

Religious and Liberal Visions of National Identity in Pakistan: Postcolonial History and its Representation in Female Feminist Cinema

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Abstract

In Pakistan, three forms of documentary production - state media, commercial TV channels, and female feminist filmmakers - shape the country's postcolonial national identity and history. This leads to a divide between two differing perspectives: right-wing and left-wing. The study focuses on the representation of Pakistan's postcolonial national identity and history through the lens of Pakistani female feminist filmmakers, utilizing documentary theories. The results indicate that the feminist filmmakers provide a liberal view of history and a secular identity for Pakistan, presenting a critical viewpoint on the country's Islamic ideology as a governing force for shaping its historiography and identity.

Keywords: religious vs. liberal national identity; postcolonial identity; feminism; documentary; film & representation

Introduction

Pakistan's documentaries offer a multifaceted and inconsistent representation of the country's history and national identity due to the existence of two competing approaches. One, under the influence of right-wing ideology, is advanced by the state media and commercial TV, while the other is put forth by female feminist filmmakers, primarily female. State-supported media like the Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), the Directorate of Films and Publications (DFP) (later renamed as the Directorate of Electronic Media and Publications or DEMP), and the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) of the Pakistan Army. PTV, DFP, and ISPR promote a conservative Islamic outlook with a focus on pan-Islamism and anti-west and anti-India sentiments (see Mushtaq, 1976; Mohammed, 1980; Saleem, 1982; Kayani, 2011). Commercial TV, while still adhering to the state's Islamic viewpoint, tackles a range of

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controversial topics (see Zohaib, 2011; Abdullah, 1999; Ali, 2013). In contrast, female feminist filmmakers adopt a liberal and secular perspective on the country's identity and history, differing from the state's Islamic stance. By examining *Naheed ki Katha* (Naheed's Story) (2001), *Dinner with the President: A Nation's Journey* (2007), and *Saving Face* (2012) by Beena Sarwar, Sabiha Sumar, and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy respectively. This article investigates how female feminist documentary filmmakers in Pakistan engage with the postcolonial politics of national identity, particularly the ideological fault lines between religious and liberal conceptions of the nation. It contends that their work constitutes a form of feminist historiography — one that recovers marginalized subjectivities and destabilizes the totalizing narratives through which Pakistani national identity has historically been articulated.

The competing religious and liberal visions of nationhood that feminist filmmakers interrogate cannot be understood apart from the postcolonial conditions of Pakistan's formation. The partition of India in 1947 resulted in the formation of Pakistan, a postcolonial state. The movement for Pakistan was based on religious separatism, referred to as the Two Nation Theory, proposed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founding father. Jinnah maintained that Hindus and Muslims were two distinct groups with differing religions, cultures, philosophies, social customs, traditions, and literatures (Jinnah, 1983, p. 10). As Masters-Waage (2011, p. 1) notes, postcolonial states differ from others as their borders and identities were often established by external powers without consideration for pre-existing conditions. Thus, as Qazi (2020, p. 29) argues, the task of constructing national identity in postcolonial states is often carried out by the government, but is faced with concerns about disintegration and the expectation to become a strong nation. However, the idea of an Islamic bond started to decline soon after independence, leading to demands for civil rights based on ethnic identities (Ahmed, 2013, p. 201). Jinnah's 1948 declaration of Urdu as the sole national language, ignoring Pakistan's other identities, triggered political turmoil in Bengali-speaking East Pakistan and eventually led to its separation in 1971 (Ayres, 2009, pp. 42–49). The separation of East Pakistan in 1971 serves as an illustration of how geographical features in postcolonial states can change, but what sets Pakistan apart from other postcolonial states like Algiers and India is the significance of Islamic ideology in its politics, culture, and nationhood. This historical context is indispensable to any account of how Pakistan's postcolonial national identity has been imagined and imposed. The religious foundations of the independence movement were not merely inherited by the postcolonial state — they were actively reinforced and institutionalized during the Zia ul-Haq era (1977–1988),

when state-sponsored Islamization restructured law, education, and public culture along rigidly orthodox lines. As scholars have noted, this process was deeply gendered, with women's bodies and conduct becoming primary sites through which the boundaries of the nation were policed and defined. The documentary interventions examined in this article must therefore be read against this double historical weight: the founding religious nationalism of partition and its authoritarian intensification under Zia.

The historical conditions outlined above — from the founding religious nationalism of partition through Zia's Islamization to the partial liberalization of the Musharraf era — constitute the ideological terrain that the documentaries examined here seek to navigate and contest.

