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Unpacking Colonial Discourse in Pakistani Films: Exploring the Intersection of Religion, Culture, and Patriarchy

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Abstract

This study investigated the interplay between religion, patriarchal culture, and the social status of women as portrayed in cinema. The data was derived from the analysis of three independent Urdu films produced in Pakistan. The films analyzed in this study were *Silent Waters*, directed by female filmmaker Sabiha Sumar, and *In the Name of God and Speak*, both directed by male filmmaker Shoaib Mansoor. The aim of analyzing these films was to highlight how the filmmakers utilized a discourse similar to colonial discourse to depict the intricacies of women's oppression. Based on narratives and discourse analysis of these films, the findings suggest that the prevailing discourse in the films centered on the criticism of patriarchal culture and Islamic conservatism that structure and undermine women's status in Pakistani families and society. The discourse portrayed women as active agents who are battling against patriarchal norms and religious extremism to achieve liberation from oppression within both their families and society. The study findings enhance our understanding of how colonial discourse is reproduced in the cinematic productions of Pakistan, particularly in the process of reflecting on women's issues and empowerment in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Feminism, Colonial Discourse, Women Empowerment, Third World Women, Khuda kay Liye, Khamosh Pani, Bol.*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Pakistani society and media have undergone significant changes in their ideologies, leading to a change in public discourse and attitudes toward gender relations and related social norms and practices. Films, particularly independent films, have constructed discourses surrounding the social and gender identities of groups in different communities. This study employs a narrative analysis approach to examine three recent independent Urdu films produced in Pakistan, which tackle the issue of gender-related status and social injustices and promote women's empowerment. The specific goal of this study is to highlight the influence that national filmmakers have on shaping public conversations and perceptions regarding the status of women in the 21st century and their empowerment in a developing society. This study analyzed three Urdu films produced after the year 2000 that depicted the challenges and difficulties faced by women in Pakistani society. The three films analyzed in this study were: *In the Name of God* (2007) and *Speak* (2011) by Shoaib Mansoor and *Silent Waters* (2003) by Sabiha Sumar. The aim of this study is to explore how these films employed discourses related to the issues of gender, religion, and culture to portray the status of women, the challenges they face in achieving empowerment, and the possibilities available to them to achieve it. The study analyzed this discourse for its similarity to, or differences from, the Western feminists' colonial discourse about women in a developing society.

It is crucial to understand how these films and filmmakers depict the current conflicts and tension between gender, religious, and cultural ideologies in Pakistan, and the solutions they suggest for change and empowerment. This is significant because it highlights the popular media's influence on shaping public discourse, which can impact people's self-identity, socialization, and decision-making. Popular Media that is widely consumed not only transforms culture into a commodity through the production of images and representations guided by the need for commercial growth, but it also greatly influences how individuals perceive and utilize these depictions (Trier-Bieniek, 2015). *In the Name of God, Speak*, and *Silent Waters* serve as important contribution to popular media and demonstrate the role that film can play in shaping the discourse surrounding gender in the context of religion and culture.

Most findings of non-Western scholars suggested that the representation of women in developing countries such as Pakistan was constructed in a postcolonial fashion (Mohanty, 1988). Colonial discourse is the continuation of colonial practices that separated races and genders both physically and symbolically (which were established to preserve social distance and exert control over colonized people) to the moral domains (e.g., discipline, authority, fidelity) in which white men consistently undermine the ability of colonized people of self-governance (Mohanty, 2003). This study expands on this pattern of colonial discourse by analyzing how Third World filmmakers represent women, culture, and religion in a Third World country.

Conducting this study is crucial because examining dominant narratives about women and various cultures and ideologies includes evaluating the effect that mass media has on shaping the ideological processes. Media often simplifies and unifies a complex social reality by ignoring diversity and presenting societies or groups as having a uniform, comprehensive image or idea (Hall, 1977). Such a skewed presentation has implications for undermining the culturally valued images of women as well as the context of other cultural practices in Pakistan.

