

## “This is Where You Belong”--Representations of the Ideal Woman in Pakistani Television Serials from the 1980’s to the Present

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*NOTE: This paper is part of a larger project where I compare and discuss three plays in greater depth. Due to page and time constraints, this paper briefly touches upon some of the core issues and discussion has been limited to two instead of three plays. For the same reasons, the synopsis of each play has been taken out of the body of the paper and is included in the endnotes for anyone who might want to refer to it.*

Almost since the very beginning of television in Pakistan, Urdu drama serials have been extremely popular amongst audiences and have been one of the most widely watched programs on television, especially before satellite and cable were introduced.<sup>i</sup> It is said that in the 80's/early 90's the city roads used to be clear at 8:00 p.m when a popular play was on air.<sup>ii</sup> In the 1980's Pakistan had one state run television channel PTV and satellite television was introduced in the 1990's.<sup>iii</sup> Under the military regime of Pervez Musharraf, media was liberalized in 2002 and by 2008, Pakistan had more than forty TV channels and fifty FM radio stations.<sup>iv</sup> The process began soon after 9/11 when, to further his stated mission of “enlightened moderation” for Pakistan and to sustain his international “liberal” image, Musharraf set out to provide freedom to the media.<sup>v</sup>

I briefly discuss two extremely popular plays from two distinct periods of Pakistani television—the 1980's and the late 2000's.<sup>vi</sup> I describe how a certain realism, and complexity of characterization of women, in earlier serials has made way for one-dimensional characters stereotyped along rigid dichotomies and understandings of traditional/Western, conservative/modern, religious/liberal, and good/evil. Women in earlier serials were not stereotyped into neat categories of “victim”, “evil,” “pious,” “modern.” Many of the popular female leads were shown to have a function other than being good wives and working women were often seen as the norm rather than being judged for being good or bad, home makers or home breakers. Heroines were also seen in a wide variety of settings as opposed to many present day plays where what audiences know about the female leads' lives is restricted mainly to the privacy of the home. In earlier plays, by observing women's interactions with others in *both* the privacy of the home and in the outside world, audiences were allowed a more in-depth look into these individuals' complex psychology relative to all spheres of their lives—love, career,

marriage, friendships, family. The limited function and setting, along with the themes of present day plays, seem to focus on the idea that good women belong in the private sphere (i.e. at home).

The major themes this project draws on include these serials' definitions of public/private spaces and the boundaries between them, the role of marriage and companionship, and the constant negotiation of tradition with the "modern." I use two broad factors to explain the ways in which these themes are tackled: (i) state-media relations at the basic level of media censorship and liberalization and (ii) the intersection of state-media relations with popular piety culture and broader aspects of mainstream politics. Through the lens of the representation of gender, I view how all these forces interact and the ways in which they influence popular culture. Though the differences between the serials are clear, explaining these differences is not very easy and does not lead to simple answers.

## **THE WOMEN'S QUESTION & PAKISTANI TELEVISION**

For a broader understanding of how the dichotomy of Western/traditional took root in the sub-continent and its central focus on women, Partha Chatterjee's discussion on women and nationalism is very useful. Chatterjee has explained how anticolonial nationalism in India led to a division of social institutions into two distinct spheres—the material domain and the spiritual domain. As India accepted the superiority of the West in the material domain it pushed even harder to preserve and maintain its superiority in the spiritual domain which was marked by culture. The need to be "modern" but distinctly "non-Western" began the process of "selective modernity." The nationalists hung on to the idea that the colonizers had failed to colonize the inner identity of the East and women became a visible symbol of that inner identity and of the spiritual domain. They represented the sanctity of the private, unconquered sphere.<sup>vii</sup> Chatterjee's

discussion of gender's relationship to national identity is relevant and applicable to post-colonial Pakistan where the good Pakistani woman is often perceived as the polar opposite of the Western woman who is shown to have little concern for the well-being of the home, indulges in useless luxuries, and is more interested in pursuing the acquisition of material skills in order to compete with men. In contrast, the good Pakistani woman devotes her life to her home and family, gets an education in order to be a more culturally refined and better homemaker and thus, remains superior to the Western woman and retains her place as upholder of tradition and the private sphere.<sup>viii</sup>