The article's analytical framework is grounded in Bill Nichols' theory of documentary modes, which offers a systematic vocabulary for examining how documentaries construct meaning, establish rhetorical authority, and position their subjects. Nichols' modes — expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative, and poetic — are understood here not as neutral formal categories but as ideologically charged representational choices. Within the context of Pakistani female feminist filmmaking, the adoption of particular modes constitutes a form of discursive resistance: a deliberate departure from the authoritative, state-aligned modes through which Pakistani national history has conventionally been narrated. This article therefore argues that the documentary mode itself becomes a site of feminist and postcolonial contestation, through which marginalized histories, suppressed subjectivities, and alternative visions of nationhood are articulated against the grain of religious nationalist hegemony.

The Representation of Reality Through Documentary Film

The question of what distinguishes documentary from fiction has intrigued both practitioners and theorists of documentary since the start of the genre in the early 20th century. The advent of portable cameras and tape-recorders in the 1960s led documentarians to embrace the principle of minimal intervention by the filmmaker in representing the historical world. This led to the birth of French cinema vérité and American direct cinema. Both methods and styles of documentary filmmaking — cinema vérité and direct cinema — aimed to offer an objective depiction of reality. Practitioners and theorists advocating these styles believed that portable cameras could capture reality without any direct or indirect intervention by the filmmaker. However, they differed in important ways. Direct cinema concealed the filmmaker and the filmmaking process from the viewer, creating an illusion of detached observation. On the other hand, as

Renov (1993, p. 53) explains, cinema vérité 'luxuriates in revealing its process', making a claim of being 'personal', 'signed', and openly 'mediated'.

Nichols (2010, p. 55) introduced four modes of documentary - expository, interactive, observational, and reflexive - each with its own relationship with the historical world. Later, he added two more modes - performative and poetic. These six modes use different strategies to engage the audience and exhibit varying approaches to realism. The expository mode primarily relies on authoritative/male narration, with images serving as visual illustrations of the voice-over. The observational mode corresponds to the practice of cinema vérité and observational documentary, focusing on capturing reality in its pure form. The interactive mode allows filmed subjects to participate through direct address to the camera or interviews, foregrounding the relationship between the filmmaker and subject. The reflexive mode highlights the relationship between the text and the audience. The poetic mode discards linear structure, using rhythm, tone, and spatial juxtaposition as engaging devices for the argument. The performative mode further emphasizes the relative nature of truth, enabling the filmmaker to use both social and professional actors to convey their viewpoint on the world. These modes can be used individually or in combination, though one mode typically dominates the others.

The idea of an unmediated and objective representation of reality came under attack in the 1970s as a result of poststructuralism, which questioned the representational limitations of documentary and put the evidential status of documentary images under scrutiny. This paved the way for increased use of re-enactments and performative elements in documentary, as exemplified by *The Thin Blue Line* (1980: dir. Errol Morris). This era saw a decrease in anxiety about fictional elements in documentary compared to the pre-1960s era. From this point forward, the debate about documentary split into two distinct but interrelated branches: the semiotic position of the image in relation to its referent and the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytical theory focusing on the position of the subject in relation to its Other. Cinema vérité and direct cinema practitioners and theorists embraced this ontological position. However, feminist documentary theorists and practitioners vehemently rejected this position, arguing that socially constructed abstract concepts, such as 'woman', could not be labeled as natural. Based on this philosophy, Johnston (1979, p. 81) believed that cinema vérité and direct cinema were inadequate for portraying the social and political issues and discrimination experienced by women. According to Stam (2000, p. 201), Johnston promoted subjectivity, which called for a critical examination not only of

the images, but also of the textual and iconographic operations that kept women in subordinate positions. Bruzzi (2006, p. 66) posits that by adopting a feminine voice, a woman filmmaker has the potential to bring about anti-patriarchal change. This means that the act of making documentaries empowers women as filmmakers to enter a male-dominated field. Women's documentaries therefore serve as political statements.