Sociocultural Contexts of Pakistani Society

In Pakistan, family organizations are both hierarchical and patriarchal because male elders make decisions in economic and other external family affairs while female elders make decisions in internal domestic matters such as meal preparation (Nath, 2005). With the identity of a housewife, the expected gender role for women is childcare and household chores while men are expected to provide for and protect the family (Rehman & Roomi, 2012). Major decisions, including the selection of a spouse (for both men and women), are expected to be made by the elders of the family (Ewing, 1991). Marriage is a union of two families as much as a union of two people. A newly married couple normally lives with the parents and extended family members of the groom (Nath, 2005). Such embedded family relations are in stark contrast to Western researchers and activists who measure South Asian women's strengths and weaknesses

on the basis of personal independence and autonomy while ignoring the cultural relativist values of interdependence and family and community welfare in Asian societies (Ewing, 1991). Broadly, collective family identity precedes personal identity in Pakistani society (Nath, 2005).

Being a complex mix of religion and culture (Weiss, 2012), most of the actions of Pakistanis may not be guided by Islamic ideals (e.g., forced marriages, denying women their inheritance rights, and women's participation in the workforce), but they are influenced by cultural norms and sometimes linked to misinterpretations of Islamic values (Afkhani, 2001). As an example, models featured in advertisements on billboards are more frequently vandalized than characters in movie posters (Rizvi, 2014), which might be due to the concerns for the Western cultural influence as the models in advertisements tend to be more Westernized than those in movie posters. Rizvi also pointed out that the models in movie posters are typically more daring in terms of their clothing and body posture compared to models in product-advertising billboards. This reveals a cultural paradox in people's perceptions of the public display of female models. This argument highlights the cultural tension that exists between local and Western cultures and the concerns regarding cultural imperialism and the loss of cultural identity that stem from such influences. The difference in the treatment of models in movie posters and product-advertising billboards can be seen as a reflection of the cultural and ideological complexities surrounding the representation of women in public spaces.

With consideration of the cultural and social backgrounds of Pakistan, this research evaluated three films from Pakistani that include *Silent Waters*, *In the Name of God*, and *Speak* that depict women's challenges in overcoming cultural and religious restrictions on their free will and highlight the tension arising from the overlap of gender, religious, and cultural beliefs. The objective of this study is to investigate how these films present the issues faced by women in Pakistani society, the difficulties they face in exercising their rights and freedoms, and the obstacles they must overcome in their pursuit of empowerment. By examining the representation of women and their struggles in these films, this study highlights the role of popular media in shaping public opinions and attitudes towards these important issues, and the potential it holds for promoting positive social change and empowerment. These films were produced within the context of the 21st century sociocultural and political climate of the country at a time when Pakistani ethos and the way of life were struggling with change, both politically and socially.

Discourse About Third World Women

It is crucial to examine how Third World women are represented in cultural production because this representation can shape public opinion and inform social norms around gender and cultural identities. The analysis of these films will help

gaining the insights into the ways in which Third World filmmakers engage with these issues and the ways in which their representations of Third World women intersect with and challenge dominant cultural narratives.

Moreover, understanding these representations is essential for the development of a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to the study of Third World women's experiences and struggles for empowerment. Previously, Rehman (2016, 2023) provided a detailed analysis of four Pakistani films for their auteur imprint in creating discourses surrounding the social complexities of Pakistan. In this context, this study aims to contribute to a broader critique of the ways in which dominant Western discourses and cultural practices have shaped the Third World filmmakers' representations of the gender issues within their own country.

Mohanty (1988) argued that the Western feminist movement had a tendency to homogenize the experiences of women in the Third World, failing to recognize the intersections of gender, race, class, and other social categories that shape their experiences. This results in a distorted and incomplete representation of Third World women that reinforces their subordination and marginalization in a global context. In order to address this issue, Mohanty called for a more nuanced and complex understanding of Third World women that recognizes their diversity and the ways in which their experiences are shaped by multiple social categories and the larger historical and political context. She referred to it as a colonial discourse because most of the feminist approaches were articulated by scholars from the United States and Western Europe. She emphasized that when writing about women from Third World countries, these scholars use a universalist methodology, such as linking the practice of wearing traditional clothing including a veil (known as *purdah*) with the oppression of women. Mohanty claimed that discourses surrounding topics such as marriage, reproduction, legal system, political resistance, education, family relationships, the division of labor, and religion were widely regarded as the standard indicators of women's oppression.

