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UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN REAL AND HYPERREAL: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST THEMES IN PAKISTANI DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

This article has been part of a larger research project done under HEC flagship research grant National Research Program for Universities (NRPU) with a particular focus on mapping out the social impact of feminist consciousness on Pakistani culture. For this, we have taken Pakistani drama as a primary source by taking a sample out of a carefully curated list of dramas. In so doing, our primary assumption is to view how drama as a medium has engaged with the feminist themes and issues as they emerge in society and engage their audience either by way of acceptance or rejection or a kind of negotiation,. In either case, the article analyses how has this engagement impacted or shaped public perception about feminism, in both theory and practice? How far and in what ways, these serials have played a major role in developing a palpable feminist consciousness in society, especially among the female audience over the years.

Keywords: HEC, NRPU, Social Impact, Feminism, Pakistani Culture, Drama.

Introduction

This article argues how Pakistani drama serials portray an array of different concerns and themes which engage audience and shape their outlook while bringing contemporary feminist debates to light. In this way, drama has been more than a mere means of entertainment showcasing different aspect of Pakistani culture including the lived experiences of Pakistani women. Moreover, far from being a frivolous site that merely entertains, Pakistani drama educates and enlightens the audience about the social, cultural and ethical issues, including a versatile representation of feminist politics and activism in the backdrop of Pakistani women's existential stories (Rizvi, 2014, Ali & Batool, 2015, Abbas, 2018).

We have made a selection of Pakistani drama serials from two temporal eras, the early 2000's and late 2010's with the view to compare their mutual similarities or differences in representing different themes in the context of feminist rhetoric or politics in the past two decades.

Our analysis identifies an interesting encounters between the real and hyper real space in the context of Pakistani women and their lived realities and material experiences in their culture. Before discussing the major issues and themes of these dramas. It is also imperative to reflect a little deeper into the principal theoretical concept of encounters or unexpected encounters by Egyptian feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) in relation to the literary critic Lauren Berlant's (2008) view of Intimate public. The term encounters facilitates us with a more complex yet inclusive appreciation of Pakistan's visual culture vis-a-vis women's portrayal. What makes such encounters more multidimensional is that they constitutes a diverse community of audience by leading them to a kind of negotiation between certain existing and emerging categories shaping their understanding of different feminist themes presented in these dramas. At many times, this has led them to go beyond an absolute identification or blanket rejection of these visual representations by offering a better appreciation of the innate diversity of Pakistani women's existential stories and their concomitant representation or misrepresentation in these hyper real spaces/visual sites.

By linking Abu-Lughod's theorisation with that of Berlant, our study identifies how Pakistani drama constitutes a particular audience, an intimate community who, on the basis of their cognitive or affective outlook is involved in a shared sense of mutuality and affinity with other people vis-a-vis visual representation. However, our analysis also highlights how sometimes this sense of mutuality is ruptured with certain unanticipated encounters, where the intimate public comes face to face with an unfamiliar or uncanny experience, something that challenges or negates their prior experience of familiarity or intimacy (their experience of being at home). In such encounters, often the received social or political response is receded in the backdrop giving way to a more nuanced and complex appreciation of some experiences or feelings on the part of audience. By inverting the theoretical model that Kiran Nazir Ahmad (2020) in her recent study on Women Digest writers has employed by viewing the readers as an intimate community constituting patterns of identification and affinity with the stories and their characters, our study argues that sometimes such feelings are accompanied with an uncanny sense of estrangement and distance that the audience experience in response to these visual representations. Hence at times, such encounters produce meanings which in a poststructuralist vocabulary may be termed as "slippage" and "spillage"(Barry, 2002, p.64).