According to the earlier discussion, in Pakistan, there are three main sources for producing documentaries: state media, commercial TV channels, and female feminist filmmakers. Each of these institutions have created their own unique forms of documentaries, television shows, and videos. According to Nichols (1991, p. 14), documentaries are an institutional discourse that reflect the political, ideological, and economic factors of society, as they have 'defined goals with specific budgetary commitments, legislative mandates, and criteria for membership'. Up until 2002, the state controlled the electronic media and documentary production was dominated by the PTV, DFP (later renamed as DEMP), and the ISPR of the Pakistan Army. The first commercial TV channel in Pakistan began operation in the 1990s, when the Shalimar Recording Company granted transmission rights to Network Television Marketing (NTM). In 2002, under the government of General Pervez Musharraf, licenses were issued to commercial TV channels through the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) Ordinance 2002. This financial independence has given the media greater freedom to tackle controversial themes.

Interestingly, all available documentaries produced by female feminist filmmakers in Pakistan were created by female filmmakers. These women's perspectives on Pakistani culture and national history differ from those presented by the State and Commercial media and will be analyzed in depth in this research paper. All documentaries examined in this study were produced by female feminist filmmakers working within Pakistan, whose perspectives on national culture and history diverge markedly from those advanced by state and commercial media. The study focuses on the period 1996–2015, a timeframe that is both corpus-determined and historically significant. 1996 marks the earliest retrievable documentary within this tradition, coinciding with the cultural opening that followed the end of Zia ul-Haq's Islamization regime, while 2015 represents the outer boundary of available works. This period spans a politically turbulent arc — from the fragile democratic governments of the 1990s through to Pakistan's post-authoritarian democratic transition — during which questions of national identity, religious ideology, and gender became acutely contested in public discourse and cultural production. The

documentaries examined thus emerge from, and respond to, a historically coherent moment of ideological struggle over the meaning of Pakistani nationhood.

The selection of these documentaries owes to the thematic structure they constitute and the focus of this research. The three documentaries in question address the difficulties encountered by women in Pakistan against the backdrop of social, cultural, and political influences, thus epitomizing the extensive ramifications of Pakistan's postcolonial religious national identity. Furthermore, the international recognition of these documentaries enhances their importance, hence, this curated selection. The analysis that follows reads each film through Nichols' documentary modes, attending to the ways in which formal representational choices become instruments of feminist and postcolonial intervention.

Documentary Analysis

In the section below, an analysis of the selected documentaries is offered. Beena Sarwar's documentary *Naheed ki Katha/ Naheed's Story* (2001) brings to light the ordeals women have to face in a patriarchal Pakistani society, particularly after the Islamization in the 1980s. *Dinner with the President* by Sabiha Sumar (2007) interrogates Pakistan's history - past and present – with a view to illustrate its secular and liberal identity that has been overshadowed by the process of 1973 Islamization. The last documentary, *Saving Face*, by Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy (2012), focuses on the impact of patriarchy and the Islamic Shariah laws on the lives of Pakistani women.

Naheed ki Katha/ Naheed's story (2001: dir. Beena Sarwar)

This documentary by Beena Sarwar tells the story of a renowned Pakistani classical dancer, Naheed Siddiqui. Siddiqui tells her story in the first person about her social and political victimization as a woman artist/dancer during the repressive regime of General Ziaul Haq. The use of selected locations helps the filmmaker establish an evocative mise en scène that validates Siddiqui's image as an artist to induce a degree of credibility to her story as a victim of the regime's policies. The filmmaker nominates additional characters – artists and television as witnesses of the ordeals faced by Siddiqui. The former director of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) Arts Academy, and a television actor, Zia Mohyeddin, talks about Siddiqui's dedication as a young dancer when she first came to the academy and how she rose to prominence. During this interview, black and white photographs of Siddiqui's performances in the 1970s visually call back the better times of a liberal society that Pakistan was before the

