denigrates men or women through the depiction in any manner of the figure, in such a way as to have the effect of being indecent or derogatory;

>   (p) contains material which is against ideology of Pakistan or Islamic values;

>   (3) Programmes must not be directed against the sanctity of home, family and marital harmony (PEMRA Rules 2009).

Clearly, the powers granted to PEMRA through the 2002 Ordinance allows for it to have a scope of influence over all broadcast media, and the code of conduct described above has been deliberately worded to be vague and subjective. For instance, Section (i) denounces anything against "basic cultural values, morality and good manners" without articulating what these values or acceptable standards of manners are. The code stated above, which contains only selected clauses of the lengthy code of conduct, is also expansive in terms of its clauses and the media forms it covers. This empowers PEMRA to wield a heavy hand in media regulation, as "state-sanctioned censorship has become the most consciously and conspicuously formalized institution of cultural regulation" (Kaur and Mazzarella 9). The 2002 Ordinance and 2009 Code of Conduct are institutionally-protected tools for an anxiety-ridden state to crush anything that appears contradictory to or questioning of national identity, and this anxiety only heightens in the age of the Internet which "presents wholly new challenges to official regulations in Pakistan" (Kaur and Mazzarella 2). In the domain of the Internet, PEMRA portrays itself as "cyber-cops" who, "working for the Pakistan Internet Exchange assiduously filter pornography, blasphemy

and 'anti-Islamic' content from online networks" (2). Ultimately, PEMRA's ability to extensively police the internet is reflective of the institutional powers it is granted.

National-cultural Identity

To understand the abstract conception of a homogenized, national-cultural identity which state institutions aim to curate and uphold, the way in which the national syllabus and its textbooks articulate this identity is a meaningful site to explore. In as early as textbooks for the third grade, "the martyrs for Pakistan who were awarded the Nishan e Haider appear prominently" and are revered using language of heroism and "repeatedly referred to as 'the sons of Pakistan'" (Naseem 111). Moreover, when it comes to representing women, Naseem points two overt elements of the imagery. There is the "panopticon of dress" which is apparent through graphic illustrations of women in social studies and Urdu texts which show them donned in "shalwar kameez and dupattas", and the second is a fixed "meaning of space in which the female subject and her subjectivity is ideally to be located" mainly occupying spaces that are "traditionally and discursively feminine" like the home, the classroom as a teacher, the workplace as a nurse and so forth (Naseem 106). These women are also shown as routinely subservient to the men around them. This can be most notably seen in the presentation of Fatima Jinnah who is hailed as the "mother of the nation" (109) in a third grade Urdu reader *Meri Kitaab/My Book*, which states that she "used to serve her brother at home. Then she used to travel with the Quaid… help him in national duties… take care of his every need" (108).

Naseem's insights on the presentation of identity and citizenship in Pakistan indicate what is curated by state institutions as the hallmarks of Pakistani national identity: belonging to the Muslim majority, being patriotic, nationalistic, and respectful of state institutions such as the armed forces; the women must adorn a demeanor of modesty and femininity, and only occupy domestic, traditional spaces and adopt roles that are subservient to the men around them. With this understanding of state-constructed idealized identity, the next section of this paper analyzes the screen texts and their tussle with the repressive force of PEMRA.

Screen Texts

On 10th May 2016, PEMRA issued a notice to Hum TV, giving it time till 25th May to explain the "objectionable" and "immoral" scenes in the television drama series *Udaari*, making the threat of regulation and censorship clear (Haider). The objectionable immorality in question was as follows; *Udaari* is a drama series exploring child sexual abuse, which features a stepfather Imtiaz with "evil intentions" towards his minor step-daughter Zebo. As the drama progresses, his advances towards her become more and more perverse until he rapes her one day and threatens her to remain silent about her ordeal (Haider). The plot follows Imtiaz's perversions, with his wife Sajida growing increasingly suspicious of his behavior, until one night he openly declares during a confrontation that he will rape her child in front of her, prompting Sajida to stab him, leave him for dead, and escape to the city with her daughter under assumed names. The series

ends in a victory for Zebo and Sajida, as the court exonerates Sajida for the attempted murder of Imtiaz and sentences him to life imprisonment for rape and child abuse.

