

Portrayal of Women Characters in Selected Contemporary Pakistani Television Drama

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Abstract: *Television has been a strong suit of Pakistani entertainment history. The recent portrayal of women characters in the TV shows displays a huge leap from the conventional towards the liberal. This paper attempts to discuss the women characters from the following dramas: Numm (2013), Zindagi Gulzar Hai (2012-2013), and Humsafar (2011-2012). The two female protagonists in Numm, Mahjabeen and Neelum, fall prey to the orthodox social custom called 'Vani'. Mahjabeen sacrifices her entire life to desolation and Neelum fails to get a happy life with her husband because of this custom. The next character is Kashaf Murtaza, the female protagonist of Zindagi Gulzar Hai. She struggles from the beginning of her life against a patriarchal society and finally succeeds to attain a respectable life for herself without losing her identity. Finally, I shall be discussing the character of Khirad from Humsafar, who never gives up on her self-respect and continues to struggle against all odds. These characters, with their respective characteristic features, represent a whole new representation of women in Pakistan and the Indian subcontinent. This paper is an attempt to discuss the same with the light of a feminist point of view.*

1. Introduction.

Feminism is generally defined as a political, cultural, pedagogic and theoretical response to the patriarchal structures of power that seek to subordinate women's lives, interests, rights, bodies and sexualities. It aims to look at the representational strategies in popular and other cultural forms drawing attention to the patriarchal constructions of women within these representations, and acquiring a political platform from which this agenda can be articulated and justice fought for.¹

Literary and cultural texts (including cinema, poetry, theatre, advertisements) naturalizes the oppression of women as meek, weak, submissive, seductress, obstacle, sexual object of the male's

desire, a procreating device and so on. Religion, social conditions and cultural traditions perceive the woman as a subordinate to the male. Most of the Islamic countries observe restrictive Islamic laws that prohibit women from participating in societal and economic developments. Like most Islamic countries, women in Pakistan have also been deprived of equal rights like men. Ever since its independence, women in Pakistan have been battling exploitative treatment at the hands of their male counterparts – the social, economic and political environment making it difficult for them to progress and fight for their rights.² This contributed to the rise of Feminist Movement in Pakistan that advocated for equal political, economic and social rights for women. Feminism offered channels where women could raise their voices and fight for equality. There has almost always been some backlash against women who wish to empower themselves by studying or working. NGOs and other institutions that work to help oppressed women and encourage them to think as an independent human being are accused of misleading them. Feminism is generally regarded as unnecessary construct of the West which does not deserve any importance in the Islamic structure. It is assumed that feminism is anti-male, thereby destructive to the family and ruinous to society and the nation. It is a Western imposition meant to wreak havoc on Pakistani society.

This paper seeks to observe the representation of women in Pakistan television industry. Television has been a strong suit of Pakistani entertainment history. The recent portrayal of women characters in the TV shows displays a huge leap from the conventional towards the liberal. This paper attempts to discuss the women characters from the following dramas: *Numm* (2013), *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012-2013), and *Humsafar* (2011-2012).

2. Posing the Problem.

In their acclaimed 2012 study entitled *Position of Pakistani Women in the 21st Century*, Dr Jaweria Shahid and Khalid Manzoor Butt commented, "Throughout history, Pakistani women have been facing various challenges ranging from role-orientation to the baffled position of women in family, socioeconomic, and political spheres of life. Besides this, women's status in legal sphere is also questionable. It goes without saying that Pakistan is predominantly a male chauvinist society" (Shahid and Butt 70).