1980s. Siddiqui tells how Ziaul Haq's minister for culture declared dance un-Islamic and unsuitable for the younger generation during his visit to the PTV Lahore station in 1978. This resulted in a ban on her appearance on national television, and she was barred from travelling abroad too. During Siddiqui's narration, the images of the mendicants at the shrine of a saint are superimposed to infuse the element of spirituality in her dances. This infusion provides a counter argument to the regime's narrow-minded policy of declaring dances as a source of moral degradation in the society. Another television compère, Anwar Maqsood, reminisces how a PTV producer called him off-stage by announcing an early commercial break when he mentioned Naheed Siddiqui's name in a live show. As a performative documentary, *Katha* employs the 'individuals who are performers and/or comfortable with the idea of performing on film' (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 190). The documentary itself does not try to conceal the fact that the interviews and Siddiqui's performances have been staged for the camera, and the selection of the locations has been made with a purpose to generate a dialogue about Pakistan's culture and history. By adopting this strategy, the documentary's 'poetic/expressive/conative work is less directed at proving what "really happened" than in reframing what has been remembered, [by] contextualizing it within a situated response of memory and collective affirmation' (Nichols, 2016, p. 99). The low angle shots during Siddiqui's dances, and the close-up shots of her anklet bells, make the staging of the action for the camera obvious. The interior of the theatre hall and dance classroom suggest a purposeful *mise en scène* for the political argument. Their association with art/dance contrasts with the society outside where such expressions are generally repressed. Hence, by confining the scenes within the interior spaces, Sarwar evokes a sense of political control on what can be shown publicly. Sarwar includes the views of a cleric about women's freedom, not because she wants to provide space for a counter argument, but to expose his limited approach on the subject of women's freedom. His dogmatic views about the role of women in society appear irrational, when placed in relation to spirituality associated with dance and the stories of suppression told by other characters. Sarwar elaborates this part, 'that mullah I spoke to, I am not trying to present them as demons. ... I am trying to understand that point of view I don't agree with' (Sarwar, 2016).

During this interview, Sarwar appears in the frame that 'gives emphasis to the encounter between filmmaker and viewer rather than filmmaker and subject' (Nichols, 2010, p. 60). The exchange between the filmmaker and her audience stimulates a psychological realism, which invites the audiences to 'identify with a feeling [of the narrative] not its fabrication' (Nichols, 2010, p. 172). It potentially enables socially and

politically subjective audiences to identify with the ordeals faced by the protagonist. No particular truth is imposed on them, but they are rather invited to participate in the truth-seeking process. Nichols (2010, p. 173) explicates that such social, 'biographies... evince a more straightforward realism that promises fairly direct access to the emotional states and psychological make-up of specific individuals'.

The political voice of the documentary does not necessarily suggest that every woman in Pakistan has faced the same problems as Siddiqui; as Yuval-Davis (1997, p. 8) observes, 'not all women are oppressed and/or subjugated in the same way or to the same extent, even within the same society at any specific moment'. Therefore, Siddiqui's story represents particularly those who raise their voice against the oppressive system. Her dances give expression to the act of resistance, which turns 'culture as a site of ideological struggle' (Gledhill, 1987, p. 109). The closing scene of the documentary suggests the revival of the Sufi culture through the dance performed by Pappu Sain, at a Saint's shrine in Lahore. This revival signifies the freedom enjoyed by the artists in Musharraf's Pakistan, a sign of social and cultural transformation that has begun to take place as result of his liberal policies.

In her interview, Sarwar tells the story behind the footage of Papu Sain:

In the documentary, things aren't always planned. I remembered Faizaan Pirzada saying something about the spiritual experience of dance but he didn't say it in the interview. I recalled it only after I had finished the interview and went back to Pirzada and asked him about it, and would have it say it on camera. (Sarwar, 2016)

Such manipulation of the material shows that she is more focused on making an argument than telling a perfect account of her protagonist's life. In other words, Sarwar employs the biography of her protagonist in service of her political objectives. Such personal history interviews ...not only... tell us about events that do not usually get into written records but also because they tell us of the meanings that those events have to the people who recount them' (Spencer & Navarro, as cited in Sarwar, 2016, p. 43). They invite the audience to participate in the construction of those meanings through the cognitive process of psychological realism. Another specific function of these interviewees, for Sarwar, is to keep the story on track as a connecting device:

If the interview wasn't taking the story along, I used voice-over or comment to move the story forward. If the interviewee is saying something better you use it, but if it is rambling then you use the commentary. (Sarwar, 2016)

It may be argued that the 'measure of success' of such documentaries does not lie in their assertion of an accurate representation of reality, but in a strategy through which 'the film draws attention to the issue it addresses and not itself' (Nichols, 2010, p. 143). Such documentaries build their rapport with the audience based on psychological realism and do not make any effort to hide the contractedness of their narratives. Their argument about the historical world in Katha is based on the idea of 'disavowal, that simultaneously signals a desire to make a conventional documentary (that is, to give an accurate account of a series of factual events) whilst also indicating, through the mechanisms of performance and ...obtrusive presence, the impossibility of the documentary's cognitive function' (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 187). Sarwar's approach to documentary filmmaking conforms to what Johnston (1979, p. 21) had proposed in the 1970s, that the women/feminist filmmakers take sides while telling the stories of women's suppression. This according to Johnston could only be done by constructing and manufacturing the truths about women's suppression. Such disregard for an objective approach to reality, argues Bruzzi (2006, p. 30), does not sacrifice the honesty of the representation. A documentary may be 'honest' in that all the images it collates are irrefutably real, and yet it is not 'objective' because those same images have been resituated to suit and argue'. Therefore, the point in question is not that of the manipulation of the interviews and other visual material, but the documentarian's commitment with the political position to represent the position of women in an Islamized society of Pakistan.