To a large extent, the idea of women's rightful place being the home tends to play out in television serials. A writer, film maker, and analyst, Javed Jabbar had, in 1984, reminded us of how many different fields Pakistani women work in—as doctors, architects, members of Presidential as well as provincial cabinets, industrial workers, teachers, engineers, scientists, researchers, and scholars to name a few. The media, claims Jabbar, “does not reflect the range or richness of these roles.”<sup>ix</sup> Working women are “invariably portrayed as irresponsible, neglectful mothers or unhappy wives, unsuccessful at love and fulfillment.”<sup>x</sup> Almost three decades later his words still hold true. The actual range of women's roles and participation in Pakistani society is not visible on the small screen, especially in entertainment media.

## **THE TWO PLAYS**

*Humsafar* (2011) is the story of a young married couple (Asher and Khirad) and the challenges their marriage faces, while *Dhoop Kinare* (1987) follows the personal and professional lives of two doctors (Zoya and Ahmer) who find love and companionship in each other.<sup>xi</sup> Both plays were massively popular.

*Humsafar (2011)*: The heroine of this serial, Khirad, is set in sharp contrast to Sara, the other young woman vying for the hero's love and one of the villains of the play. This contrast is established from the very first scene where we see a responsible, hardworking, *shalwar kameez* clad girl taking care of all household chores and showing concern for her mother's health. As she prepares and carefully pours *chai* into a cup, the scene cuts to a close up of coffee being poured into a cup at an upscale café. This is significant because *chai* is considered a traditional South Asian drink whereas coffee, though common, is something most Pakistani's would associate with the West. It sets the stage for the Westernized characters we are about to be introduced to after the very obviously non-Westernized Khirad. Two young people, Asher (the hero and Khirad's future husband) and Sara, are seated at a table dressed in Western wear. Their seemingly inconsequential chatter portrays them as very carefree and emphasizes the contrast between a carefree, consumer oriented upper class and a family focused, responsibility driven lower class, which Khirad comes from.

The contrast between Sara and Khirad is continued throughout the play—in costume, sometimes in setting, in character traits and in the kind of language characters use to describe these two women. Whenever Sara, who is always seen in Westernized wear, expresses her jealousy and hostility to Khirad, we see that Khirad has her *dupatta* wrapped around her head whereas earlier and later in the play it is often slung around her neck instead.<sup>xiii</sup> Similarly, locations and settings also matter. All of Khirad's happy moments are situated *inside* the home whereas Sara is happiest when she is outside the house—in the office, in restaurants and cafes, on a drive. Despite the fact that she has such an active social life, Sara does not seem to have any close friends whom she is shown to confide in, other than Asher. It is as if she has lost the privilege of close female companionship that is often associated with the domestic sphere.

Khiraad, on the other hand, is seen sharing her thoughts, fears, and concerns with female companions who are also sources of both moral and material support for her whenever she is faced with a crisis. In comparison, Sara's female companionship consists only of her mother and her aunt both of whom, like her, are working women and, in the end they cannot manage to help her or prevent her from ultimately committing suicide.

Khiraad is not just the good Pakistani girl, but also as a good Muslim girl. Within what is essentially a man's world, an essential task assigned to women is to be upholders of tradition and religious rituals, of being symbols that enforce or reinforce ethnic, religious, and/or national identities and ideologies especially at moments of crisis.<sup>xiii</sup> Post 9/11, in Pakistan, religion and religious symbolism has been very visible on the small screen in the past decade or so, whether it be in the form of complete channels dedicated to religious programming or aspects embedded within entertainment programming. Women, as always, became a critical tool for showcasing such symbolism and presenting images of a non-violent Islam. *Humsafar* is no different. Religious rituals and symbols abound in the play and the heroine's "good Muslim" identity is made very clear starting from the very first episode where she is specifically shown sitting on a prayer mat. The white *dupatta* she is often seen wearing connotes the traditional *namaaz ki chaddar* (prayer covering) and reminds us that Khiraad gets her strength and endurance from God. The value Khiraad accords to prayer—for example in a scene depicting her daughter's critical open heart surgery--is not a trait shared by Asher or with any of the Westernized women in the play. The men in most of these plays may offer a supplementary "Amen" at the end of the woman's prayer as in a scene in "Episode 19" where Asher walks in on Khiraad praying, but the task of praying lies with women like Khiraad.