While this research is more focused on a close analysis of the content (including their themes and settings) of some dramas, it identifies a gap in analysing the impact of such representation which offer alternative meanings by shaping the subjective and collective outlook of the audience. In so doing, our methodology is not to superimpose any meanings on the content and presentation of these visual sites by emphasising to view them both as an agent of change as well as a product of the collective unconscious of a society with a host of tacit assumptions regarding the role and position of women in relation to patriarchy, culture, morality, and an ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity.

In the following lines, we have presented a content-based critical analysis of three Pakistani Dramas, broadcast in past years, somewhere in between 2016 to 2018.

The list include:

Baaghi (Rebel)

Udaari (To Fly or Flying)

Aakhri Station (The Last Station)

The following table presents the basic information about the selected plays along with the names of the playwrights, the year and channel of their broadcast as well as the youtube link they are available:

Drama Title	Channel	Year	Existing Themes	Emerging Themes	Link
Udaari	Hum TV	2016	Sexual Abuse	Resistance and female bond	https://youtu.be/3GA5XA3t60k
Baaghi	Urdu 1	2017	Honour Killing	Radical feminist subject Social media and digital agency of Women	https://youtu.be/1dWTpntjhDk
Aakhri Station	ARY Digital	2018	Patriarchy and Violence against Women	Feminist Solidarity via storytelling	https://youtu.be/6yIGuZ7I9UE

Udaari

Udaari was aired on ARY Digital in 2016 and instantly became popular as it projected a very sensitive yet silenced theme of sexual abuse suffered by a young girl by her own step father, something that devastates her mother. There are two parallel stories in the serial which are interconnected, however the lead story is that of Sajjo, who remarries

Imtiaz in order to get his protection and assistance in raising her kid Zebo. She never knows that Imtiaz keeps a bad eye on her daughter and agrees to marry her in order to fulfil his demonic design. In the backdrop of Sajjo's absolute trust in and total ignorance of her husband's villainy, the serial takes a catastrophic turn when Imtiaz attempts to rape her daughter Zebo, in her absence, something that she discovers afterwards. The drama takes an unexpected turn when Sajjo defies social pressure and her fear of consequences by confronting Imtiaz's violent behaviour and stands up to save her daughter. At this point, the play represents the trauma and sufferings of both mother and daughter when Imtiaz tries to abuse Zebo in front of her mother. However, Sajjo, takes a courageous step by attempting to kill him and leave the place along with her daughter, leaving him fatally injured there.

It is at this point that the story is connected with the other story of Sheedan and her daughter Meeran with whom Sajjo used to live in the village, before Meeran got an opportunity to pursue her dream of becoming a musician by eventually settling in the city. Fleeing from village, Sajjo meets Sheedan and her daughter and starts living with them in the city, trying to rehabilitate herself and her daughter who is traumatised after suffering abuse from Imtiaz.

However, the story gets more complex when after many years, one day Imtiaz reappears in their lives, this time with more venom and vengeance to blackmail Sajjo for her attempt to kill him. However Meeran and her mother Sheedan shield her and with their support, Sajjo has a legal fight against Imtiaz, in which after a lot of hardship, she finally wins.

In this way the play represents the heroic struggle of a woman who breaks the societal taboos and barriers coming in her way by denying to be a victim. Instead, she fights against the unjust sexual and moral norms of patriarchy where a woman suffers the insult and injury of a man's misdeeds and is expected to stay silent. She even helps her daughter emerge out of her trauma as a survivor of sexual abuse and questions the stereotype of victimhood often associated with such incidents both in our society and the visual space. The play also questions the widespread acceptance and normalisation of gender-based violence and domestic abuse by unmasking how family and marriage become the grounds for their perpetuation. Sajjo's fight against the compound exploitation of patriarchy, rotten morality and corrupt legal system is made possible with the help of Sheedan, a woman who is also demeaned in society as belonging to a *Miraasi* family (singing family in traditional culture). Nonetheless, both women refuse to be encumbered by inhibition or injustice and struggle to change their destiny by making right yet tough choices in order to showcase their agency and are willing to pay the price for it.