Broadly speaking, there are two dominant threads of feminist discourse in Pakistan: a modern, Islamic feminism and a secular feminism. Modern Islamic feminists seek to further women's rights by redefining Islamic views and focusing on the female-centric laws Islam offers by using passages in the Quran. This methodology produces an understanding of Islam that grants women greater freedom and rights than those afforded to women by their male counterparts. This form of feminism appeals largely to the less educated, lower and middle class of the society which looks to religion for answers. Secular feminists, on the other hand, define their struggle for rights outside the Islamic framework. Secular feminists consider feminism as an extension of basic human rights, regardless of any religious connotations. These women are generally labeled as protagonists of western culture by those who misconstrue Islamic views to suit feed their own selfish chauvinistic point of views. They are not anti-religious or against Islam, but rather deviate from Islamic feminists on the method through which to negotiate women's rights with the state. Secular feminism has a more democratic scope; its proponents agitate for the rights of all women in Pakistan, non-Muslim as well as Muslim. It relates to other feminist movements worldwide and is more pluralistic.

In the words of Bina Shah, "A feminist movement can succeed only when it mirrors the makeup of the women and the society for whom it operates. Pakistan needs a feminism that elegantly marries both strands of feminism — secular and Islamic — because that's how Pakistan was formed: on both Islamic and secular principles" ("The Fate of Feminism in Pakistan"). "While the space for women in nationalist politics was always small, the space for feminist politics in Pakistan is almost non-existent," explains writer Madihah Akhtar in her article on feminists in Pakistan. "Feminists, of both the secular and Islamic flavours, have to be content with voicing their opinions through non-governmental organisations and in academia, both in Pakistan and abroad."

3. The Curious Case of *Numm*.

Numm is a tale of sadness, oppression, tyranny and rebellion, based on the unwise ritual of "Vani". The drama starts with the following words, "A woman is born with many colors... colors of sunshine, colors of fragrance, and colors of beauty.... She is embodied with all the colors of the rainbow. But the darkness of ignorance turns all her colors to black" (*Numm*, Episode 1). The story of this drama revolves around the Wali Bakht, Mahjabeen, Neelum and Sikandar Bakht. The main characters were very badly affected by the imprudent, foolish and unwise custom of Vani. Vani is one of the crimes that are perpetrated against women in Pakistani societies in the name of preserving patriarchal honor.

Because of the traditional custom Wali marries Mahjabeen in his childhood while she was a grown young woman. Wali and Mahjabeen, naturally, had never a conjugal relationship. Wali comes back to Pakistan after completing his education in Oxford and his grandfather Sikandar Bakht starts forcing him to get married again in order to bring an heir to the family. Wali lost his father in a dispute with Mahjabeen's family when he was a child. His mother lost her mental sanity after her husband's death and it was Mahjabeen who brought up Wali. She was nothing more than a caretaker in his house.

Sikandar Bakht or Baday Saab is a typical example of the pervading patriarchal figures. In the first episode of the drama when Wali expresses his reluctance to get married again, he comments, "A new woman is coming into your life.... You are a man and it is not unusual for a man to have multiple women in their lives.... Women come and go in a man's life...." Baday Saab reminds Wali time and again, "Neelum is your wife, Mahjabeen is only a *Vani*." Baday Saab proudly declares, "*Vani* is not only a mere custom, it is an example. When the bloodlust between two enemies become unstoppable, a woman takes control of the situation. So, here we have placed a woman on the equal position with a man. What else is left to do now? (Episode 18).

Neelum also could not accept the marriage in the beginning. She says to her mother, "He is a married man, mama. Now he is marrying me, and then he will marry again, and again, and again.... That's exactly what happens in this family, isn't it?" Neelum tries her best to get rid of the situation. She tries to convince Wali, "You are educated, right? Do you think this is right? What happened to your education in Oxford? You are acting like a

dumb fool.... If you remain silent, then at the end of the day there is no difference between you and all the other bloody feudals. Why do you need to make a harem? Why is one woman not enough?" (Episode 1). Wali cannot break away from the traditions no matter how much he wants to. He does not support the custom but he is unable to break it. Wali replies, "Listen Neelum, I wish it was that simple.... Our decision is not only related to the two of us or our families, it is strongly related to the entire *nizam*. I agree it is wrong. But our decision can prevent a lot of problems.... And sadly these are the state of affairs that neither I, neither you, nor a thousand Oxford graduates can change overnight" (Episode 1).