Dinner with the President: A Nation's Journey (Germany/Pakistan, 2007: dir. Sumar Sabiha)

Dinner with the President features Sabiha Sumar's self-searching saga as a Pakistani Muslim woman in contemporary Pakistan. She seeks an appointment with President Musharraf, whose ambiguous policy faced the double-edged allegation of promoting the philosophy of moderate enlightenment, and simultaneously supporting the extremist mullah in the country. The pre-credit shot of the women activists, rioting and chanting against the mullah-military alliance and confronting the mullahs on the streets, sets out the agenda of the documentary. Sumar's interviews with the people in different locations of Pakistan 'constitute[s] a form of ethnographic cinema that looks at the filmmaker's own culture rather than another' (Grant, 2014, p. 253). This visual ethnography helps the filmmaker to locate her own identity as a Muslim Pakistani woman in contemporary Pakistan. To illustrate this idea, we shall consider three scenes from Dinner with the President: Sumar's dialogue with common

people in the streets of Peshawar, the disco party at a Karachi beach, and the interview with the tribal men in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). These interviews juxtaposed with the conversation with President Musharraf underpin the complex identity of contemporary Pakistan. Both Sumar and her Sri Lankan co-director, S. Sathananthan, sit facing President Musharraf, his mother and wife, at the dinner table. A brief silence prevails before Sumar's internal monologue is heard: 'How shall I start the discussion with the president who is targeted by both liberals and Islamic extremists? Who is criticized for not taking a strong stand against the Islamists and also for being too close to the United States?' The scene cuts from the presidential dining room to Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province which presents both audio and visual documentation of the current history. The chief of the ruling religious parties' alliance (MMA), Qazi Hussain Ahmad (1938-2013), expresses his disdain for the anti-Taliban and pro-US policies of President Musharraf. His claims of the equal rights enjoyed by the women in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province make Sumar look increasingly anxious in disagreement. To validate the claims, she goes out on the streets of Peshawar, where no woman can be seen. Back to the dinner table, the camera records Sumar's anxious visage, while President Musharraf boasts about empowering 'the minorities, the women and the people'. Paradoxically, the blackened images of the female models on the billboards in Peshawar, particularly outside the cinema house, expose the hypocrisy of the society and contradict the assertions made by Qazi Hussain Ahmad in his interview. A large number of men gather around her and she asks them about the blackened-out pictures of the actresses on the cinema hoardings: 'Publicly you blacken women's faces, but privately you watch them?' The young man who works at the cinema explains: 'That's a different thing! Privately it's ok, publicly it isn't'. During the interview with the truck-driver, the camera captures the postcards displaying women's pictures on the door of the caravan (the traditionally decorated truck): 'why don't you let your women out?' The truck-driver replies, 'this is an Islamic custom'. On this, Sumar reflects sharply: 'So am I not a Muslim?' The truck driver says that she is a Muslim too; but there is a huge difference between her status and those of his own women, who cannot be like her because they are not educated. His sense of economic and social deprivation deepens, as the camera reads the truck driver's expressions of self-absorption. He commences again: 'If you can't pay 200 rupees (£1.5) to learn English, there is no way. These are all poor people!' This interaction significantly expands Sumar's knowledge about the society and the understanding about her own privileged status in relation to other people in various parts of the country. For the audiences, the