By recontextualising Abu-Lughod's theorisation, *Udaari*, like another TV Serial Cheekh in 2019, becomes an unexpected encounter for the audience by presenting the struggle of women who refuse to be "sinned more against than sinning" and defy the flawed logic of patriarchy by reclaiming their autonomy on their bodies and lives. In this way, the play resonates with the feminist ideal of demanding autonomy and control over women's lives, however it presents it in a manner that helps audience identify with the trials and tribulations suffered by women.

What sets this serial apart from other dramas focusing on the issue of sexual violence against women is the overt and direct representation of the violence inflicted on women. This is best illustrated in the episode where Imtiaz, after being exposed to Sajjo for his sexual crime against Zebo, tries to do it again in front of her mother. The scene with its tantalising visual impact highlights the enormity of this crime in the backdrop of two hapless women and their extreme vulnerability. However, instead of presenting women in this cage-like existence where they are imprisoned once and forever, the play offers an alternative when Sajjo attempts to kill her tormentor. Her invocation in the form of her dialogues such as "*Main Survivor Hoon, Main Victim Nahi*", (I am a survivor, not a victim), "*Main Beychari Nahi Banoo Gee*", (I will not accept the victimhood) "*Ussay Karnee Chahiye Sharm Mujhai Nahi*" (Not me, but he should feel ashamed of his behaviour) foreshadow the birth of a new woman emerging out of such crisis.

In this way, Sajjo exemplifies a survivor who turns her traumatic past into a source of empowerment and strength, not for her or her daughter only, but for many women in society lacking her courage and substance. In this way, the drama urges the viewers to confront and examine the repressive systems that uphold and normalise violence and injustice as the unchanging destiny of women. However, the drama shows the triumph of women representing the oft-missing dimension of their struggle and fight against the crimes of honour within family. Alongside sparking empathy and awareness, the serial illustrates the cultural impact of such visual sites, making Pakistani drama a unique social space that shape and influence public opinion and encourage societal change. This can be further seen by gauging how the drama serial invited a national debate on the subject of violence, especially sexual violence against women, something that was not projected so directly on TV screen before.

Baaghi

Aired on Urdu 1 in 2017, the drama serial *Baaghi* was written by Umera Ahmad and Shazia Khan, and is based on the life story of a social media sensation in Pakistan, Qandeel Baloch, who was killed in the name of honour by her brother. The drama fictionalises this real event through a character Fauzia, who is lively girl living in a village with her family and is fascinated by the glamorous lifestyle of TV and film celebrities.

She daydreams to get fame one day by means of her talent for singing and acting. However before moving to city to actualise her dream, she has to deal with many ordeals coming in her way via her family. The drama presents her struggle to become a model with the name of Kanwal Baloch, a dream that soon gets frustrated owing to the tough and not-so-tidy competition in the showbiz industry. At the face of a failure to become a famous model, Kanwal starts making TikTok videos and anticipates a quicker fame based on her desire to create hype and sensation on on social media. We can deconstruct her choice of using social media, as a means to fame and fortune. Seen superficially, the drama presents it as her willed choice, however, she adopts it for her survival, knowing fully well that she is not strong enough to fight against the oppressive structures of class and gender simultaneously. In this way, the play problematises the complex notion of female agency and autonomy in relation to digital technology that in case of a woman like Kanwal, becomes another web of exploitation, using her like a commodity, leaving little at her disposal to choose from and giving her this false illusion of willed choices. In an indirect way, the drama also highlights the crucial factor that Kanwal misses in her life, implying that unless women are able to acquire sufficient education and skill, the dream of empowerment will remain an illusion. Hence deprived of any skill education, Kanwal is bound to adopt TikTok and other social media tactics, a rather unwilled choice that she has to make for her survival and sustenance, however, this choice makes her life more precarious and vulnerable in her family and society. Though she apparently succeeds in her dream of being financially independent while supporting her parents and siblings, who continue to take advantage of her by treating her like dirt and by considering her a disgrace and shame for them, the serial highlights the hypocrisy and double standards of society, especially the middle or lower middle class families with their hollow myths of respectability and honour in ostracising women like Kanwal. The drama keeps signalling towards female agency and its nuanced exhibition in different circumstances as she rebels and resists against the social norms of female honour and does not deter from doing things in her own way. The serial also portrays her personal life in relation to her immediate family, where she stands up against her husband who cheats on her and deprives her of her son, as a punishment. However, she does not kneel down to this oppression and injustice and is ready to fight against this emotional and physical abuse. She even speaks up in favour of her sister when her husband throws her out of his house after beating her. She refuses to succumb to the societal pressure by rejecting a man of her brother's choice and questions the power and privilege patriarchy assigns to men to decide the destiny of women. She fearlessly confronts her husband when he tries to cheat on her and supports her sister to step out of an abusive marriage by saying:

Allah nay tujhy do hath do ankhain do pair diyay hain. aurat kisi mard say kam nhi hay. Khud kaam kr

["God has made you equal to man, in your limbs and nerves, you should work and earn yourself"] (my translation).

However, the drama offers the flip side of her life by showing how she has to pay the price of the radical choices she makes in her life. For instance, in exercising autonomy over her life, her career and finally her body, Kanwal is shown to be singing and dancing in order to achieve her lifelong dream of leading a glamorous life. However, this is something that earns her the label of a bad woman from everyone around her. The last part of the play touches upon another important theme of honour killing that is so rampant in Pakistani culture. This happens when she falls in love with another man, but before she can marry him, she is killed by her brother who thinks her to be disgrace for the family.

The drama made waves because of its overt representation of honour killing as a penalty to the fierce and unapologetic existence of Fauzia in the private and public sphere. In many ways, she epitomises a reactionary and angry version of feminism that flouts convention and refuses to conform to the moral judgment of society. For this reason, the drama was viewed differently by different groups of audience. It faced backlash from a faction of society who thinks that the heroine is unduly glorified for/over her conduct which is morally controversial and socially unacceptable. In this way, the drama raises some serious questions in relation to Kanwal's posturing of a controversial social media figure, something that resonates with the real life story of Qandeel Baloch. That such image of woman with her defiance becomes a site of scandal, ensuing provocation and anxiety in society, without granting or guaranteeing stability or success for her, and eventually making her a victim of her provocations. In this way, *Baaghi* can be listed among those Pakistani dramas where women showcase their anger and resentment against the double standards of society that they cannot hit back as it continues to pass judgments about their character and conduct by tacitly holding them responsible for their plight.

Aakhri Station

The serial *Aakhri Station*, was written by Amna Mufti and aired on ARY Digital in 2018 as a joint production of Khoosat Films and Kashf Foundation. The mini-series consists of seven episodes that brilliantly portray the tough life choices made by seven women characters and their consequences for them and the society they belong to. By evoking the dramatic technique of telling tales, the serial represents these women hailing from different regions of Pakistan who while travelling in a train share their life stories with each other. In this way, it establishes a subtle link between storytelling and healing as one woman starts sharing her story and before she finishes, the next joins her. The

cumulative effect of these stories is deepened on the audience when they realise how these stories are not mere stories but inextricably linked and woven in the social fabric. This is further evident when we see that these women, on account of their different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, are not merely the victims of patriarchy but a complex web of oppression and abuse based on the intersection of gender, class, capitalism and tribal and cultural misogyny. At another level, these stories represent a more complex angle of Pakistani women and their stories coming from different territorial and geographical locations including the remote areas in tribal belt KPK or interior Sindh.