Mohanty (1988) observed that Western feminists mainly cast Third World women as universally dependent and objects who defend themselves from the violence of men (subject), a colonial process that has changed the lives of married women by taking away some rights and privileges from these women, the victims of the familial system such as patriarchy, religion, and subordination within their family system, and victims of economic development processes that look at the empowerment of these women in terms of the economy rather than development in general. She also leveled her criticism at scholars from the Third World who have written about their own cultures, employing a discourse that resembles that of colonial discourse. Mohanty maintained that these discourses primarily focused on highlighting instances of female powerlessness to demonstrate that "women as a whole" were powerless, disregarding the agency and resilience of women, rather than examining the specific factors, both in

terms of material and ideology, that led to the disempowerment or empowerment of women in specific circumstances.

Critics who view the dominant feminist voice as an expression of elitist Western ideology have also approached feminist issues in the Third World through the perspective of colonial discourse. Spivak (1988) maintained that Western literary and intellectual outputs have primarily been geared towards benefiting Western economic powers. The feminist analysis carried out by individuals who have not personally experienced the exploitation of women often results in oversimplified perspectives that depict women as mere victims and that attribute their oppression to religion and patriarchal systems in problematic ways (Mohanty, 1988). She stressed the issue with the Western feminist or elitist perspective, which tends to view the challenges faced by women in the Third World through a narrow, individualistic cultural lens. This Eurocentric view often ignores the collectivistic yet diverse context of gender relations in non-Western societies. In the current study, the potential identifiers of colonial discourse surrounding gender, as identified by scholars such as Mohanty (1988) and Afkhami (2001), assist in analyzing the themes of colonial discourse within the understudied films that pertain to the distinct milieu of Pakistan.

Conceptual and Analytical Considerations

The central idea in this research is based on Stokes's (2012) proposition which suggests that the discourses found in media originate from ideologies, which are defined as a collection of beliefs and concepts. Ideologies refer to the fundamental beliefs shared by a group and its members that act as the foundation for their representation in society. Van Dijk (2006) defines ideology as a way of comprehending social phenomena and is characterized as the central beliefs that uphold the social depictions of a specific group. It influences their perceptions, attitudes, and actions, and helps to maintain the existing power structures and relationships within a society. The study of the representation of Third World women in films, therefore, provides insights into the dominant ideologies and beliefs surrounding gender, religion, and culture in these societies, and how they shape the lives of women. Van Dijk emphasizes that ideologies are symbolized in social memory as a means of defining the identities of groups. Therefore, ideology serves as a representation of one's self and others through the aggregation of shared beliefs and the establishment of criteria for identifying members of a group. Ideology not only influences what we communicate verbally or in writing but also affects our behavior. Evidently, films, especially independent films often portray characters to represent unique but relevant ideologies. This line of thought is important to understand how the status of women (as a group) is created in the sample films.

The present study examines how filmmakers from Third World countries depict the challenges faced by women, their status in society and families, and their paths to

empowerment. Additionally, the study explores how these narratives resonate with the colonial discourse concerning Third World women. Understanding how these filmmakers represent these issues and construct their discourse is crucial, as it can influence public perception and shape the discourse on women's rights and justice at both national and international levels.

Material and Method

The present study analyzes three significant films: *In the Name of God* (2007) and *Speak* (2011) by Shoaib Mansoor, and *Silent Waters* (2003) by Sabiha Sumar. These films were chosen for their feminist themes and the pivotal times during which they were produced. *Silent Waters* was produced in the early 21st century, a period marked by Pakistan's struggle against religious extremism and the implementation of progressive reforms by then-President General Pervez Musharraf aimed at empowering women. The film addresses women's suffering across various political eras such as the partition of India in 1947, women's suppression during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime in the 1980s, and the martial law imposed by General Pervez Musharraf in 1999. Sumar initially began *Silent Waters* as a documentary film centered on these historical events, offering a rich backdrop to explore the enduring impact of partition on women's lives. Later, she expanded the project beyond the documentary format and historical context, creating a film that addresses contemporary issues of violence and religious intolerance (Ahmad & Anjum, 2014). In doing so, she created a narrative that not only reflects on the past but also resonates with present-day challenges, highlighting the persistent themes of gendered violence and the intersection of religious and cultural tensions in modern society.

In the Name of God was set during a time of social transformation in Pakistan, reflecting the changing attitudes toward the remnants of jihadi elements that had radicalized parts of the population. The film explores themes of women's suppression, extremism, and reform, emphasizing the societal shifts in the aftermath of radicalization. The film received special approval for screening from the former president General Pervez Musharraf. *Speak* was set during a period of social transformation where Pakistani society was increasingly exposed to progressive global influences. The film addresses the shift in societal norms, particularly highlighting the conservative attitudes towards women prevalent among certain strata of society due to traditional beliefs and misinterpretations of Islamic teachings. The film explores how these attitudes manifest in the control over women's lives and career choices, emphasizing the tension between progressive change and deep-seated cultural norms.