contrast drawn by Sumar's existence in different places underpins multicultural identity of the nation. The journey continues on an empty road, accompanied by the melancholic sound of a musical instrument. The elitist disco party at a Karachi beach brings out the social, economic, political and ideological contrasts in the country. The upper-class boys and girls, drinking and smoking, offer an unflinching support to President Musharraf for his anti-mullah and pro-US policies, and wish he stayed in office for long. The shot cuts to the President House, where Musharraf explains the predicament of Pakistan for being a partner in the conflicts between the US and the Communist Russia, and how this involvement has affected the society, particularly in the tribal areas. The interaction between the filmmaker and the tribal men takes place in the tribal areas produces the most awkward situation. Sumar asks the tribal chief as to why 'only a man can interpret the Quran into a law (Shariah)'. Her claim of having read the Qur'an and its translation makes her desire to assert her identity as a Muslim woman clear. And she challenges the authority of the tribal chief: 'You too are a human being, and so am I. when I'll interpret [the Quran], I'll write that the men and women are equal; and you'll interpret in a way that says women must be ruled by men. We read it differently'. It gets even more intense when she implores: 'Then please tell me who am I?' The chief retorts: 'You should know yourself'. Annoyed by Sumar's questions, he decides to leave the conversation along with other men. The dialogues between Sumar and male characters in different locations reveal different types of truths. The documentary, according to Nichols (2010, p. 83), speaks through the embodied participation of the filmmaker and complex a social reality can only be unveiled through a personal encounter with other people. The truth emerging from such encounters, he argues, are not 'what is true for just the filmmaker or just her subjects alone and not what is true about the world in its empirical facticity'.

In this process, both the filmmaker and the social actors arrive at their own respective conclusions regarding their identities. As Sumar comes face to face with the social realities through her interview with the tribal chief, the latter also realizes the equilibrium of power reversed by Sumar's presence (with a camera) in a space otherwise off-limit for women. Hence, in this type of ethnographic documentary '[t]he relationship between filmmaker and participant (often called subject) is at the root of the power relationship' (Cuklanz & McIntosh, 2015, p. 8). The tribal chief's inability to tackle the perplexing questions asked by a woman leave him as a dismal figure for the spectacle of the audience.

Towards the closure of the documentary, we return to the village in Sindh Province, Kot Yar Muhammad. It presents the picture of a typical feudal society, where people live under the absolute dominance of the landlords. The condition of the women in Kot Yar Muhammad, as bonded workers, represents the situation of the majority of women in Pakistan, 60% of whom live in the rural societies (World Bank, 2016, p. 19). This time, Sumar asks an old man about the name of Pakistan's president. He hardly understands her Urdu and the voice of a local interpreter explains the question to him. He is unable to tell the name of the president. Sumar concludes: 'They don't even know the name of the country's president; then how can they be left to decide what is right for them?' This situation questions the practicality of the western model of democracy in a place besieged by poverty. By positioning herself at the centre of the narrative, Sumar evades the problematic issue of mis/representing the Other. As an Indian anthropologist and documentarian, Sikand (2015, pp. 42–56) argues that by situating these films in a personal vein freed me from the responsibility of speaking for millions of Indians. These films avoided the replication of the images of Third World poverty that have come to represent the Indian subcontinent'. Sikand (2015, p. 45) further elaborates that by adopting this strategy she 'freed [her] from being the sole authority on India and her people and from being enslaved to "documenting" her through documentary films'. Hence, *Dinner with the President* invites the audiences to travel into different locations, and meet people from various sub-cultural groups, 'as a "voyage of discovery"' and the end result is 'a report on what I've found' (Grant, 2014, p. 256). The ethical issues, therefore, remain at the margins, because the purpose here is not particularly to describe people's lives, but to generate a dialogue about the way society has been polarized because of the religious discourse. The filmmaker's presence in various locations as a liberal woman serves as an agency to expose the problematic domain of difference, in contrast to the unified identity under the banner of Islamic ideology of the state. Similarly, the filmmaker's identity as a liberal woman positions her as Other in relation to the majority of the people adhering to the conservative, patriarchal values and religious ideology. It also positions the filmmaker's voice as marginalized and existing on the periphery of the main discourse. The act of giving voice to the normatively mute perspectives of national (and personal) identity displaces as to what constitutes the 'we' in this instance. As Nichols (1994, p. 63) further elaborates, '[t]his "we" is not universal ... [the] quotation marks around it ... indicate its lack or normative authority'. Sumar does not enjoy the normative authority of the white/male/western ethnographers, whose audience readily agreed and identified with their depictions of the Other. On the contrary, her Pakistani

audience, whose sensibilities are ostensibly too firmly tied to the religious ideology, find it difficult to imbibe a liberal discourse. It makes Dinner with the President an ethnographical documentary, in which the protagonist is not "one of us" and instead offer[s] a representation of the historical world that centres on terms and conditions that prevail elsewhere' (Nichols, 2010, p. 208). That 'elsewhere' in a Pakistani context refers to the social and cultural discourses promulgated by the state, which cannot be readily altered even if certain laws are amended in favor of women.