***Dhoop Kinare (1987)***

Questions about Islamic ideology were at the forefront in Pakistan during Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in the 80's and women and minorities became major victims of his Islamization process--an attempt to enforce "Islamic" laws in the country, affecting all social, legal, economic and political institutions. Strict media censorship and a campaign against "obscenity" were also part of Zia's efforts to maintain his place as ruler of the country.<sup>xiv</sup> During the Zia era, television dramas were the most viewed television programme and *Dhoop Kinare* was one of the most popular ones. Despite strict media censorship the play managed to get away with subtly defying the censors on various levels and was said to have been enjoyed by the dictator himself. Scholars have claimed that Zia's restrictions on media images of women had less to do with preventing obscenity and more to do with promoting a domesticated image of women.<sup>xv</sup>

*Dhoop Kinare* is an excellent example of a show which, despite all such restrictions, presents ideals and scenarios that are the very opposite of what Zia was trying to achieve. Not only did the play refrain from presenting domesticated images of women, it also outright defied two of Zia's legal injunctions—members of the opposite sex were shown holding hands and a banned poet's poem was used as background music. At a time when any kind of physical interaction between men and women was banned on screen, Zoya takes and holds on to Ahmer's hand. Moreover, the setting is an open field—a public space--where she has come to carry out professional work as part of her participation in the "outside world," the material domain. The scene is part of a broader tendency in the serial whereby women are as much participants of the material domain as the men. None of this is portrayed as something exceptional, good, or bad; it is shown as a normal way of life. Furthermore, when there are conversations about careers the men in the serial encourage, even push these women to go out and be independent and self-confident.

The fathers in this play may be compared to Khirad's mother, in *Humsafar*, who sees marriage, and thus a secure place within the domestic sphere, as the only way to provide social and financial security for her daughter. A trend in recent plays suggests that for a woman who is a victim of poverty, or a widow who has to bring up her children, or one who has been unjustly thrown out of her house, it is considered acceptable—even noble—to go out and earn a living.<sup>xvi</sup> However, societal reaction is very different for a woman who chooses to go out and earn, and is not forced to do so out of financial necessity. Such women are more often than not stereotyped in recent plays as being home wreckers, cunning plotters, and neglectful wives and mothers who usually meet an unpleasant end.<sup>xvii</sup> The working women in *Dhoop Kinare* are neither idealized as noble, nor are they condemned as being Western or materialistic. In fact, there are more similarities in the lifestyle of Sara, *Humsafar*'s villain, and Zoya, *Dhoop Kinare*'s heroine—both drive around town in their cars, go out to restaurants with friends, are assertive and outspoken and possess an overall sense of independence.

### **THE IDEAL WOMAN & THE SPACES SHE OCCUPIES**

Though the domestic sphere is portrayed in both serials, its boundaries with the outside world are very much blurred in the earlier play and very marked in *Humsafar*. In *Dhoop Kinare*, both men and women are portrayed as part of public as well as domestic spheres and they walk in and out of both public and private spaces with ease. In *Humsafar*, the women who participate in both the material and the domestic sphere are either villains or setting themselves up for disaster. Similarly, men who are not part of a character's immediate family entering the domestic sphere is an idea fraught with tension in *Humsafar* whereas the men in *Dhoop Kinare* are seen to not only be welcome inside homes other than their own but are also seen carrying out domestic chores.