These films were produced during a period when technological advancements greatly enhanced the accessibility and impact of cinema. The early 2000s witnessed the rise of high-speed internet for movie streaming, the shift from VHS tapes to CDs which made sharing and transferring of long-duration movies files easier, and the widespread

use of portable devices for convenient film viewing. These innovations enabled broader distribution and increased viewership, amplifying the films' influence on public perception and discourse surrounding women's rights.

Analytical Approach

The study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to dissect the thematic elements and narrative structures of the selected films. This involves identifying and categorizing key themes related to women's issues and empowerment, analyzing the portrayal of women's roles within the socio-political contexts of the films, and comparing the discourse in the films with existing literature on colonial and postcolonial narratives.

The films were analyzed for their discourses as a broader framework under the assumption that all media discourses are the products of ideologies (Stokes, 2012). Such discourses convey ideologies through the use of language (Van Dijk, 1997), which in this case were articulated through the narrative devices of plot, dialogue, and characters of the film (Riessman, 2005). These narrative devices were analyzed for their identity formation of gender, religion, and culture through narrative analysis.

Narratives can serve as a means to express both discourse and ideology. A narrative can be defined as a discourse, either oral or written, that presents a sequence of events (Genette, 1983). Chase (2007) described narrative as a unique type of discourse that creates various interpretations through its representation of the social world in both oral and written texts. Through their use of language, images, and symbols, narratives help to convey dominant ideologies, values, and beliefs. Therefore, the narratives in films can be seen as a way of expressing and reproducing ideology, as well as influencing the views, attitudes, and behaviors of audiences.

In alignment with Riessman's (2005) view, this study employs structural analysis to investigate the manner in which the story is communicated through its narrative elements, including plot, characterization, dialogues, and visuals. Plot refers to the strategic use of techniques such as selection, combination, exaggeration, distortion, omission, acceleration, and retardation, among others, to modify a basic story or sequence of events, making it more engaging and appealing to a particular audience (Huisman et al., 2005). Characterization involves attributing mental attributes to a character in a narrative (Margolin, 1986). In the analysis of plot and characters in the films, this study looked at how characters were assigned different identities, including their designation as antagonists or protagonists, as well as their gender identities and roles, and religious and cultural identities.

The themes of victimization and disempowerment were explored through the representation of characters, their motivations and experiences, as well as through the

film's dialogue and narrative structure. It is important to mention here that plot, characterization, and dialogue are not mutually exclusive, rather they complement each other. The plot was analyzed for the significant events and the transitions among those events. Although characterization was analyzed during the plot due to the contribution of the former towards the latter, through character interaction, it was also analyzed for identity formation. Similarly, dialogue not only contributed to the plot but also the characters.

Plots of the Films

Silent Waters

The film *Silent Waters* is a 2003 film that was released with the actual Urdu title of *Khamosh Pani* which means "silent waters." This is an Urdu and Punjabi language independent drama film. Sabiha Sumar, an independent female filmmaker, directed the film. *Silent Waters* is the story of Veero (Suhair Fariha Khan), a Sikh woman who fled her home during the partition of India in 1947, to escape the honor killing by her Sikh father. According to the film *Silent Waters*, during the division of India, many women were murdered by the male members of their families in the name of honor due to the concern that they would be taken away and sexually assaulted by individuals from a different faith. Veero was kidnapped by Muslim men who converted her to Islam. Her name was changed to Ayesha (Kirron Kher) and was married off to a Muslim man in the village of Charkhi in Pakistan, where she gave birth to a son, Saleem (Aamir Ali Malik). The film takes place in 1979, during a time when the country was being Islamized by the military dictatorship of General Zia-Ul-Haq. Ayesha was then portrayed as a widow living with her son Saleem, who, following his socializing with a jihadist group, underwent radicalization. At the same time, a group of Sikh pilgrims visited Charkhi for a religious pilgrimage, and among them was Ayesha's brother Jaswant (Navtej Singh Johar). Jaswant visited Ayesha which exposed her Sikh background to the villagers. Under pressure from his radical peers, Saleem compelled Ayesha to publicly renounce her Sikh beliefs and affirm her Islamic ones. Frustrated with her son's radical and oppressive behavior, Ayesha takes her own life by jumping into a well.