Through the dichotomy between the characterizations of Zebo and Imtiaz, the purpose of the drama serial is clear. Zebo's portrayal with her plaited hair, childlike features and a demeanor of innocence, and Imtiaz with his leers, unsettling grin, dark eyes and harrowing dialogues such as *"Aba ki baatein maney gi na? Tujhe har cheez milay gi. Toffiyaan, gooliyan"* ('Will you listen to what your father says? You'll get everything. Toffees and sweets') show that the series does not glamorize or endorse this behavior but rather attempts to condemn the predatory nature of the rapist and emphasize upon his monstrosity. In fact, the director Mohammad Ehteshamuddin stated that the Pakistani audience played a significant role in creating a public demand that pushed back against PEMRA's threats of censorship. He stated that "to deprive people of stories is criminal, especially when they are trying to make society a better place… the audience stood behind us because it broke the unspoken rule of discussing a taboo during prime time" (Isani and Alavi). This shows how PEMRA's approach to the drama serial was not necessarily indicative of the standpoint of the wider population; rather, it was a top-down enforcement of morality. Unlike PEMRA, the audience was able to understand the nuances of the serial and grasp the notion that showcasing child sexual abuse was not intended to be immoral but rather a portrayal of abominable social ills. Moreover, Pakistan already has numerous cases of child sexual abuse, rape, murder and domestic abuse that continue to be underreported for reasons such as "family honour, concept of morality, and cultural taboos" (Hyder and Malik 175). In fact, two years after the airing of *Udaari*, the brutal rape and murder of Zainab Ansari, a six-year-old girl in Kasur, left the nation reeling in horror, with over "half a million social media users" rallying "around the hashtag #JusticeForZainab" (Pierpoint). Yet, PEMRA believed the drama serial to be purporting immorality rather than representing a horrific reality. Although *Udaari* was permitted to air despite the threats, it remains curious that a show merely attempting to explore child sex abuse should invoke such a response to begin with, as "whoever the eyes and ears of PEMRA are, they seem strangely selective in their outrage" (Haider).

I argue that by threatening the show, PEMRA was upholding its mandate and acting upon what it perceives to be serving state interests. As per PEMRA Rules 2009, anything that "is against…good manners" (Section 1) or "directed against the sanctity of the home, family" (Section 3) can be disallowed to air; all criteria within which *Udaari* falls under as it is hardly "good manners" and it questions the sanctity of the home by portraying a sexual abuser in a domestic setting. The domestic home is the space recommended for an idealized Pakistani woman to occupy as per Naseem's analysis of identity, and this characterization of the *"chadar and char dewari"* ('a scarf and the four-walled confines of the home') (Naseem 118) being under threat or a site of abuse is unacceptable to a state that endorses the confinement of women within this spatial realm, hence provoking PEMRA to wield its authority under the garb of perceived immorality. A state anxious about preserving its curated identity must make a statement by displaying its authority through its institutional arms, even if the threat of censorship is ultimately not implemented.

However, even when a screen text does not attempt to make a political statement or challenge any cultural norm or identity, it may still pose a threat. Such was the case with the Gala Biscuits' 2020 advertisement, which was posted for public viewership on Twitter by Mehwish Hayat, the actress who starred in the festive ad that aimed to celebrate Pakistani nationality and heritage.

The hashtag associated with the advertisement is intriguing: *#deskabiscuit*, which can be translated to "the nation's biscuit" (@MehwishHayat). Clearly, this connotes a sense of cultural identity attached with the biscuit, as it posits itself as the top contender for being the nation's beloved biscuit. The tweet also articulates what values the brand espouses as the national biscuit; they "cherish the cultural diversity of our *des* ('land')" (@MehwishHayat). Indeed, the ad attempts to portray its own version of a celebratory, culturally-diverse festival as the scene opens with Hayat, donned in a gold *peshwas* ('traditional flowing dress'), descending upon the stage while perched atop of a crescent moon (alluding to the moon presented in the Pakistani flag), and breaking out into a festive dance with the other dancers on stage, all dressed as garish ethnic caricatures, singing repetitively "*mere des ka biscuit Gala!*" ('my nation's biscuit Gala!'). The settings change throughout the one minute and thirty-seven second ad, as the scenes switch across the cultural displays, with the dancing Punjabis wearing turbans and carrying swords, and the Balochi men armed with Kalashnikovs.