Zoya is part of the upper class which perhaps gives her an easier access to public spaces and helps allow for a greater blurring of the boundaries between home and the outside world. Kamran Ali says, “Over the past two decades, Pakistani society has seen an ‘increase in traffic, restaurants, video outlets, expensive boutiques’ (Rouse 1998, 61). It has also witnessed a diminishing of female presence on the urban streets linked to an increase of public and domestic violence against women”<sup>xviii</sup> However, he also points out that middle and upper class women (for the most part) have “retained social and familial privileges as long as they did not transgress social norms,” even under the most antiwomen regimes. Moreover, “in an increasingly hostile and restricting public sphere” these elite women are given a social protection when going out into public spaces, which poorer women have to do without. Although both plays portray the lifestyles of the elite upper classes, wealth is not flashed in *Dhoop Kinare* in the way that it is in *Humsafar*, where we see big cars, fancy houses, designer clothes, and upscale cafes. Though *Humsafar* criticizes and condemns the consumption focused lifestyles of rich women like Farida and Sara (the two villains), its vivid descriptions of consumerism sends a complex message whereby audiences might aspire to achieve these lifestyles even while they condemn Sara and Farida for having them.

How piety is conceived also begins to change in the time period between these two heroines. Zoya does not need to have her goodness (or her right to a happy life) validated through visible religious-cultural symbols like the *dupatta* and the prayer mat or through constant appeals to God, the way Khirad does. Similarly, choice of clothes is more of an issue for Khirad than for Zoya who goes to work in the same type of clothes that we see her in the rest of the time. Khirad pointedly has a *dupatta* wrapped around her head when she starts going to university. Khirad is a heroine shaped by an international socio-political scenario that developed

as a response to attacks on Islam and thus, we see in her character a defense of the faith.

Alternatively, Zoya is a heroine produced in a national context where a specific interpretation of Islam was being forced down people's throats. Her character is part of an almost rebellious reaction to the forced imposition of religion in daily life.

## **CONCLUSION**

Multiple factors are contributing to changes in the way women are represented in Pakistani television plays. With consumerism on the rise in Pakistan, class distinctions are perhaps becoming more distinctly visible and the socio-economic situation of the country demands that these issues be noted. The popular upper-class heroines of plays like *Dhoop Kinare* have made way for a lower-class heroine who has become the new ideal. However, her class has also created restrictions on fluidity between public and private spaces. Over time Pakistani dramas have both reiterated and challenged the perception that the home is a domain of power and of confinement at the same time. In recent years however, there has been a greater focus on emphasizing that power within the domestic sphere is what the ideal woman should aspire to and stepping outside this sphere leads to nothing but trouble.

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<sup>i</sup> Shuchi Kothari, "From Genre to Zanaana: Urdu Television Drama Serials and Women's Culture in Pakistan." *Contemporary South Asia*, 14 (2005), 289.

<sup>ii</sup> Sabahat Zakariya, "Drama serials: Golden Age?," Dawn, March 3, 2012, <http://dawn.com/2012/03/03/drama-serials-golden-age/>

<sup>iii</sup> Zafarullah Khan, and Brian Joseph, "The Media Take Center Stage," *Journal of Democracy*, 19 (2008): 32-33; Mughal, 40; Steven Barraclough, "Pakistani Television Politics in the 1990's," *International Communication Gazette* 63 (2001): 225.

<sup>iv</sup> Khan & Joseph, 32-33.

<sup>v</sup> Afiya S. Zia, "Faith-based Politics, Enlightened Moderation and the Pakistani Women's Movement," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11 (2009).

<sup>vi</sup> Henceforth "play" refers to Pakistani television dramas whereas "serial" is a genre within Pakistani television plays. In Pakistan the word play is often used to refer to both television drama and stage/theatre plays. Serials typically consist of thirteen to twenty five episodes (up until the 1990's a serial rarely went over thirteen but now longer running serials are the norm).

<sup>vii</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>viii</sup> Chatterjee.

<sup>ix</sup> Javed Jabbar, *The Global City* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1999), 45.

<sup>x</sup> Jabbar, 42.