In the Name of God

Released in 2007, *In the Name of God* also known by its original Urdu title of *Khuda Kay Liye* is Shoaib Mansoor's Urdu-language drama film. The film addresses the issues of Islamic fundamentalism and the suppression of women in society. The film revolves around two brothers, Mansoor (Shaan Shahid) and Sarmad (Fawad Khan), who perform together in a music band located in Lahore, Pakistan. Mansoor travels to Chicago, United States to attend a music school, while Sarmad quits music and joins an extreme Islamic organization in Lahore. While in Chicago, Mansoor was arrested by the

FBI on suspicion of having ties to Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. The story also features Mary (Iman Ali), a British-born Pakistani woman and the cousin of Mansoor and Sarmad. She resides with her father Hussain (Humayun Kazmi) in London. Hossain forced Mary to marry Sarmad in Pakistan against her will, whereby Mary loved and wanted to marry her British classmate, Dave (Alex Edwards). However, Mary's father Hossain, and her cousin Sarmad abducted her and took her to a tribal village in Pakistan where they forced her to marry Sarmad who eventually raped her. In the end, the Pakistan army with some help from her British classmate Dave and her father's British girlfriend rescued her. The film was concluded with Sarmad embracing a more moderate form of Islam, Hossain regretting his mistreatment of Mary, and Mary being freed from Sarmad's control and choosing to teach girls in tribal areas of Pakistan.

Speak

Released in 2011 under the original Urdu title of *Bol* (an Urdu translation of "speak"), is Shoaib Mansoor's Urdu-language independent film. The film revolves around Zainab (Humaima Malik) and her struggle against the traditional and patriarchal views held by her father Hakim (Manzar Sehbai), who stood up for her siblings and their rights within the family. Hakim had five daughters and was fixated on the idea of having a son, which becomes a major driving force in his life. His sixth child Saifee (Amr Kashmiri) was identified as transgender and was brought up as a male by his sisters who gave him a male name and dressed him in men's clothing. The film portrays an incident where Saifee was kidnapped and subjected to sexual abuse by a truck driver, who then abandoned them by bounding in a bush. Later, he was rescued by a professional transgender dancer. Seeing him with a transgender dancer, Hakim presumed that Saifee had danced at a private show with other transgender persons and prostituted himself by cross-dressing on the streets. As a result, Hakim murdered Saifee in the name of honor and was arrested by the police. He was then asked for money in exchange for avoiding charges for Saifee's murder. Hakim, who held the position of treasurer for a mosque committee, utilized funds from the mosque to pay the bribe.

Hakim then sought a loan from Saqa Kanjar (Shafqat Cheema) in order to repay the mosque's funds he used to bribe the police. Saqa, who operates a prostitution business, made a bargain with Hakim to father a child with Saqa's daughter Mina (Iman Ali) in exchange for clearing the debt. After the birth of a girl, Hakim asked Mina for handing over him the girl as it would be against his honor if his daughter sells sex during her adulthood. Although, both Mina and Saqa initially refused to give the baby to Hakim, Mina later takes the baby to Hakim without informing Saqa whereas Saqa followed her to retrieve the girl. Hakim tried to murder the girl instead of giving her back to Saqa so she will not be raised for prostitution. Zainab and her family tried to impede Hakim, and during that chaos, Zainab unintentionally killed Hakim but managed to save the baby.

The court sentenced Zainab to death penalty on the account of the murder of Hakim. However, Zainab did not disclose the reason behind her actions to the court. The film concluded with the demise of the antagonist Hakim, Zainab sacrificing her life for her mother and sisters, and the surviving family members achieving financial stability by starting a small food stand, which turns into a large restaurant later.

Findings

The findings of this study are based on the analysis of colonial themes, employing observation strategies and premises outlined in Western feminist scholarship on Third World women, as identified by Mohanty (1988) and other scholars. These colonial themes underscore that when addressing the challenges faced by Third World women, they are often portrayed primarily as victims of male dominance, gender-biased familial structures, and economic disparities (Afkhami, 2001; Mohanty, 1988). Environmental factors such as religion, culture, patriarchy, family kinship, reproduction, marriage, and purdah are frequently cited as indicators of such oppression. Informed by existing literature, the following themes related to women's status were examined during the analysis of the films:

Women Portrayed as Being Victimized by Men

All three films portrayed women as the victim of men who controlled them and were the leading cause of their oppression. They represented women as objects who defend themselves against men – the subject or the perpetrator of violence (Mohanty, 1988). For instance, in *Speak*, the father was controlling Zainab and her family by not sending them to school or letting them work, physically abusing them, and forcing them to marry someone against their will. They could not even report the killing of their transgender sibling by their father to the police as they were dependent on their father for their living and protection. Similarly, in *Silent Waters*, Ayesha escaped the honor killing of her Sikh father during the partition of India in 1947 and later she became the target of her son Saleem's oppressive and radical behavior, who demanded that she publicly proclaim her Islamic beliefs and abandon her Sikh faith. The Mary's character in *In the Name of God* was portrayed as to be victimized by her father, who compelled her for marriage with her male cousin Sarmad despite her affection for her British boyfriend, Dave. She was also the victim of Sarmad who abducted her, forcefully married her, and then raped her (i.e., marital rape). She was the victim of Islamic radical patriarchal men of her Pakistani neighborhood who facilitated her abduction, rape, and forced marriage. Such victimization of women by men is in line with Mohanty's (1988) argument of colonial discourse about Third World women's victimization by men.

Married Women Portrayed as the Victims of the Customs

In the context of married women's victimization, we see the narratives about the stigmatization of the custom of arranged marriages. The narratives of at least two of the films advocated the Western concept of free-choice marriages over the Pakistani custom of arranged marriages. For instance, in *Speak*, Zainab's sister Ayesha (Mahira Khan) wanted to marry Mustafa (Atif Aslam) while her father arranged her marriage with an older man. Zainab's account of her story suggested that Hakim made her marry a man living with his extended and financially weak family, from whom Zainab obtained a divorce. However, the narrative of the film did not clarify whether she was forced into that marriage or not. Zainab also managed to arrange the free-choice marriage between Mustafa and Ayesha. Forced marriage was also evident in *In the Name of God*, whereby Mary was forced to marry Sarmad instead of letting her marry Dave. Such a narrative suggests the filmmakers' portrayal of Pakistani marriage customs as the oppressors of women.

Women Portrayed as the Victims of Familial System

When it comes to the Third World women's oppression in Western literature and scholarships, family kinship is presented as a model of women's suppression (Mohanty, 1988). Mainly, male relatives such as fathers and brothers appear to be the subject of perpetrating violence against their women. This narrative was evident in the films of this study. In *Speak*, Zainab and her sisters were the victims of their own father Hakim who physically and verbally abused them and their mother. Hakim was portrayed as a misogynist and patriarchal man who was obsessed with a male child and blamed his wife for not giving him one. He compromised on his wife's health and his family's welfare for his desire for a male child by procreating more children with his sick wife amongst a shrinking family income.

The film *In the Name of God* also generated a conversation that portrayed women as victims of their families. Mary was deceitfully brought by her father to Pakistan to make her marry a Pakistani Muslim man instead of a British Christian man. Her father also arranged her abduction to make the marriage with a Muslim man possible. Mary became the victim of her male cousin Sarmad who abducted her, forcefully married her, and raped her. A similar narrative was present in *Silent Waters*, where Ayesha's Sikh father murdered her sister and mother for his perceived honor during the partition of India to prevent their abduction and rape by Muslims. Later in the 1980s, Ayesha's son Saleem developed misogynistic tendencies and started controlling her actions. Ayesha became frustrated with his patriarchal behavior and committed suicide.

Women Depicted as Victims of Patriarchal Culture

Like Western scholarship, patriarchal culture was found to be another major signifier of women's oppression as depicted in the films (Mohanty, 1988). In non-Western cultures, a patriarchal social structure enables certain men to exert control over

women by manipulating religion and culture (Afkhani, 2001). We can see such misuse of religion and to some extent, culture to control women in these films. In *Speak*, Hakim justified his misogynist and authoritarian behavior through Islam and the customs of his ancestors. Hakim's interpretation of Islam was challenged by his daughter Zainab on several occasions. For instance, in order to have a son, he was procreating more children by supporting his actions through hadiths (i.e., sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad) by claiming that Prophet Mohammad encouraged a larger family size and through the teaching of the Quran that Allah had made a promise of feeding His creatures. He also deemed it culturally inappropriate to permit his daughters to engage in paid work. The film also showed that Hakim turned toward physical violence when his religious and patriarchal views were challenged by Zainab, suggesting the misuse of an authority position by a patriarchal father to control women in his family.