Upon initial viewership, there could be various reasons behind the brewing controversy over the advertisement on Twitter, such as disapproval of the ethnic stereotypes presented, but the actual basis of the controversy was different. Harsh criticism swept across the social media platform, that first surfaced in a tweet by columnist and journalist Ansar Abbasi who called the advertisement a "*mujra*" ('erotic dance') and urged PEMRA to take action (Hussain). PEMRA's response, predictably, was swift and decisive; it directed satellite TV channels to avoid airing such "indecent" advertisements which were "in violation of commonly accepted standards of decency but also socio-cultural norms of Pakistani society" (Hussain).

Through the diction of their notice, and the swift urgency of their response, PEMRA places itself as the ultimate authority for cultural regulation. They are a direct extension of a state that invests itself as a constructor of national identity and ethos, one within which a jovial, dancing woman does not belong. However, PEMRA's reactionary response to the advertisement could not have been because of this reason alone. Dancing women have been previously used as a prop to attract audiences and represent liberal modernity in cases that serve the interests of the state. Such was the case in *Kaaf Kangana* (dir. Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, 2019), an Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) which features a three-minute item number *Khabon Main/In My Dreams*, that is also publicly available on YouTube by ARY Films. The ISPR serves as "the military's public relations department", and even "under General Musharraf's military rule it was a de facto architect of the liberalization project in broadcasting" (Sulehria 102), therefore making it apparent that portrayals of dances that are otherwise considered immoral are acceptable for the public relations purposes of state institutions. Even though one could argue that PEMRA overlooked this instance because it was an ISPR-project film, this still does not explain PEMRA's selective scrutiny as civilian media projects have frequently depicted dancing women. Gala biscuits even had a previous advertisement that was aired in 2013 and is still accessible on YouTube, which features a woman dancing to a similar festive jingle with the same chorus as used in the 2020 ad. The difference between the 2013 and the 2020 advertisements was ultimately the public attention and criticism that the latter drew, which would bring into question the credibility and effectiveness of PEMRA as a regulatory body if prompt and decisive action was not taken. Therefore, while PEMRA certainly is able to take on regulating content for its purported immorality and vulgarity, the process by which the institution selects what is liable to

censorship is selective and often based upon public discourses that pushes the institution into action.

Moreover, it is intriguing to note that with the advent of the digital cyberspace, the weakening grip of control of state institutions follows. Consider, for instance, the documentary *Among the Believers*, directed by Hemal Trivedi and Mohammad Ali Naqvi. The film provides in-depth insight into Maulana Abdul Aziz and the underbelly of his radicalized Laal Masjid, which functions as a *madrassa* ('religious school') imparting not just religious education but training children in the radical politics of *jihad* ('struggle'). The documentary is meant to be immersive and chilling, and those effects are achieved through composition choices such as the background score of *tablas* ('Indian twin hand drums') that quicken in pace as scenes of the chanting children and Maulana Aziz's sinister interviews unfold, thus heightening the intensity of the scenes. It also goes on to present a dichotomy of sorts; an ideological divide between the radical Islamic right-wing spearheaded by Maulana Aziz, and the comparatively small progressive, secularist circles led by nuclear physicist and activist Pervez Hoodbhoy. It then lends way to highlighting the efforts undertaken by the armed forces to destabilize the mosque, with little success in their endeavors. Even with a cursory purview of the screen text, it is a fairly straightforward task to identify the themes that could be problematized by PEMRA, especially in light of clause (g) and (p) of the PEMRA Rules of 2009 that disallow material against the integrity of the armed forces, the ideology of Pakistan, and Islamic values. In fact, the documentary proved so reprehensible to the state that it was banned at a federal level, as the Central Board of Film Censors issued a notification of the ban, citing the reason that it "projects the negative image of Pakistan in the context of ongoing fight against extremism terrorism" ("Another Film Banned").