<sup>xi</sup> Detailed synopsis: *Humsafar* is a story of an unwanted arranged marriage between people from different socio-economic classes who, nevertheless, end up falling in love only to part ways when they become victims of deliberate attempts by the boy's family to create misunderstandings between the two. Khirad (Mahira Khan) is a poor girl who lives with her mother in small town Hyderabad in a somewhat conservative section of society. Due to her mother's sudden illness and death, Khirad is married off to a cousin she never knew in order to secure her future. Asher (Fawad Khan) who is a wealthy Yale returned fellow, is pressurized into marrying her by his father (Behroze Sabzwari). Gradually they both overcome their preconceived notions about each other and fall in love. Meanwhile, Asher's other cousin Sara (Naveen Waqar) is in love with him and enraged that he has married Khirad. Asher's mother Farida (Atiqa Oudho) comes up with a scheme to get rid of Khirad and, with Sara and Sara's mother (Hina Khawaja Bayat) as accomplices, succeeds in creating misunderstanding between the young couple and separating them. Khirad is framed, accused of cheating on her husband and sent away by him without getting a chance to plead her case. Four years later she is forced get in touch with him because their daughter, whom Asher never knew existed, has a heart problem and Khirad cannot afford treatment. Ultimately the truth unfolds and they get back together. Sara, who had been led to believe by Farida that she would get to marry Asher ultimately, realizes the hopelessness of the situation and kills herself. Asher confronts his mother and realizing that she cannot hide the truth from him any longer, plus disturbed by the fact that Sara has just killed herself (partly because of her actions), Farida loses her mind.

*Dhoop Kinare* follows the private and professional lives of two doctors--Dr Ahmer (Rahat Kazmi), the adopted son of a wealthy man who has recently passed away, and a younger junior doctor Zoya (Marina Khan) who works under him. Zoya happens to be the granddaughter of Ahmer's foster father but never knew about her grandfather till he dies and she inherits his house. Ahmer, without meeting this girl, hates her with a passion because his foster father kept her a secret and left her the house which is very valuable for Ahmer because of the memories he has associated

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with it. Ahmer and Zoya, unaware about each other's identities, meet at the hospital, get off to a bad start and ultimately fall in love. A dilemma arises when he finds out who she really is and creates problems between them. The stories of Dr Sheena (Badar Khaleel), Dr Irfan (Sajid Hussain) and Angie (Kehkashan Awan) form sub-plots of the play. Sheena, Ahmer's friend and colleague, is in love with him but ultimately resigns herself to the fact that he will never reciprocate that love and marries someone else. Her marriage turns out to be a disaster and Ahmer helps her get her life back on track. Angie is Zoya's neighbor and best friend. She is constantly terrified of her overbearing father (Hameed Wayne) and much of her time revolves around convincing him to let her make her own decisions. Dr Irfan is Zoya's colleague who falls in love with Angie and ultimately manages to get her father's approval to marry her.

<sup>xii</sup> Towards the end of the play, in "Episode 19," this image of a *dupatta* clad heroine facing the hostility of the villainous woman without the *dupatta* (in this case, Farida) is repeated. Much later in the serial, after being thrown out of the house, the white *dupatta* wrapped around Khirad's head almost becomes her uniform and is very obviously visible throughout the rest of the play.

<sup>xiii</sup> Chatterjee; Urvashi Bhutalia, "Legacies of Departure: Decolonization, Nation-making, and Gender," in *Gender and empire*, ed. Phillipa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 204; Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>xiv</sup> Sehar Mughal, *The Fate of Tomorrow is in the Hands of Women: Gender, Social Position, and the Media During Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization Campaign* (Honors Thesis, Rutgers, 2011, 15,19).

<sup>xv</sup> It is ironic that Haseena Moin's plays, which almost always had a bold, spirited, independent heroine who worked outside the house, were enjoyed by Zia himself. Mughal, 46-47, 52-53.

<sup>xvi</sup> Numerous examples exist amongst recent plays. To name a few: Asma in *Daam* (ARY, 2010), Saba in *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan* (Geo Tv, 2009), Aiman in *Maat* (Hum Tv, 2011).

<sup>xvii</sup> Examples include Mahroosh in *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan* (GEO TV, 2009), Madiha in *Ashk* (Geo Tv, 2012), Kiran in *Mere Paas Paas* (Hum TV, 2007), Nijaat in *Ijaazat* (ARY Digital, 2010), Sharmeen in *Talafi* (PTV Home, 2012).

<sup>xviii</sup> Kamran Asdar Ali, "'Pulp Fictions': Reading Pakistani Domesticity," *Social Text*, 22 (2204): 131.

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