A similar discourse of misusing religion by men for patriarchy was evident in the *Silent Waters*. Saleem previously had a friendly relationship with his mother Ayesha and his girlfriend Zubaida (Shilpa Shukla), but after adopting religious radical views, his attitude becomes increasingly patriarchal and misogynistic. The film shows that Saleem's friend who initially helped him in fixing his date with Zubaida, later upon, adopting religious radical beliefs, advised Saleem to control Zubaida to maintain his male supremacy. *In the Name of God* had a similar narrative whereby Sarmad abducted Mary, forcefully married her, and raped her after he was religiously radicalized. He also asked his mother for *pardah* which suggests how his religious belief led him to control women in his family.

Extreme Religious Beliefs Associated with Men

In the films, we can see that the religious ideologies or identities are assigned to men and women in a way that creates a discourse that religion is the men's domain. For instance, in *Silent Waters*, only men were shown to be involved in religious leadership and practices. This includes both Sikh and Muslim men, whereby only Sikh men came to Pakistan to perform the pilgrimage and only Muslim men were shown to worship in the mosque or engage in religious practices. The only occasion a woman was shown to be involved in any religious practices was when Ayesha was teaching the Quran to children. The film depicted a more extreme interpretation of religion by men, highlighting their religious radicalism, while women were portrayed as either secular or displaying mild to moderate religious beliefs, emphasizing their religious tolerance.

Similarly, In *Speak*, Hakim was shown as religious and the religious practices, if any, performed by the women of his family were enforced by him. For instance, during the India-Pakistan cricket match, Hakim asked his daughters to pray for the success of the Pakistani team. When Pakistan lost the match, Hakim attributed the loss to the lack of sincere prayers, by accusing his daughters for not praying with true spirit. Zainab's answer to Hakim was more logical as she argued that the supporters of both teams

were praying to their respective gods, but the team that plays well actually wins. This suggests that the film portrayed men to have more controlling and orthodox beliefs about religion than women. A similar association between gender identity and religious identity was found in *In the Name of God*. The majority of the men in the film were religious and almost all of the women were less religious or non-religious.

Purdah

Like colonial feminist discourse about Third World women (Mohanty, 1988), *purdah* or *burka* remained the symbol of oppression in all three films. In *Speak*, Zainab encouraged her sisters to stop wearing *burkas* and shape their own destinies when they were in an oppressive condition. However, when they opened the restaurant and became well-off financially, none of them were wearing *burkas* suggesting that women's economic development and *burka* may not coexist. In *Silent Waters*, there was no character in the film wearing a *burka* or *purdah*, but the speech by a political Islamic figure criticized the women walking bareheaded in the streets and asked men to protect their women. Because the plot of the film shows how patriarchy was endorsed through Islamization, it may as well have referred to *purdah* or *burka*. In addition, there was another aspect of *purdah* whereby Saleem and his religious friends raised the wall of the girls' school to block the public from viewing the girls or to create seclusion. In *In the Name of God* had a similar discourse about *purdah* where Sarmad, after turning religious, was seen instructing his mother to wear a *hijab*. In the same film, Mary and the tribal women (who were shown as less empowered) were wearing an Afghani-style *burka* in the tribal village.

Discussion

This study analyzed three independent films, produced in Pakistan after 2000, that contextualized Third World women's gender-linked struggles and problems in Pakistani families and Islamic society. The findings of the study exhibit a notable resemblance to the observations regarding Western feminists' discourse on Third World women made by other scholars such as Mohanty's (1988) and Afkhami (2001), aligning with the results of the present study on the portrayal of Third World women by 21st-century Third World filmmakers. The findings indicated that Third World filmmakers represented Third World women in a colonial fashion. The salient representation includes women portrayed in the films as the victims of men who are in the subject position and perpetrate violence against women being in the object position. To reflect such representation, some common methodological approaches were employed in the films that were also in line with Mohanty's (1988) argument about the method used by Western feminist scholarship to represent Third World women. These include representing *purdah* as a sign of subjugation, reproductive choice of women, family kinship as a potential barrier to empowerment, patriarchal culture that controls women, and women's education for empowerment.