Saving Face (USA/Pakistan, 2012: dir. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Daniel Junge)

Saving Face is about the victims of acid attacks on women in Pakistan. The documentary features the victim women and their treatment by a British Pakistani surgeon, Dr. Muhammad Jawad. The interviews of the victim women, Dr. Jawad and other social actors, reflect sharply on the social and cultural conditions in Pakistan, particularly in a rural society. The film opens with a close-up shot of Zakia's hands, with a burn-scar visible on it. She holds out her old photographs, taken before her face was deformed by the acid-attack, in which her face looks beautiful, as she reflects: 'I had a great passion for taking photographs of myself'. The camera shows her sitting on a chair, while she keeps half of her face covered, because she does not have the courage to show her deformed face to the people. The close-up shot of her half-covered face, however, makes it quite visible how badly burnt her face is. This pre-title sequence evokes a strong sense of disdain for her perpetrator, as well as for the society that produces such criminals. The long shot of the Faisal Mosque in the capital Islamabad, immediately after the titles, denotes the Islamic identity of the state. The next shot of the billboards of beauty parlours, displaying pictures of female models, evokes a sense of sympathy for the women, whose faces have been deformed and the society that ironically uses the beautiful faces of the female models to promote their products. The performative mode comes into play, as the camera follows Zakia through a bazaar, while she keeps her face covered. She arrives at the Burns Care Centre, while the music intensifies the suspense as she walks through the clinic's corridors. The camera records the action in an observational mode, as no voice-over is supplied and the diegetic and non-diegetic voices of the people in the clinic fill the shot. The intertitle provides information about the place: 'In Pakistan's government hospital, a free clinic has been set up for the victims of acid attacks'. The facts disseminated through the intertitles establish the documentary's bond with reality. However, the performative mode of the documentary involves 'the viewer in teasing out

meaning rather than documenting absolute truth' (Grant, 2014, p. 256). The fact-fiction combination allows the filmmaker to use the factual data to fortify Zakia's argument. The observational camera performs of the role of a detached observer, whereas the close-up shots of Zakia's hands and face, in the opening sequence, make the performativity of the action obvious. The use of performative 'tactics' in this instance, offer a kind of 'honesty' that does not seek to mask their inherent instability but rather to acknowledge that performance' (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 187). It compels the audience to pay attention to the political dialogue with regard to women's victimization. The intertitle reveals the magnitude of the problem: 'There are over 100 acid attacks reported in Pakistan every year. Many more go unreported'. This estimate of the acid-attacks implies that it is increasingly difficult for the women to report such cases out of the 'fear [of] further retribution and retaliation from their attackers and their families' (Pituro, 2014, p. 30). A collage of shots depicts four young women with burnt faces in their homes. The choice of home for the women to tell their stories underpins the violation of a space associated with protection and security, where their victimization has taken place. This irony is accentuated when Zakia narrates the account of her attack and the sound of the Azan (call for prayer) is heard: Move towards the Salvation! Both the assurance of salvation and protection in the Azan, and the promise of safety associated with home are thus questioned through the mise en scène. The close-up shots of the cooking-oil being poured into the pan, and the focus of the camera on Zakia's deformed face with a gas-cylinder showing in the background represents the crime scene, the victim, and the instrument of violence. Her husband, Pervez, appears handcuffed in police custody. As the filmmaker approaches him in a police van, the low angle camera shows two police constables looking indifferent during the interview. The filmmaker's voice is heard as she commences her interview with Pervez, who looks calm and without remorse. When she asks him about his wife's name, he firmly replies, 'I don't think it's important to tell you that'. Zakia's father-in-law, Taj, appears in the frame. The close up shot shows Pervez's angry expressions on raising the questions about his family honour, as the interview continues. The concept of family honour in the tribal societies, 'is closely linked to the notion of 'shame' that may be endured to by a family, tribe or community to a person's behaviour or act' (Imran, 2016, p. 141). The use of vérité style filmmaking during this interview, while the filmmaker's (off-screen) her voice shows her presence, invites the audience to judge the actions of the perpetrator in the light of their callous responses. The performative tactics combine the traits of melodrama during a dialogue between Rukhsana (another acid-attack victim) and Marvi Memon (a woman Member of Parliament). The close-up shots

