Representations of Women’s role in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis through Drama Serials

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Why this topic?

- Violence against women is a grave issue in the country. From 2010 to June 2016, 5185 females became victims of honour crimes.

- When Chinoy, in collaboration with the HBO films made a documentary regarding the issue, she attracted criticism by the Pakistanis who did not like a woman making a film in collaboration with western directors, about women being killed or mistreated in Pakistan and thus bring ‘shame’ to the country (Maher 2016).

- This speaks volumes about the increased need to give attention to media, not just with honour crimes in mind but the larger woman empowerment question.

- Personal is political, personal is international: Cynthia Enloe
Aim: engage with the politics of gender in Pakistan by critiquing and evaluating women’s representation in Pakistani popular culture.

The primary research question: ‘To what extent does the representation of women’s roles in contemporary Pakistani popular culture include traditionalist ‘honour’ discourses?’

Butler’s performativity theory will be the primary theoretical framework and it will attempt to utilise insights from feminist post-structuralism in order to analyse how women are represented in Pakistani drama serials.

Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis and Content Analysis
Identity as Performance

- Gender as a performance.
- In Butler’s words, gender is, “a process in which the ‘body’ is objectified in discourse that takes for granted the reality of sexual difference and inequality”
- The identity ‘I’ doesn’t exist prior to the discursive construction. In the process of construction, discourses of the body replace the sex by gender.
- Gender isn’t a fixed or an objective category and seems relatively stable only because social institutions continue to reproduce the preferred meaning.
- How is this identify performed and hence constructed repeatedly in Pakistani drama serials?
“Honour is typically perceived to be residing in the body and sexuality of women; protecting this honour and policing female activities relating to marriage, sexuality or love are perceived to be the primary roles of the male or the male members of a family or a community. This idea of regulating women's lives, experiences, and sexuality are common in patriarchal discourses surrounding a society” (Atakav 2015: 52).

In this gendered construction, Honor appears as a male trait and shame as a female trait.

Defiance of the set traditional and communal rules and suspicion, allegation or proof of sexual impropriety by the victim can get her killed or punished by her immediate family.

The rules governing marriage, family, inheritance, divorce-most of which pertain to women are thought to be in the domains of religious authorities and thus, when women raise their voices regarding any of these laws, it is the religious clergy and established order that they are confronting (Rouse 2004).
The continued presence and the power of Islamic ideologues and fundamentalists, both at the state level and at the cultural level who do not shy away from dictating what ‘appropriate’ roles should the women be playing in society, situates the ‘honour discourse’ in a larger religious context.

Bhasin asserts the basic needs of the women are not only linked to the issues of class and patriarchy (as proposed by western feminists), but also, to religion and community.

Religion becomes a political tool to ensure subordination.

‘If we are to assess correctly, women’s’ prospects and future we have to relinquish simplistic stereotypes that present fundamentalism as an expression of regressive medieval archaism and read it, instead as a political statement’ (Mernissi 1987: ix)

Rouse divides the impact of religion into two parts: 1) the religious discourses as constructing gender on the level of culture 2) policy level.

It is on the 1st level, she argues, that men and women socialize as individual agents historically and it is these continuities, along with discourses and institutions supporting them that must be challenged, if systematic change is to be achieved in women’s social status (Rouse 1996: 17).
Sample A constitutes the following top four serials based on IMDB rankings: *DiyareDil* (2005), *Humsafar* (2011-12), *Meri Zaat Zare Benishan* (2009), and *Khuda aur Mohabbat* (2011).

Sample B contains the following three serials chosen because of their relevance to the topic i.e. honor discourses surrounding sexual violence: *Sangat* (2015-16), *Chup Raho* (2014-15), *Dastaan* (2010).
Findings

- Dominant themes identified at the expense of silencing others
- An honorable (arranged) marriage for women.
  
  A specific gendered construction of Muslim female sexuality that caters to the patriarchal gaze.
- Conforming Motherhood: otherwise exhibiting a lot of control, when it comes to issues concerning honor, mothers are portrayed to be operating within the traditionalist honor discourse and perpetuating it.
  
  “Do you think your husband will accept you back if he ever knows you are raped?” (Sangat 2015-16).
  
  “You have committed a sin against Allah, He will never forgive you” (Meri Zaat Zara e Benishan 20019-10).
- Difference between mothers of boys verses those of girls.
  
  ‘Baiti walon ka sur neecha”
Findings

- Economic roles of women
- Natural role= housewife
- Female education’s is important but must not result in encouraging the girl to make her own decisions/choices.
- Necessity verses career drive
- Respectability of Profession
- Does not constitute true empowerment because there is an element of retreatism that dictates a woman that her original purpose in life is that of a caregiver for her family.
Findings

- Violence/abuse is justified (At varying levels) if a woman’s activity results in the loss of honor of the patriarch.
- The females of the household have no moral ground to protect such a woman.
- It is interesting to note that even in the case of Eiman, the virtuous, obedient daughter, her father informs her lover that, ‘if you continue to seek her hand in marriage, I will be left no choice but to kill both my girls to save their honour’ (Khuda aur Muhabbat 2011).
Findings

- Binaries: Career women are ‘problematic’, ‘unfulfilled’, ‘western’ and ‘lose their warm feelings’.

- Pious woman wears eastern attires, is religious and converses in beautiful Urdu; the villainous woman is dressed in western clothes, lacks a spirituality and choses to speak English

- Women=Religious (praying for things to happen) Vs Men=practical (making things happen)
Silences

- Lack of any story line that portrays females in empowered, economically independent roles
- Reduces the space to discuss the issues of working women (work place harassment, unequal pay etc) and recognize them as legitimate part of country’s social, political and cultural realm.
The contradiction in representing the rape victim and the rapist.

Heroic characteristics of the rapist verses the victim’s negativity

While it portrays rape victim finally transforming into a survivor, the fact that the rapist and villain, is also the hero, increases the space for men’s forgiveness while at the same time constricting the avenues of female efforts to bring the rapist to accountability (Sangat)

The portrayal of complete unaccountability of the villain simply produces the idea that men can get away with things both physically and spiritually.
Conclusion: Changing Culture

- It is in everyday conversations and discourses that women need to be afforded more space and more progressive ideas about what constitutes honor and how it ought to translate in real life should be introduced and inculcated.

- In Oct 2016: passing of the anti-honor killing and anti-rape bills in Pakistan in the aftermath of Qandeel’s murder case (July 16).

- Breakthrough Productions like Udari (addressing child abuse) and ‘Baghi’ were produced from 17-18 and Baghi is still being aired by one of the private channels which has gained a lot of popularity amongst the people.

- Conversation about what constitutes ‘honor’ are beginning to get redefined in Popular culture

- But then how far are these one or two exceptional productions actually reflective of changing social norms?