The portrayal of women as victims of male oppression, particularly within the familial context, is a recurrent theme in the analyzed films, resonating with prevalent narratives found in Western feminists' colonial depictions of Third World women. While acknowledging the existence of such scenarios, it is imperative to adopt a nuanced perspective that recognizes the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics within Pakistani society. In the midst of social reforms, Pakistani society is witnessing a gradual shift towards gender equality, exemplified by increasing parental support for their daughters' educational and career aspirations. Fathers, in particular, are assuming a more active role in advocating for their daughters' empowerment, challenging traditional gender norms and expectations. This evolving familial dynamic underscores a broader societal movement towards recognizing and valuing women's agency and autonomy.

Moreover, the practice of arranged marriages, while often perceived through a lens of patriarchal control in the films, is a cultural tradition and familial expectations deeply ingrained within Pakistani society. Parents, both male and female, play a central role in the selection of spouses for their children, aiming to secure favorable matches that ensure the well-being and future prospects of their offspring. Arranged marriages, therefore, encompass a complex interplay of familial obligations, cultural norms, and pragmatic considerations, transcending simplistic notions of male dominance and female subjugation.

The association of religious identities with men and the enforcement of purdah by male family members emerge as significant themes within the analyzed films, echoing prevalent narratives found in Western feminists' colonial depictions of Third World social systems. The practice of purdah, or the veil, is deeply ingrained within Pakistani society, often perceived as patriarchal attitudes and norms regarding female modesty and propriety. However, it is crucial to approach the issue of purdah with nuance and sensitivity, recognizing that it is not solely a tool of male oppression, but also a matter of personal choice for many women. While the expectation for women to adhere to certain dress codes may indeed stem from patriarchal structures, it is essential to acknowledge the agency of women in deciding whether to observe purdah or not. Many women may choose to wear the hijab as an expression of religious devotion or personal preference, rather than as a result of coercion or compulsion. Therefore, any attempts to challenge or dismantle dress codes such as purdah must be approached with caution, as imposing Western notions of liberation may inadvertently infringe upon women's freedom to choose their attire. Rather than stigmatizing certain dress codes, efforts should be directed towards promoting autonomy and agency for women, ensuring that they have the freedom to make informed choices about their clothing without facing societal judgment or coercion.

The films portrayed conservative beliefs and religiosity as primarily associated with men, perpetuating a narrative that aligns with broader societal perceptions.

However, it is essential to approach this portrayal with critical scrutiny, as there is no empirical evidence to support the notion that men are inherently more religious than women in Pakistan, nor that patriarchal men are more religious than their non-patriarchal counterparts. While religion undoubtedly plays a significant role in shaping social norms and practices within Pakistani society, it is essential to recognize the historical misuse of religion as a tool to control individuals' lives, particularly women. Throughout history, religion has been employed to enforce patriarchal norms and practices, perpetuating gender inequalities and restricting women's autonomy and agency. Such misuse of religion underscores the importance of critically examining the intersections of religion, gender, and power dynamics within societal contexts. Caution must be exercised when associating religious identity strictly with one particular gender, as this may perpetuate harmful stereotypes and essentialist assumptions regarding gender and religious association. Rather than reinforcing binary notions of religious devotion based on gender, efforts should be directed toward fostering a more nuanced understanding of how religion intersects with gender dynamics within diverse cultural contexts.

Religion in Pakistan is integrated into the social spheres of people's lives as evident in the films. The boundaries between cultural and religious norms are blurred enough to determine if certain actions are driven by religious beliefs or they are guided by cultural norms. Women's rights and statuses mainly suffer from this dilemma, whereby the two forces i.e., religion and culture, are used substantially to determine the status of a woman within her family and society. However, contemporary scholarship suggests that future research on gender relations and practices should be careful in tackling the blended religious beliefs and cultural norms in a traditional society (Rehman, 2023). Such a step would help isolate religious values from cultural practices and minimize the misinterpretation of how religious (Islamic) beliefs create a challenging family and social environment for women in a Muslim society (Hossain & Juhari, 2015).

The current study is unique as it extends the critique of colonial feminist scholarship to the cinema. Limited research has explored the drama genre of independent Pakistani films produced in the 21st century and the current study is an attempt to fill this gap. Further, the current study expands on feminism and colonialism by extending the critique of the latter on the former. Such a critique encourages feminist scholars to consider the cultural and sociohistorical complexities of the Third World women, rather than presenting them as monolithic subjects. This study invites future researchers to explore the colonial feminist discourse in other cultures because the experience of Pakistani women may be different from the experience of other Third World countries.

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