Exploring Competing Approaches to Religious and Liberal National Identity of Pakistan: A Post-Structuralist Reading of the National Identity and History of Pakistan by the Pakistani Feminist Filmmakers

Hasan Zafar[*], Beenish Masood[†], Muhammad Habib Qazi[‡]

Abstract

This study examines Pakistani documentary films produced by feminist filmmakers, focusing on how they construct representations of Pakistan's national identity and history. Situated against dominant narratives circulated through state media and commercial television, which often reflect right-wing ideological orientations, the study explores alternative historiographical and identity formations. The objective is to analyses how feminist documentary practices reconfigure national memory and challenge hegemonic accounts of history and identity. Drawing on documentary theories and employing a post-structuralist textual analysis, the study treats documentaries as sites of unstable and contested meanings shaped through discourse, power, and ideology. Through close reading of three selected films, the analysis identifies how meaning is produced through language, narrative strategies, and representational choices rather than reflecting fixed or objective truths. The findings suggest that, in contrast to mainstream media, feminist filmmakers construct a more critical, left-liberal perspective that foregrounds plurality, inclusivity, and secular articulations of national identity. Their documentaries destabilize dominant historiographical frameworks by questioning the centrality of Islamic ideology as a governing principle of Pakistan's identity formation. The study concludes that Pakistani feminist documentary functions as a counter-discursive practice that reimagines history and nationhood, expanding the possibilities of interpreting Pakistan's identity beyond hegemonic ideological boundaries.

Keywords: counter-discursive practice, Feminist filmmakers, hegemonic discourse, national identity, Pakistani documentary films, post-structuralist analysis

---

[*] PhD in Theatre Film & TV Studies, Assistant Professor Media Studies in the Department of Media Studies, Art and Design, Lahore School of Economics, Lahore, Pakistan.

[†] PhD Education, Assistant Professor in the English Language Centre the University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

[‡]PhD, Corresponding Author, Associate Professor in the English Department of the University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Introduction

Pakistani documentaries present a complex and conflicting representation of the country's national identity and history due to the presence of broadly two distinct approaches: one espoused by the right-wing state media and commercial television, and the other by the Pakistani feminist writers. The state-sponsored media, such as Pakistan Television (PTV), Directorate of Films and Publications (DFP), and Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), promote a right-wing Islamic ideology, with a focus on pan-Islamism and anti-India and anti-west sentiments (Nisar 1976; Muhammad 1980; Ahmad 1997; Shahzad, 1980; Saleem 1982, Kayani 2011). The commercial television, while also adhering to the state's Islamic ideology, brings a range of controversial topics into the public sphere (Zohaib 2011; Abdullah 2012; Ali 2013). In contrast, the Pakistani feminist filmmakers take a more liberal and secular approach to Pakistan's history and identity, deviating from the state's Islamic ideology. Drawing on an in-depth analysis of *And She Dances On* (1996), *Hawa ke Naam/ For a Place Under the Heavens* (2003) and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* (2015) by Shireen Pasha, Sabiha Sumar, and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, this article examines the ways in which Pakistani documentaries produced by the Pakistani feminists depict the country's national identity and history.

Context

Pakistan is a postcolonial state that came into existence in 1947. The movement for Pakistan was primarily based on the idea of religious separatism, known as the *Two Nation Theory*, put forward by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father. Jinnah argued that Hindus and Muslims were two distinct entities with different religions, cultures, philosophies, social customs, traditions, and literatures (Jinnah 1983, 10). However, this idea of an Islamic bond began to disintegrate soon after independence, leading to demands for civil rights based on ethnic identities (see Ahmed 2013). In 1948, Jinnah declared Urdu the only national language, ignoring Pakistan's other identities, which resulted in significant political unrest in Bengali speaking East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and ultimately led to its separation in 1971 (Ayres 2009). Qazi (2020) argues that 'the project of national identity construction in postcolonial states is essentially taken up by the governments and is generally beset with fears and expectations – fears of disintegration, and expectations to emerge as a solid nation' (72). The separation of East Pakistan in 1971 is an example of changing geographical features of a postcolonial state. However, what distinguishes Pakistan from other

postcolonial states (such as Algiers and India), is the role of Islamic ideology in its politics, culture and national. This historical context is important in analyzing the role of documentaries in representing Pakistan's national identity and history.

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following two objective:

1. To analyse how Pakistani feminist documentaries construct alternative representations of national identity and
2. To analyse how they challenge dominant historiographical narratives regarding the Pakistani identity

Research Questions

RQ1. How do Pakistani feminist documentary filmmakers construct representations of national identity and history?

RQ2. In what ways do these documentaries challenge dominant historiographical narratives in Pakistan?

Theoretical Framework

While drawing on relevant documentary theories, this article employs a post-structuralist textual analysis to examine selected documentaries. Post-structuralist analysis is a critical approach that treats texts as sites of unstable and contested meanings rather than fixed truths. It therefore conceptualizes meaning as multiple, contingent, and context-dependent rather than stable or universal (Tyson 2006). As Sarup (1996) notes, the reader actively participates in the construction of meaning, and the text becomes a site of competing interpretations. Similarly, McKee (2003) argues that textual analysis involves generating plausible readings of a text rather than identifying a single correct one.