Neelum's grandmother tries to convince Neelum to accept the relationship. She comments, "We women are like beautiful and colorful kites flying in the sky. We fly and dance with the air but we have a string attached to us and we are always controlled by others."

Neelum's studies are discontinued and she is forced to marry Wali. She comments, "Mama, you took me out of the school and placed me on the *sej*.³ I don't even have the right to choose my own life.... What kind of *nizam* is this where it is a sin to have one's own rights? A woman here is nothing but a machine that produces the heirs for this *nizam*.⁴ She belongs to nowhere...." (Episode 4).

Numm compels us to think deeply about a culture that promotes such atrocities. Mahjabeen has been forsaken for her loved ones; she has been blamed for every tragedy and her entire life has been wasted because of the meaningless cruel social custom. She was separated from her son after secretly giving birth to him and was forcefully married to Wali. She could not raise her son; she could not take care of him. She could neither be a mother to her son, nor she could be the wife to the person she was married to.

However, Wali finally courageously decides to elevate the woman from the oppressed Vani system and give her proper status and respectability in the society by giving her a huge part of his property. When Wali dies in hands of his grandfather, Neelum refuses to accept her son as an heir to the Bakht family. She finally leaves for London to pursue higher studies. Msahjabeen happily takes over the duty to bring up Wali's child.

4. Khirad and Kashaf: Two Inspiring Protagonists.

Khirad from *Humsafar* is an educated girl from a middle class family. She continues her M.Sc. in Applied Mathematics after her marriage. She never gives up on her self-respect and continues to struggle against all odds in her life. She is the brightest student in the class and successfully impresses all her teachers at the University. When she falls prey to the conspiracy of her mother in law, she decides not to give in to the injustice.

She is not happy even though she is married in a rich affluent family. While talking to Batul Khala over phone in the fourth episode after her marriage, she says, "My ego hurts when I think that I am pushed into someone's life forcefully.... I feel like I am totally unwanted and uninvited here. Whenever I face Asher or as long as I stay in this room, I feel nothing but insulted.... To maintain one's self-respect is very important for a human being. After what Ammi had made me do, I have lost my self-respect" (Episode 4).

Later in the fifth episode she tells Asher's father, "I am not happy with this relationship. How can I be happy with this relationship? Ammi has not done the right thing.... Couldn't I stay in your house as your niece? Did I have to become your daughter-in-law? You could have taken care of me as my uncle too. Then why this forced relationship? I don't like this at all Mamu that I have been included in someone's life forcefully.... I have never gone to anyone's house without proper invitation, and now I have entered into someone's life. I feel so insulted.... Nobody needs me here and this very thought has badly hurt my pride and my ego. I never wished for a rich and affluent husband, all I wanted was respect" (Episode 5).

She refuses to give up on her self-respect even when she faces utter hardships in life. She takes up a job in a school as a teacher and decides to bring up her child on her own without any financial help from her husband. She does not beg for mercy and forgiveness for the adultery she did not commit. Of course, she goes to Asher and demands money for her daughter's medical expenses. But she is determined to leave his house soon after her daughter is cured.

In the eighteenth episode when her mother-in-law tries to threaten her, she says to her mother in law, "To the hell with your son and this palace. I have nothing to do with them. I have come here for my daughter's treatment. Otherwise

I would not want any one of you to come close to my daughter.... You are no more talking to the old Khirad, who used to be meek and weak, now you are talking to Hareem's mother. Your son's wife was very weak, so you did whatever you wanted to do with her. Hareem's mother is very strong. Don't you dare to come on my daughter's way" (*Humsafar*, Episode 18).