One would think this would suffice as relief for PEMRA's urge to suppress media dissent. However, what is curious to note is that *Among the Believers* aired on Netflix Pakistan, and eventually was uploaded on YouTube on 24 November 2017 by user Gurpreet Singh, and till this date it remains accessible online for public viewership. As far as the question of access to these digital platforms remains in Pakistan, as of May 2019, PTA's (Pakistan Telecommunications Authority) telecom indicators released statistical data that placed the number of smartphone users in the country at 161.183 million, a figure that has been achieved due to the influx of low-cost Chinese smartphone brands in the market (Syed). Syed points out that out of these, 68.07 million are 3G and 4G users due to the provision of mobile Internet services in remote areas of the country. Drawing from these statistics, it is reasonable to presume that a sizable section of Pakistan's population can access and navigate cyberspace, and hence have the ability to view censored screen texts. This possibility does not bode well with, and has been attempted to be tackled by, state institutions. PEMRA called for regulating web media content in the country, but in the deliberations held by the Senate Functional Committee on Human Rights, chaired by Senator Mustafa Nawaz Khokar in 2020, it was decided that PEMRA had no jurisdiction over these realms as it would be a violation of Article 19 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech to citizens. ("Senate Committee Rules"). With the Senate Functional Committee of Human Rights applying a measure of restraint to PEMRA's legislative powers over the cyber realm, along with the rapid dissemination of technological devices to Pakistani citizens, we can make the case that the digital realm provides the possibility of loosening state control of media in Pakistan.

Another instance of this loosening state control was seen through the banning and subsequent unbanning of the web serial *Churails/Witches* (dir. Asim Abbasi, 2020); based on a group of feminists-turned-detectives, this revenge thriller streamed on Zee5 and vividly depicted "drugs, alcohol, infidelity, interspersed with foul language" (Ebrahim). Complaints regarding the content were lodged to both PEMRA and PTA; however, Ebrahim establishes that PEMRA could not legally ban the program from being aired as digital streaming services did not come under their jurisdiction. According to Ebrahim, PTA official, on the other hand, confirmed that the institutions were in correspondence with Zee5 and requested the platform to take down the show since neither PEMRA or PTA had the legislative authority to ban content on the platform, and could only negotiate a request with Zee5 for removal on the basis of citing a violation of a code of conduct or law. The request was initially accepted, but the removal did not last. A critical outcry emerged online, led by Asim Abbasi, the director of *Churails* who lamented the show being "shut down in its country of origin", prompting a reinstating of the show within mere days with no official word by either Zee5 or by any Pakistani media regulatory authority why or "on whose behest it was pulled down" to begin with. Instances such as the reversal of the banning of *Churails*, or the widespread availability of the federally banned documentary *Among the Believers* online, showcase the way in which the distribution of media over the Internet has challenged the traditional authority of media censorship and regulatory authorities. The tools of control are being rendered less effective in its intended outcome to stifle threats, as not only is the censorship of media more difficult over the cyber realm, but the critical voices of an observant and engaged population cannot be erased either.

Conclusion

The screen texts examined in this essay deal with vastly different thematic concerns and intents as *Udaari* touches upon child sexual abuse, the Gala Biscuits advertisement portrays a jovial celebration of a nationally beloved biscuit, and *Among the Believers* provides an intriguing political insight into the operations of the radical Laal Masjid. However, each screen text was subjected to either censorship or the threat thereof by PEMRA, despite the significant variation in content which indicates that the regulatory body is not an apolitical institution that implements standard regulations. Rather, it exists as an arm of the state that serves to preserve the sanctity of an identity that a post-colonial, post-partition Pakistan state is anxious to maintain, and any representations contrary to this national, hegemonic identity are not tolerated. Regulatory institutions such as PEMRA are designed to fulfill state-vested interests, and authoritarian control over media content is legitimized through a broad spectrum of legislation that can justify any measure undertaken by these institutions. The dynamics between the media and PEMRA, however, are shifting due to the advent of a digital age where access to the Internet and cyber-spaces is more prevalent than ever before. The digital cyberspace can make room for "oppositional cultural elements" to emerge further in Pakistani media, which can ultimately play a role in "reemploying the history, heroes and cultural values of the country" (Bilal 21). This changes the landscape in which PEMRA operates, as screen texts now have increased opportunity to evade regulation by circulating online. This poses a significant challenge to the state and its institutions, who now anxiously grapple with a reality that is increasingly weakening their control.

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