The post-structuralist textual analysis, as employed as the method of analysis for the selected documentaries, involves close reading of their verbal and visual narratives, with particular attention to language use, representational strategies, and recurring themes. It further includes the identification of binary oppositions, contradictions, and silences within the texts to understand how meaning is constructed. The documentaries are interpreted as discursive formations in which meaning is produced through language, editing, framing, and narrative sequencing rather than as

transparent reflections of reality. Through this process, the study examines how ideological positions are embedded in and conveyed through representational choices.

From this perspective, post-structuralist textual analysis situates Pakistani documentary within a socio-political context in which meanings are continually reconstituted through shifting discursive formations. Accordingly, this study examines selected Pakistani documentaries produced by feminist filmmakers, focusing on how they construct representations of Pakistan's national identity and history.

Literature Review

This section surveys the various stages through which documentary's relationship with the representation of 'reality' has evolved. It also briefly highlights how in Pakistan, three sources of documentary production, namely state media, commercial television channels and feminist filmmakers, have represented Pakistan's national identity and history.

Since the beginning of documentary in the first quarter of the 20th century, the issue of what differentiates documentary from fiction has caught the attention of documentary practitioners and theorists alike. The coming of the portable cameras and tape-recorders in the 1960s compelled the documentarians to subscribe to the notion of minimum intervention of the filmmaker in the representation of the historical world. The result was the birth of French cinema vérité and American direct cinema. The two methods and styles of documentary filmmaking - cinema vérité and direct cinema - shared the promise of objective depiction of reality. Their advocates believed that their portable cameras could capture reality without direct or indirect intervention of filmmakers. The two camps, however, departed from each other in important ways: direct cinema concealed the filmmaker and the process of filmmaking from the sight of the spectator, thereby, creating an illusion of detached observation. Whereas, cinema vérité, explains Renov (1993), 'luxuriate[s] in revealing its process, allowing for a claim that the work is personal, 'signed' and mediated in an open and above-board fashion' (53). The representation of reality under the influence of these two methods intensified the objectivity-subjectivity debate in documentary. Nichols (1991) introduced four modes of documentary - expository, interactive, observational, and reflexive – with their particular relationships with the historical world. Later, Nichols (1994) announced two more modes: performative and poetic. These six modes adopt different strategies to address the audience and exhibit different approach to realism. He later elaborated how these

modes lend a 'voice' to the filmmaker to (re)present his or her point of view about the world (Nichols, 2000). Briefly speaking, the expository mode relies mainly on the narration in an authoritative/male voice, in which the images usually function as visual illustrations of the voice-over. The observational mode pertains to the practice of cinema vérité and observational documentary, with an insistence on capturing the reality in its pure form. The interactive mode allows the filmed subjects to participate in the action via direct address to the camera or interviews. It foregrounds a relationship between the filmmaker and his subject; whereas, the self-reflexive mode underpins the relationship between the text and the audience. The poetic mode, discards the linear structure of the narrative, and applies rhythm, tone, and spatial juxtaposition, as provocative devices to engage the audiences in the argument. The performative mode further emphasizes the relativity of the truth and allows the filmmaker to employ both social and professional actors to make their point about the world. These modes of documentary, Nichols (2000) posits, function in combination or individually, however, in this combination one mode dominates the other. With the dawn of the 1970s, the notion of unmediated and objective representation of reality came to be attacked under the impact of poststructuralism. Where it questioned the representational limitations of documentary, it inadvertently put the evidential status of the documentary image under scrutiny. This development paved the way for an increased use of re-enactments and performative element in documentary, as the archetypal documentary of this era, *The Thin Blue Line* (1980: dir. Errol Morris), vividly shows. This era witnessed a diminished anxiety about fictional element in documentary, compared to the way it had haunted the filmmakers in the pre-1960s era. From this point onwards, the debate about documentary forks into two distinct, yet interlinked branches: the semiotic position of the image in relation to its referent, and the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytical theory with an emphasis on the position of the subject in relation to its Other. The practitioners of cinema vérité and direct cinema had assumed this ontological position. However, feminist documentary theorists and practitioners strongly reacted to this position, by contending that the socially constructed, abstract concepts (such as woman), could not be labelled as natural. Based on this philosophy, Johnston (1979) rejected cinema vérité and direct cinema as insufficient ways of representing the socio-political problems and discrimination faced by women. Johnston's campaign in favor of subjectivity, according to Stam (2000), 'called for an analytic not only on image but also on the textual iconographic operations that maneuvered women into subordinate positions' (173). Bruzzi (2006)

argues that the woman filmmaker's 'adoption of a feminine voice necessarily offers the potential for anti-patriarchal radicalism' (66). This implies that the act of documentary making enables the women as feminist filmmakers to enter a space traditionally occupied by men. Women's documentaries, in this sense, are essentially political texts.