Yasmeen is the first woman who shares her story of living with her gambler husband who forces her to sleep around for clearing his debts. She resists her husband's illegitimate demand by showing her agency and in so doing exercises her control and autonomy over her body. It is very interesting to note that this idea of autonomy over one's body resonates the controversial slogan of *mera jism meri marzi* (my body my choice) in the recent years of feminist activism in Pakistan. However unlike its provocative projection in the streets causing a lot of public clamour and backlash, when this issue is presented on the TV screen via the story of Yasmeen, it has facilitated a more grounded and nuanced expression by impacting the community of viewers and by engaging them in a bond of empathy and identification. At this point, the serial deftly inserts the dialogue of the ticket checker who encourages Yasmeen for her decision of not putting up with her violent husband saying

Na baita kiun tashadud bardasht kia jy, aurat bhi Allah ki makhlooq hay or gharelo tashadud naa naa.

[“You don't have to endure torture, women are as much of God's creature as men, and domestic violence shouldn't be tolerate”.] (my translation)

This comparison between the visual and actual invites our attention to consider the manner as well as context of representing such complex themes in relation to public response/reaction. On the other hand, Yasmeen's husband's act of forcing her wife to sleep with other men, represents the flip side of patriarchy where men are considered as the beholders of women's bodies and honour, something that the serial reverses, hence inviting a more thorough critique of this widespread public perception.

The second storyteller Gulmeena, a woman from Waziristan tells her struggle to find her son, forcibly taken by her mother-in-law when she was married off to an older man after the death of her first husband. Her tale highlights yet another ignored aspect of Pakistani society, namely the idea of oppressive matriarchy, where women exercise control and domination over other women in the family. Ironically, such acts of access and control on the part of women are usually accepted by men in the family,

something that points to the potentially oppressive dynamics of patriarchal and matriarchal structures in Pakistani society.

The next story is told by Farzana, who shares her experience of emotional abuse as she is married to a paranoid and narcissist man who mistrusts and mistreats her for being a working woman. The story presents her struggle of enduring the suspicion and cynicism of her husband hoping to win his love and trust, till her friend supports her to step out of this abusive relationship. Her eventual decision to leave her husband and home also signals an important shift in Pakistani society by breaking the stereotype that holds that woman can only be a good mother or wife if she does not pursue her career. However, instead of reinforcing the binary logic of confining or compartmentalising women's existence and role in the private realm only, the serial breaks this dichotomy of housewife or working woman by showing another shade of Pakistani women's existence where she can be simultaneously a good mother and a promising professional.

The next story is told by Rafia who is married to a drug addict, who dies but leaves her as HIV positive, something that makes her existence a pariah in her family and society. The serial shows how none blames Rafia's husband for his deviant behaviour while ostracising her for no sin of her own, a sad but very bitter fact of our society where many women like her, struggle with their addict or alcoholic husbands and suffer the burden of their criminality or deviance.

Then another character, Shabana continues the chain of stories by describing her tough battle of fighting against poverty and hunger and working as a household maid. She is to struggle against the societal attitude that without offering her any material or emotional support, undermines her for doing such a lowly job. However, the serial breaks this stereotypical social attitude when Shabana's brother talks some sense into her husband when he feels ashamed of her wife working as a maid. In this way, the serial questions the deep-seated misogyny that downplays or undermines the crucial importance of work for women and also combats the flawed societal outlook that tags certain tasks as mean or menial.

The next story is told by Shumaila who is a victim of acid attack by her husband who suspects her having an affair with his younger brother. The story, however offers a unique angle to her struggle when she is helped by her mother-in-law not merely in getting a divorce from her abusive husband, but also getting her medical treatment. By inverting the stereotype of a cruel mother-in-law, the serial highlights another nuanced dimension of our culture by showing a unique bond among women who support and sustain each other in crisis. In this way, the serial becomes an unexpected encounter as it reverses the expectation of audience who are accustomed to seeing a toxic mother and daughter-in-law relationship.