Kashaf Murtaza, the female protagonist of *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* starts her struggles against male chauvinism since the very beginning of her life. Her mother is an educated and working woman who brings up three of her daughters on her own. Her mother faces utter neglect and avoidance from her father because she never gave birth to a male child. She is also often ridiculed because of her education and job. In twelfth episode, Murtaza's elder brother comes to meet her mother he says, "You have worked hard for your daughters and you have made their future. Otherwise daughters are there in all the families and they are burdens for all." Kashaf's mother replies, "Daughters are not born as burdens, they are made to feel like that and thus they become like that. And besides, anyone can be a burden, be it a daughter or a son. What matters is proper education, upbringing and attention.... One should not differentiate between boys and girls... be it parents, family, or society" (*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Episode 12).

Kashaf's father and his brother are shown as proud male chauvinists who think that women should not be educated. They even try to convince Kashaf's mother to stop Kashaf from going for higher studies. In the second episode he says, "Why was there a need for her to do an MBA? A B.Sc. would have been more than sufficient.... You should be plan for her marriage. What is she going to do with all the education?" Kashaf comments, "And Ammi thought Abba would bring garlands of flowers for me. It only happens in films and dramas that a father feels proud of his daughter's achievements. In reality, fathers feel ashamed if their daughters become educated."

As Dr. Khalid Manzoor Butt and Jaweria Shahid rightfully comment, "At individual level, women should build confidence in them and should not remain silent to their exploitation. Women should explicitly demand for self-determination in all private and public arenas. For this purpose, education is the principle tool to achieve the objectives" (Shahid and Butt 98).

Kashaf is a strong woman who does not want to depend on anyone for anything. In the seventh episode she says to her mother, "... this

thought of yours makes me very angry. The thought that if there is a support of a man, then only we can stand on our own feet even if that man is like our father." She does not approve a woman's desire to marry a rich man just for his wealth. In the tenth episode she says to her sister, "One cannot be the most eligible bachelor with a rich family, a handsome face and an attitude. A person needs a good character and values as well to be the most eligible bachelor. I do not know why some girls cannot see anything beyond money.... I do not want to run after a rich man begging for his name, family and prosperity. I do not desire these things to have an identity of my own. I cannot run after rich men like Zaron just to get those things" (Episode 10). Despite all the hardships, Kashaf completes her education and finds a respectable job. She marries Zaron after turning down his proposals several times. But she never gives up on her individuality and self-respect.

5. Conclusion.

Neither laws nor social codes nor religious mores truly guarantee women a secure place as equal citizens to men in a place which is controlled by misogynist traditions as they are continuously influenced by Islamic injunctions to suit the needs of misogynists. Women in Pakistan are still trying to achieve the same political, cultural and economic equality for woman as their sisters in the West. The clinical psychologist Rubeena Kidwai said about the status of women in Pakistan today: "Pakistani women are like bonsai trees, clipped and pruned and weighed down by the expectations of Pakistani society" (Shah).

Though they still live in a society with widespread gender-based violence and a widespread belief that women don't require education or jobs and only deserve to stay within the limits of domestic sphere, most of the women in the Television of Pakistan know of their rights and potential. It is inspiring to see these women who are strong and vocal about their point of views and thus breaking the stereotypes and 'norms' the society. They are pursuing education and holding down jobs. The characters of Kashaf Murtaza, Khairat, Neelum show us that Pakistani women have become conscious of their rights now and they are taking steps to protect their rights. They are not only bold, confident and educated but they are also well informed.

Though social contexts of Pakistani women are different from women of other countries, still all women around the world experience the discrimination and marginalization to some extent. The message conveyed through

these TV shows does not signify that women should in any way be superior, nor do they call for immoral and anti-religious practices. They simply represent a picture where women can flourish and grow to the heights of their human potential to make their lives a bit easier.

6. Notes.

1. See Nayar 71.
2. See Ovais.
3. *Sej* means a bridal bed.
4. *Nizam* is a realm or a domain.

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