As stated earlier, in Pakistan, state media, commercial television channels and feminist filmmakers, have represented Pakistan's national identity and history. According to Nichols (1991), the institutional discourse of documentary pertains to the social and political agendas. Therefore, documentary filmmaking in Pakistan can be considered as an institutional discourse with regard to the political and ideological factors. Since the inception of the country in 1947 until 2002, the state maintained its control on the electronic media. As a result, documentary production (both film and television) remained monopolized by Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), Directorate of Films and Publications (DFP), later renamed as Directorate of Electronic Media and Publications (DEMP), and Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) of the Pakistan Army. These three organizations have functioned under both civilian and military governments in pursuing their political objectives at different times. The first commercial television channel in Pakistan started operation in the early 1990s, when the government operated Shalimar Recording Company delegated transmission rights to Network Television Marketing (NTM) to air entertainment programs, with the logo of STN (Shalimar Television Network). In 2002, the government of General Pervez Musharraf issued licenses to commercial television channels under the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) Ordinance 2002. The financial independence has given considerable independence to the Pakistani media, resulting in them taking 'sacred' and 'tabooed' themes including the debacle of East Pakistan in 1971 and the role of the Army generals in in politics. Interestingly, all the available documentaries within the category of feminist documentary in Pakistan were produced by female filmmakers. These women's narratives provide a different perspective of Pakistani culture and national history compared to State and Commercial media. This is the focus of this research paper and in the succeeding sections, we will make an in-depth analysis of the documentaries produced by Pakistani female filmmakers from 1996 to 2015, with a focus on how they offer a liberal perspective of history and a secular identity of Pakistan. The documentaries sampled for this research articles include *And She Dances On* (1996), *Hawa ke Naam/ For a Place Under the Heavens* (2003) and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* (2015) by Shireen Pasha, Sabiha Sumar, and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, respectively. The

selection of these documentaries provides a thematic structure that this article explores. All three address the challenges faced by women in Pakistan within a socio-cultural, political context - broadly representing the impact of Pakistan's ideologically motivated religious national identity. Another factor is their recognition internationally.

Analysis of Selected Documentaries

In this section we examine the selected documentaries produced by Pakistani feminist filmmakers from 1996 to 2015.

> *And She Dances On: A dance documentary* (Pak/1996: dir. Shireen Pasha) The first documentary in this section by Shireen Pasha, *And She Dances On,* presents the story of a classical dancer. Her auto/biographical narratives bring to light the ordeals women have to face in a patriarchal Pakistani society, particularly after the Islamization in the 1980s.

And She Dances On offers a critique of the Islamization of Pakistan during the 1980s. The protagonist, Tehreema Mitha, talks about the social and political impediments she had to face as a woman artist, while growing up in Ziaul Haq's Pakistan (a military dictator from 1977-1988, known for his Islamization drive in the country). Mitha's dances at the archaeological sites associated with Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim civilizations perform two functions: they illuminate the diversity of Pakistan's national heritage; and these dances bring the politics of body into play as an act of defiance against the cultural and social restrictions imposed by the patriarchal culture. These components constitute the documentary's 'formal voice that reserves for itself a high degree of epistemic authority' (Plantinga 1997, 107). The archaeological sites, at the same time, function as symbols of a multi-civilizational, multicultural Pakistan, that has been yoked with a singular Islamic identity. The opening shot of the documentary shows the ruins of a Hindu temple at Balot Fort in the north of the Punjab province. The long shot emphasizes the grandeur of the architecture, fully revealing the details of the carvings on its façade. The camera gradually zooms in to focus on Mitha's dance performance. She is dressed in a red and green Indian sari adorned with traditional jasmine garlands, anklet-bells, and gold jewelry. The Indian culture and traditions embodied through Mitha's attire and the choice of locations signify the filmmaker's political and ideological motives. The Hindu temple reminds of the land's history that has been home to various civilizations before the partition of India. Miester (1996) writes that these structures are '[l]argely ignored by the scholars in this century, and orphaned from the mainstream of architectural scholarship since the

Partition of South Asia in 1947' (41). The recognition of non-Islamic/Muslim history challenges the right-wing historiography from which the Hindu and Buddhist civilizations have been strategically banished.

The dance performed at the Sheesh Mahal (Crystal Palace) of Lahore Fort denotes Pasha's unique fascination with the architecture of Lahore. Here, Mitha performs the Kathak dance that 'originated within the Hindu temples as a means of portraying the epic tales contained within the Mahabharata and Ramayana, Hindu scriptures'[i]. With the advent of the Moghul rule in India, Kathak became an established part of court culture, performing under the special patronage of India's Muslim Persian kings and Muslim Moghuls. The choice of Kathak, Mitha's sari draped in a traditional style of Indian classical dancers, and the location itself, denote a hybrid Hindu-Muslim culture of India. Mitha's dance performance in the woods depicts a girl, who suffocates herself to death on being denied to marry the man of her choice. The shot of the four men carrying the body of the girl (played by Mitha) elaborates the vulnerability of the women in a male-controlled setup. The black garbs and covered faces of these men symbolize a culture in which female autonomy and the patriarchy come in a direct clash. The woman whom the men in black garbs carry to the woods, presumably to bury her alive, is symbolic of the consequences women are likely to face for disobeying the social/moral codes in this type of society. The highly stylized mise end scene during this performance signifies a collaborative effort between the filmmaker and the subject, where the combination of the radical dance and the filming style complement each other to heighten the melodramatic effect of this particular scene. The emphasis on the body of the women dancer in such melodramatic scene, according to Brooks (1994), denotes 'an aesthetics of embodiment, where the most important meanings have to be inscribed on and with the body' (17). Mitha's free body movements and her (backless) black dress characterize her dance as radical. The black color sends out a symbolic message of protest, a disregard for the control on the female body. This dissent is given physical expression thorough her free body movements, which she also insists on her pupils to adopt. Mitha's performance at Taxila is accompanied by Sufi music at a site not associated with Islam. It attests to the filmmaker's idea of a multi-civilizational history of the country. The act of bringing together of the mystic poetry of a 13th century Persian poet Maulana Rumi, and Mitha's Turkish costume shows the filmmaker's preference of the Persian and Turkish tradition of Sufi Islam as liberal and accommodating in contrast to the pro-Arab, pan-Islamic philosophy. This contest of ideologies,