On a deeper level, such representation creates what the literary critic Jennifer Cho (in Raja & Lu, 2023, p.315) has termed as hyper empathy by deconstructing the standard and expected societal attitudes and expectations that both produce and efface pain. Shumaila's choice of getting a treatment, in which she is aided by her mother in law is another site where the serial offers an alternative view of feminist agency with their refusal to allow society render their abused and bruised bodies as eternally disabled, deformed or diseased.

The last woman, Tehmina, who is also the lead characters, narrates her inspiring battle of fighting against depression, with the help and support of her husband who first recognises the signs of her mental illness and makes her go for the treatment without judging her. The serial uses the technique of flashbacks showing snippets of Tehmina's past that allow audience understand the roots of her trauma in her childhood when she had to witness her mother's death by suicide. On the other hand, in rendering support, her husband's act of supporting her till her final healing exhibits a positive yet unrepresented model of masculinity in our culture. Her husband embodies the unique attributes of kindness and communication, something which is usually missing in the visual representation of male characters, often characterised with their one-sided, exaggerated and even glamourised projection of a toxic masculinity. However, the drama subverts an essentially aggressive or oppressive shade of masculinity or patriarchy by presenting caring and considerate males who support women in the moment of crisis. Moreover, it also problematises, even ruptures the one-sided veneration of matriarchy by showing mean and abusive female characters who inflict injury to fellow women. In this way, the drama highlights the negative effects of how women, too, internalize the abusive patriarchal notions of power and domination and are guilty of exercising similar or sometimes more abusive control over other women which eventually result in strengthening the patriarchal structures. In either case, the visual representation neither sensationalises nor undermines the agency of both men and women, by presenting healthy and resilient femininity blended with enabling and more humane expressions of masculinity.

In all seven stories, the serial ends on a positive and hopeful note by projecting these sensitive issues and showing the will and spirit of the characters to redress, resolve and redeem their lives. By recontextualising Cho's argument in the above lines, we can further infer how the women in the serial demonstrate their urge to combat and come back to life despite suffering innumerable wounds and scars on their bodies and souls. At another level, when such stories of abuse and violence are articulated and represented in the mainstream televisual space, they create a strong bond of empathy and solidarity among those who suffer abuse by the hands of patriarchy or matriarchy.

At another level, the serial highlights the subtle link of trauma with the act of storytelling, suggesting how trauma in the form of an ongoing narrative creates a kind of cure and becomes therapeutic in its own right. Far from being a mere catharsis with its expression of grief and sufferings towards an audience, this kind of storytelling offers a deeper and fuller insight into the subtle dynamics of human psychology and emotions. In this way, these stories become a site of healing as well as female solidarity rooted in Pakistani women's existential realities across different cultural, ethnic or personal backgrounds. Besides the sporadic commentary of the ticket checker reflecting empathy and courage, another engaging technique in the drama is the use of choir comprising a bunch of women traveling in the same train and singing after each woman finishes her story. These songs have been used as a linking device for all seven stories by also foreshadowing the pain and trauma experienced by the narrators. The song they sing is part of the folklore hence rooted organically in Pakistani culture and creating a kind of bond among all women and their stories, not merely based on their shared sufferings but shared sense of will and resilience too.

Most importantly, all these stories besides highlighting the everyday lives and actualities of Pakistani women also televise some core issues which have become tabooed such as marital abuse, sexually-transmitted diseases and domestic violence etc. These stories also evoke some very basic, yet silenced or least-discussed aspects of women's biological existence including their experience of mothering, lack or total absence of maternal health, as well as postpartum depression. By evoking Abu-Lughod's concept, the serial becomes an unexpected encounter by problematising the essentialist representation of matriarchy and patriarchy in Pakistani visual culture hence offering the possibility of displacing or undoing the deeply entrenched psycho-social beliefs and attitudes of audience. Likewise, the serial disengages the perception of first generation audience who disdain feminism as a western idea, with its one sided and often dark projection of men and masculinity in Pakistani culture.

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