during this interview highlight the expressions of both the victim and her sympathiser. Similarly, as Rukhsana tells her story to Dr. Jawad, the camera records his anger through an over-the shoulder (point of view) shot. Through this technique, Dr. Jawad 'becomes our stand-in and he expresses the sentiments and emotions that we feel as viewers' (Pituro, 2014, p. 29). His verbal and facial expressions add strength to the documentary's voice that emphasizes the emotional crises the acid-victims have to bear in addition to the physical suffering. Dr. Jawad's response also establishes that the sensitivity about the women's victimization is not only specific to the women activists, alone. This idea is further endorsed by the angry remarks of the men participants at a seminar in a hotel in Islamabad, organized by the Acid Survivors Foundation. A glaring example of 'the emotional intensity and subjective expressiveness of performative documentary' (Nichols, 1991, p. 160) occurs when Rukhsana shows the room where acid was thrown on her face. She opens the door to show the wall erected to bar her from entering the other side of the house, where her daughter lives with her father (Rukhsana's husband). The shocking act of reconciliation with the husband after he burnt her face is motivated by her desire to be united with her daughter, which she has been permanently denied. She bursts into tears while telling these details. This scene introduces a 'strong pathos (i.e., the elicitation of powerful feeling of pity), [as] a strong element of melodrama' (Singer, 2001, p. 31). Zakia's lawyer expresses her fear that the Session Court might acquit Pervéz. The intertitle announces: 'The verdict is delayed'. The delay in social and legal justice denotes the morally improvised society, where the law often protects the offenders rather than the victims. Ironically, Rukhsana's reconciliation with her husband after he burnt her with acid leads to her pregnancy. Speaking from her dreadful experience, she hopes to have a baby-boy this time, 'because girl's future gets risky after the marriage. I wouldn't want my girl to face the same plight as me. In our society boys live well'. This probably sums up the documentary's thesis. The message is clear: under the current patriarchal system, it is increasingly difficult for an ordinary woman to live a protected life, and to avail justice if anything happens to her. This argument, however, gains strength through a combination of performative and melodramatic elements in the documentary. The repeated shots of the police van and the court premises, remind of the delay in justice: the intertitle announces that 'after months of delay, Marvi Memon manages to bring a bill to the floor of Parliament. The bill mandates life sentence to the perpetrators of acid-related violence'. The shot of the rising sun towards the closure denotes a hope for a brighter future, as the low-angle shot depicts the triumphant figures of the acid-victim women congratulating each other. Zakia's husband is

finally convicted by the court. This presents a typical ending of a melodrama with a promise to bring the culprit to justice. Interestingly, *Saving Face* faces the allegations of framing Pakistani society as violent and discriminatory against women. It is linked with the violence against women, such as 'honour-killing [that] have come to be associated with Islamic societies as an Arab-Islamic practice, [whereas] these murders have been occurring in all regions of the world' (Imran, 2016, p. 141). In Pakistan, this problem was further intensified after Obaid-Chinoy and her American co-director, Daniel Junge, received an Academy Award for *Saving Face*, which labelled her working for western interest.

Conclusion

The article examined the narratives of female leads in chosen documentaries, utilizing documentary theories, mainly Bill Nichols's with a concentration on their portrayal of Pakistan's postcolonial national identity and history. In this process, we also considered how other state resources depict the same. The narratives told by them in these documentaries uncover the impact of patriarchal systems on women's lives and how these systems exploit religious discourse for their own benefit. These stories feature private spaces as locations for political discourse, challenging the traditional domination of public spaces by men. By doing so, these narratives aim to establish a place in the patriarchal system for women's voices, challenging religious and cultural institutions and their relationships with broader structures of power and class within society, as well as hierarchies of desirability and concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Despite limitations on airing these documentaries on mainstream television, their impact has been significant. For example, after Obaid-Chinoy won her second Oscar for *A Girl in the River*, Prime Minister Sharif pledged to fight the injustice depicted in the film and host a screening at the Prime Minister House in Islamabad (NewsBytes, 2016). This led to the amendment of the law that protected the perpetrators of violence against women in 2016.

While these documentaries face criticism for their portrayal of Pakistani culture and its honor, their greatest contribution is offering a women's perspective, which otherwise would be missing from the larger discourse on history and identity and without which the story of Pakistan's history and identity would be incomplete. According to Yuval-Davis (1997, p. 45), women in such societies often bear the responsibility for representing their collective identity and future destiny, making certain deviation from the status quo considered as misrepresentation. The conclusion of this research is that documentary filmmakers craft their own

interpretations of history and identity through various modes and styles, in support of their own ideas. However, their work remains important despite the risk of exclusion from mainstream debates and criticism for potentially misrepresenting culture.

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