according to Minh-ha (1991), 'means to contend the regimes of power that construct those ideologies, whereby the images of representation come into being' (2). In this process, the symbols of national identity are redefined, à la *Dances On*, where even an ordinary marketplace turns into a space of political dialogue. Mitha's stroll with her white, American, husband in the streets of Peshawar renders a political status to an ordinary location - the bazaar. The bearded men and women clad in abaya represent the radicalized segment of Pakistani society, as a result of Ziaul Haq's Islamization. Mitha's presence in this place delineates a divided cultural identity on the basis of religious faith. Mitha reflects on this: 'I think we're going through a struggle to find the identity….and to know where we are and how we should be thinking. Women are making progress …. but on the street, it is very different'. Therefore, it is not just the archaeological sites, but also the public places like bazaars and the private spaces like a room where the dance classes are held, turn into a visual vocabulary to depict the identity and history of contemporary Pakistan. Mitha's act of bringing her liberal identity (through dance, dresses and American husband) into the public space bears the consequences, which her girl pupils' parents fear. Mitha distressfully tells how the parents force their girls to withdraw from the dance classes, when they reach a certain (marriageable) age. The interviews with Mitha's family members contribute to validating the various stages of Mitha's struggle. But more importantly, the interviews of other artists endorse the documentary's thesis about the oppression of Ziaul Haq's period. Kishwar Naheed talks about the status of art and the artists during 'the Ziaul Haq regime in 1977, which barred the schools and colleges from holding cultural activities of any kind (subtitles)'. Similarly, the classical dance maestro, Maharaj Kathak points out certain misconceptions about classical dance and the promotion of vulgar dances during Ziaul Haq's time as the hypocrisy of the regime. By juxtaposing the interviews of different people, Pasha brings forth the main argument about the problems emanating from a combination of religious and cultural discourse. She avoids using the voice-over by sequencing the interviews in a certain pattern, that allows the subject's voice to come through. She believes that the voice-over runs the danger of undermining the credibility of the narrative, when it is 'superimposed upon people's voices and given priority over them' (Kahan 2015). The voice-of-God commentary for Pasha means to suppress the voices of her subjects, which she wants to avoid:

> I as a compère can talk about you better than you can speak for yourself. So, I will tell your story back to you in a new way, and

> tell it back to you in such a way that it will become my own. So I will be re-writing you and I will write myself anew. (ibid.)

This approach to filmmaking harks back McGarry saying 'that filmmaker is not dealing with reality but with that which has become the pro-filmic event: that which exists and happens before the camera' (cited in Lakshmi 1986, 13). Or as a Tamil feminist writer, Lakshmi (1986), posits that 'the moment first cut is done on the editing table one has excluded reality that is outside one's perception. Hence the reality that is presented is actually a reality modified, pruned and altered to suit one's world-view' (ibid.). This approach to documentary filmmaking insists on making an argument about social reality with regard to the lives of certain women. Mitha's story delineates the filmmaker's own perspective about Pakistan, in which the biography of the protagonist represents the filmmaker's own experience of living in Pakistan as an artist woman, as a filmmaker. Usually, a narrative is regarded as autobiographical, in which 'the author, the narrator and the protagonist are identical' (Renov, et al. 2004, xi). However, a documentary like *Dances On* may be categorized as a collaborative autobiography in which 'the author 'outside' the film is articulated through the author 'inside' the film' (Chaudhuri 2006, 59). Therefore, the political argument of Mitha's story represents the filmmaker's point of view about Pakistan's history and identity. It performs a rhetorical function by referring to the Islamization as the fundamental problem faced by contemporary Pakistan. The other voices (of the interviewees) by contrast to Mitha's story, 'retain little responsibility, but are used to support it or provide evidence or substantiation for what the commentary addresses. The voice of authority resides with the text rather than those recruited to it' (Nichols 1991, 37). The other characters in the story only appear to endorse Mitha's story, and by doing so, contribute to the voice of the text. This method of representation is probably what Hall (1997) calls an 'intentional approach,' through which 'the speaker/author imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language' (25).

For a Place Under the Heavens [aka Hawa Ke Naam] (France/Pakistan, 2003: dir. Sabiha Sumar)

This documentary by Sabiha Sumar 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 Islamization.

In *For a Place Under the Heavens*, Sumar, presents a view of Pakistan's early history based on her personal memories (resurrected through a family movie played in her home), a conversation with her close friends at a terrace (overlooking Jinnah's mausoleum in Karachi), and a collage of newspaper archives. She documents the contemporary history of Pakistan through ethnographic fieldwork - interviews with the people (mostly women) from various socioeconomic backgrounds. This creates two different tracks of historiography, based on ethnography and personal record of memories, which provide the basis for a cause-and-effect structure of the documentary. Our reading of the documentary focuses on the outcome of this combination, through which the 'writing of history [becomes] extremely ideological' (Rosenthal 1988, 13). This discourse of history brings the personal, the political, and the ideological together. Sumar's family home appears to be a site of personal memories. She appears on the screen in traditional Pakistani *kameez shalwar* (Pakistan's national dress), with her head covered in *dupatta* - a long scarf that covers head and shoulders. The recitation of a classical Urdu poem runs in the background as she illuminates the room with sandalwood smoke. Her monologue recalls the good old days when her father's recitation of poetry echoed in these surroundings. The accompanying qawwali music in the scene creates an ambience of mysticism. This act of remembering the past is aided by playing her old birthday film on a 16mm projector. The churning sound of the projector produces the evocative effect in addition to the visual display of memories. The old birthday film shows young boys and girls and other members of the family as an emblem of a liberal society that is lost. The family home with which these memories are associated, appears to be a site of personal identity. A sense of history emerges from these personal records, which, according to Nichols (2016), in the digital age of the 21st century collapses the classical (Marxist) notion of historiography from an elitist, dominant point of view:

> 'History from below gains striking prominence over the classic model of history from above. The reliance on archival material of humble origin such as home movies, is a vivid demonstration of this tendency. (84)

This personal record of history is enmeshed with the current history unfolding before the observational camera that records a group of the lower-middle class women dressed conservatively in abayas on a Karachi beach. The young girls (also wearing abaya) run after each other. No commentary is added to this. In contrast to the family film (in which girls appear in western clothes, playing the musical chairs) this visual

depiction of contemporary Pakistan illustrates the basic idea of the documentary – a complete transformation of the society from liberal to radical culture. A middle-class woman speaks to the camera about her transformation from a liberal to a religious person. This is followed by the shots of a large assembly of middle-class women attending a dars (Islamic gathering) in a five-star hotel's banquet hall. This scene projects that the radicalization is not merely specific to the lower-middle class, represented by the women on the beach. In order to examine the causes and effects of this transformation of the society, Sumar commences a conversation with her friends - Saba, Nausheen and Aliya. The mise en scène changes from the interior of the banquet hall to a terrace, overlooking Jinnah's mausoleum in Karachi. Owing to Jinnah's perceived liberal ideals, this location symbolically refers to the title as the only place under the heavens where they can talk at will. Their conversation centers on the various reasons of the radicalization, and how it has affected their own lives and identity as Pakistani women. Their liberal stance is validated via two sequences that run parallel to their conversation: Sumar and Nausheen construct a history of Pakistan through a montage of the newspaper headlines, while Sumar's ethnographic field interviews with the radicalized women depict the current state of affairs. The montage of the newspaper cuttings begins with Jinnah's famous speech of 11th August 1947, followed by the Objectives Resolution in 1949. It further shows the headlines of Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's death sentence in 1979, and the subsequent Islamization laws introduced by Ziaul Haq in the 1980s. This sequence is mixed with the conversation between Sumar and her friends, who largely hold the Wahhabi influence imported from Saudi Arabia and the Ziaul Haq's regime responsible for radicalization. As these women renounce religious fundamentalism, they do not appear to disregard the cultural norms of Pakistani society. For instance, in the opening shot, Sumar appears with her head covered and wears kameez shalwar, a tradition also followed by her friends in conformity with the dress code of Pakistani women. Their avowal of Islamic and cultural identity is, however, associated with Sufi Islam as a more tolerant and liberal form of religion. The opening shot accompanied by qawwali music and scenting the home with sandalwood-smoke exemplify their respect for this tradition from the outset.

The interviews with the radicalized women from the lower-middle class mostly take place in their homes, in contrast to the conversation with the liberal middle-class women in an open place. Another significant contrast is presented through Sumar's on-screen presence during the conversation with her liberal friends, whereas she chooses to remain off-

screen during the interviews with the radicalized women. It denotes a distance that must be maintained between the ethnographer and the Other under scrutiny. As '[t]he separation of US from Them is inscribed into the very institution of anthropology and into the structure of most ethnographic film' (Nichols 1994, 67). This strategy draws a distinction between the filmmaker/liberal as 'us', and the subjects/radicalized women as 'them', as the two faces of the society. This distance also allows the filmmaker to assume an objective relationship with her subjects, and to study them in their personal spaces. The mise en scène of the lower-middle class homes connotes the socioeconomic backwardness as one of the potential causes of radicalization. One woman talks about her son who died in jihad and the other woman talks to her young son about embracing martyrdom when he grows up. These women directly address the camera that records their expressions (although their faces remain covered in veil). The filmmaker's own status as a woman enables her to represent the hidden truths about society, such as the tutorial for the burial of women, in an all-women gathering. Such places would normally be beyond the access of male filmmakers. The privileged access of Sumar into all-women gathering enables her to makes these spaces part of her discursive dialogue about radicalization in Pakistani society and culture. Through the direct cinema style of filming in these sequences, a hierarchical relationship prevails between the filmmaker and her subjects. The ethnographic work reflects this hierarchy more sharply during the interview with the cleric - the administrator of a madrassa. The off-screen voice/presence of the filmmaker assumes an authoritative position in relation to the cleric. Nichols (1991) explains this kind of relationship in the following words:

> The visible presence of the social actor as evidentiary witness and the visible absence of the filmmaker (the filmmaker's presence as absence) give this form of the interview the appearance of a "pseudo monologue." (54)

With the observational cinema technique, the film mostly speaks through its editing pattern. In this style of filmmaking, the documentary's point of view, or its voice emerges not in the content or narrative structure of a film or through the indexical relation between the photographic image and the real object it represents, but through editing practices. Eisenstein wrote that montage '"is exactly what we do in the cinema, combining shots that are depictive, single in meaning, neutral in content—into intellectual contexts and series" ("Cinematographic Principle" 30)' (Hershfield 2014, 38). For instance, Sumar's camera mutely follows a housemaid through the streets from a lower middle-class neighborhood to a posh locality in Karachi. This woman speaks directly to the camera about having no other

choice, but to work as a domestic worker. Again, it reveals the economic unevenness as one of the primary (but not the only cause, as the middle-class women in the five-star hotel suggest) causes of making people vulnerable to the extremist ideology. The closure of the documentary replays the two initial visuals – the birthday film and the women in abaya strolling on the beach. This juxtaposition creates the impression like that of the end of an exhibition in a museum, where after taking a whole circuit of the ethnographic material, the visitor 'on the way-out s/he may 'read' it more carefully being less startled by its exuberance and more aware of its encapsulation of the exhibition theme' (Lidchi 1997, 171). It concludes the argument by resonating a contrast between the past and present identities of the nation.

A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (USA, 2015: dirs. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy)

The last documentary in this section by Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, focuses on the impact of patriarchy and the Shariah laws on the lives of Pakistani women.

A Girl in The River relates the story of an attempted honor killing of 19-year-old Saba. Her parents deceived her to come back to their home after she secretly married Qaisar, a boy from the neighborhood. Saba's father took her secret marriage as an attack on the family honor, and while taking her home, shot her in the head and drowned her into the river. We first meet Saba in a hospital where she unfolds her story before the camera. The intimate talk between Saba and her husband shows their eager participation in the process of filmmaking. It suggests the performative mode of the documentary that opens the window on sociopolitical and cultural realities through the agency of the willing participation of the social actors. Moreover, the documentary's strong symbolism - the moon, and the bird against the black sky, the long shot of the river, (comparable with Errol Morris' use of 'artful miseen-scène, and stylistic embellishments such as the slow motion shot of flying milkshake, in *The Thin Blue Line* (1988)' (Nichols 2016, 80) – conveys the political message of the documentary. The statements made by nearly all the characters in the documentary expose the religious hypocrisy in the society. For instance, Saba states that she only agreed to go back to her parents' home, 'because they had sworn on the Quran, [so] I had no fear in my heart'. The re-enactment of the attack and the survival scenes is juxtaposed with her narration. She believes that the divine powers had saved her life because her father and uncle had betrayed their oath on the Quran. The police

officer calls the crime 'un-Islamic.' Saba's father, from behind the bars tells the filmmaker (Obaid-Chinoy's off-screen voice is heard during this interview) that 'Islam does not permit the girl to go out of the house.' To the question if Islam permits the murder, he replies, 'No, it is not written in the Quran. But, where is it written that a girl can run away with a stranger? Please tell me where is that written in the Quran?' The argument emerging from this dialogue refers to the tension between religious hypocrisy of the society and social injustice inflicted on the innocent victim. It exposes the position of the victim women 'within structures of domination and as articulated by other social relations' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 11). Through this process, we learn the ways in which religious discourse is constantly invoked against the women, because the state has not fulfilled its responsibility of providing equal rights to women. The negotiation between Saba's lawyer and the notables of the neighborhood, who try to patch an agreement between the two parties, reveals the dominant role of the society in the individual's life. They insist on an early settlement of the case outside the court, and that Saba makes a statement before the District Session Court that she has forgiven her father and uncle. The criminal investigator, Ali Akbar, deliberates on the consequences of forgiving the culprits. His voice runs in the background of the shots of the river at night, with the halfmoon appearing against the black sky. The recurring use of these images articulates an 'unspoken and unspeakable history' (Nichols 2010, 164), which lurks under the personal tragedy of Saba. The tragic and poetic effect of Saba's story 'results from the juxtaposition of 'rational', interpretative narration and emotive images' (Bruzzi 2006, 58). The repetitive play of the crime scene (the river at night) symbolizes the battle between good and bad forces. This visual treatment of the crime scene refers to the dearth of legal justice in a society obsessed with religious vocabulary. The religious discourse, Yuval-Davis (1997) has observed, 'bears a close relationship to that of culture, although both cannot be reduced to each other' (42). The mixing of the religious and cultural discourses increasingly comes into play as the story advances. Due to the bulging social pressure to call a truce, Saba' mother-in-law too resorts to invoking religion: 'We have faith in the Quran. If in the future they [Saba's parents] try to harm us, the Quran will keep us safe.' In the following scene, the camera observes Saba enter the premises of the courthouse in Hafizabad district of the Punjab province, and a police officer emerges from the gate and signals to take the camera away. The fadeout is followed by the intertitles, telling the rest of the story: 'That afternoon Saba gave her statement to the court. The next day the judge released her father and uncle.' The audiences are increasingly drawn into

an emotional state, as Saba appears to be withdrawn and defeated. After giving her statement in the court, she talks to the camera: 'God did not want me to die. They tried to kill me but I survived. Fate protected me from their bullets. In the future fate might let me die at their hands. Only God knows all these things.' With these last words, she looks away from the closely observing camera. The pain and defeat in her eyes become visible through the black veil covering her face. This expressionistic shot produces a strong melodramatic effect. The emotional force of the courthouse scene draws attention to the social reality with regard to Saba's vulnerable position. The documentary's performative modes successfully make the invisible visible. It places the narrative 'within a discursive or interpretive frame… [in which the] discourse gains the force to compel belief through its capacity to refer evidence to a domain outside itself' (Nichols 2008, 29). This domain is both spatial and situational. 'The construction of private-public dichotomy,' emphasized in the documentary, 'is employed as a convenient and apparently neutral tool which continues to marginalize women' (Ross 2002, 11). The performative mode helps the filmmaker to underscore the exploitation embedded in social and religious discourses by constantly shifting the scenes between the public and private spaces. Shortly before the final scene, Saba's mother is shown in the kitchen, where she expresses her hope about reuniting with her daughter. The scene dissolves to a wide-angle shot of the fields outside the town at dawn. The camera follows Saba's father walking through the fields from the back, then from his side, as a proof of a staged action. His voice commences as he keeps walking without looking at the camera: 'She has forgiven me and I have forgiven her. We have started a new life again.' His voice continues as the scene cuts to the rooftop of his house, where he appears to be talking to the (off-screen) filmmaker:

> After this incident, everyone says I am more respected. They say I am an honorable man. They say what I did was right… I have other daughters. Since the incident, each daughter has received proposals, because I am called an honorable man. (Italics in the Subtitles)

The next shot shows Saba walking through the same fields. She too is filmed from different angles, and her voice runs in the background in the form of an internal monologue:

> If the elders had not pressured me, I would have never forgiven them…. Everyone knows I forgave them for society… But in my heart, they are unforgiven. (Italics in the subtitles)

It is far from doubt that both Saba and her father willingly performed before the camera, as their shots have been taken from various angles. Obaid-Chinoy talks about Saba's natural and fearless performance:

> And she just took to filming matter-of-factly, as if she was born for the camera. But she never did anything extra for the camera, she was who she was; and you see that as the film progresses, you see her demeanour, the way she reacts, the way she laughs – it's all very natural. (*The Guardian*, February 2016)

The willing enactments of the social actors and the artistic treatment of the crime scene stress the tone and mode of the narrative. The social reality constructed through the performances of the social actors unfolds a hidden truth of the incident. Obaid-Chinoy points out that Saba's father believed that what he did was the right thing to do. This made him a hero in the community, and that is 'why we made this film because people don't think about honor killings as a crime in Pakistan' (White 2016). This suggests that the filmmaker is not primarily concerned about showing an unmediated action, but rather intends to represent a social truth that would otherwise have remained hidden. This kind of documentary is 'more iconic than indexical, being less dependent on an indexical authentication of what is seen and heard' (Nichols 1994, 100). The indexical bond with reality in such performative documentaries remains 'operative but in a subordinated manner' (ibid., 98). The dominating element is the argument based on the evocative quality of Saba's story, which exposes the social injustice from her personal experience. This constructed reality gives 'figuration to a social subjectivity that joins the abstract to the concrete, the general to the particular, the individual to the collective and the political to the personal' (Nichols 1994, 94). Saba's story, thus, serves as a metaphor of social and legal injustice, fear, and harassment in a place dominated by the religious discourse. It represents a culture where the social behaviour of women, remain subordinated to the patriarchal system. Thus, '[i]n this culturalized discourse, gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as territories, markers and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectivities' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 39).

Conclusion

This article analyzed the stories told by the female protagonists in the selected documentaries, employing post-structuralist textual analysis and documentary theories with a focus on the ways they represent Pakistan's national identity and history. In so doing, we also referred to the way other state resources that do the same. These stories by the female filmmakers reveal the effects of patriarchal system on their lives and the ways in which this system has exploited the state's religious discourse for its own interest. These narratives characterize the private spaces as sites for political dialogue. The act of bringing women's stories in the public arena, a space traditionally dominated by their male counterparts. This means to launch a battle in order to carve out a discursive space in the patriarchal system that not only incorporates 'the religious and cultural institutions and their relations to more general structures of class and power within society, but also in relation to the religious and cultural imaginations and their hierarchies of desirability as well as constructions of inclusion and exclusion' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 39). The impact of women's documentaries in Pakistan has been significant despite undeclared restrictions on showing their work on mainstream television screens (both public and commercial). For instance, after Obaid-Chinoy received her second Oscar for A Girl, Prime Minister Sharif (2013-2017) 'made a pledge to fight this grotesque injustice that has destroyed thousands of lives and promised to host a screening of the film at the Prime Minster House in the capital city of Islamabad' (*NewsBytes* 2016). The Prime Minster promised to amend this law, and later in October of the same year (2016), the law protecting the perpetrators of victim women was finally amended. As noted in the Guardian:

> The new law, which was passed by a joint sitting of the two houses of Pakistan's parliament, will allow relatives to pardon the killer if he is sentenced to death. However, the culprit will not be able to avoid a mandatory life prison sentence. (*The Guardian*, February 2016)

Hence, by restricting women filmmaker's voices to NGO screening rooms, universities, and colleges does not necessarily curtail their socio-political impact. International recognition such as Oscars and other notable awards, nevertheless, do play a significant role in the promotion and consequently enhancing the impact of these documentaries. Such international recognition and support also entail criticism on these filmmakers. The greatest criticism on these filmmakers pertains to the negative portrayal of Pakistani culture; since in such societies the ''burden of representation' on women of the collectivity's identity and future

destiny has also brought about the construction of women as the bearers of the collectivity's honor' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 45). The politics of representation on these terms demands to comply with the status quo, and any deviation would be termed as misrepresentation. This compliance, in other words, attests to the fact that giving voice to women's issues would result in their exclusion from the mainstream discourses of national debates. However, the greatest contribution of these filmmakers is (taking the risk of) rendering women's perspective, without which the story and the picture of Pakistan's history and identity remain incomplete. With regard to the question of documentary as a suitable vehicle to represent history and identity, this article concludes that documentary makers construct their own truths to support their specific ideas. For this purpose, they employ various modes and styles of documentary as persuasive strategies.

---

[i] What is Kathak Dance? – Katha Dance Theatre

References

Abdullah. A. 1999. *"12 Oct 1999 - The Story of a Coup"*. Dunya TV, 2012. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYADmJ6B4Gw.

Ahmad, A. 1997. "Mr. Jinnah: The Making of Pakistan." BBC. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-tWIe9aYgE.

Ahmed, N. 2013. "Demands for civil rights based on ethnic identities in postcolonial Pakistan." *South Asian Journal* 29 (2): 56-63.

Ali, U. 2013. 'Qaidi No. 1500 (The Prisoner No. 1500)'. Documentary. Dunya TV. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XciXKshj-PI.

Ayres, A. 2009. "The impact of Urdu on national identity in postcolonial Pakistan." *Journal of South Asian Studies* 19, (1): 42-49.

Brooks, P. 1994. "Melodrama, Body, Revolution." In Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen, edited by Jacky Bratton et al., London: BFI.

Bruzzi, S. 2006. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. Routledge.

Clark, A. 2016. "The Case of Saba Qaiser and the Film-Maker Determined to Put an End to "Honour" Killings." *The Guardian*, Feb. 14. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/14/sharmeen-obaidchinoy-interview-saba-qaiser-honour-killing-documentary-girl-river-oscarnominatio.

Hall, S. 1997. "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices." Sage.

Hershfield, J. 2013. "Paradise Regained: Sergei Eisenstein's Que Viva México! As Ethnography." In Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Wayne State University Press.

Jinnah, M.A. 1983. *The Two Nation Theory*. Lahore: Pakistan Publishing House.

Johnston, C. 1979. "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema." In *Questions of Third Cinema*. London: BFI Publishing.

Kahan, H. 2015. "Shireen Pasha, Pakistani Documentary Filmmaker." Radio interview. http://hazelkahan.com/shireen-pasha-pakistani-documentary-filmmaker/.

Kayani, S. 2011. "Glorious Resolve - Death Before Disgrace." ISPR. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LN_rVlZ41Q&t=28s.

Lakshmi, C. S. 1986. "Feminism and the Cinema of Realism." *Economic and Political Weekly* 21 (3): 113-115.

Lidchi, H. 1997. "The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures." In Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, edited by Stuart Hall. Sage.

McKee, A. 2003. *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. London: SAGE.

Miester, J. 1996. *Architecture, Ethics and Civilization*. New York and London: Routledge.

Minh-ha, T.T. 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. NY: Routledge.

Morris, E. 1988. The Thin Blue Line. Miramax, Umbrella Entertainment. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjqGRrGa1uQ.

Mohammad, S.A.1980. "*Allama Muhammad Iqbal. DFP, 1980."* YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwbZLeegW7Q.

NewsBytes. 2016. Oscar winner Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy's film gets Pakistan to act against honour killings. NewsBytes. [online] Available at: https://www.newsbytesapp.com/timeline/Entertainment/7105/45/Oscar-winner-Sharmeen-Obaid-Chinoy-s-film-gets-Pakistan-to-act-against-honour-killings.

Nichols, B. 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. 1994. Blurred Boundaries: *Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, S. 1997. Sounds and Gestures of the Performative. In S. Nochols and L. Campion (Eds.), *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* (pp. 273-291). New York and London: Routledge.

Nichols, B. 2000. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. 2010. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. 2016. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Indiana University Press.

Nisar, M. 1976. Kalash. Pakistan Television (PTV), 1976. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWrezv1emr8.

Obaid-Chinoy, S. 2015. A Girl In The River - The Price Of Forgiveness. 2015 – YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7a-nOOXdtA

Pasha, S. 1996. And She Dances On - Part I. TMDC, 1996. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JLMvv46ybU&t=2s.

-------- And She Dances On - Part II. TMDC, 1996. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W55TfinY6ow.

Plantinga, C. 1997. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectators Experience*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Price, M.E. 1997. *Television, The Public Sphere, and National Identity*. Oxford University Press.

Renov, M. 1993. "The Subject of Documentary." In Theorizing Documentary. New York: Routledge.

Renov, M., et al. (eds.). 2004. *The Subject of Documentary*. University of Minnesota Press.

Saleem, T. 1982. "Major Raja Aziz Bhatti Shaheed. Pakistan Television (PTV), 1982". YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6D2PQ0mE1Q.

Sarup, M. 1996. *An Introduction to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. Routledge.

Stam, R. 2000. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell.

Sumar, S. 2006. *For a Place Under the Heavens*. WMM, 2006. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVaahy

Tyson, L. 2006. *Post-Structuralist Criticism: An Introduction*. Prentice Hall.

White, T. 2016. "Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy on "A Girl in the River" and Honor Killings in Pakistan". International Documentary Association, http://www.documentary.org/online-feature/sharmeen-obaid-chinoy-girlriver-and-honor-killings-pakistan. William Rothman. 'The Filmmaker as Hunt'.

Yuval-Davis, N. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage Publications.
Zohaib, S. B. 2011. "*Sakoot-e-Dhaka (The Fall of Dacca)"*. Dunya TV, 2011. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojog5yX4wLY&t=17s.