



RESEARCH PAPER

Good Woman, Bad Woman: Language, Gender and Agency in Pakistani TV Dramas

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ABSTRACT

The present study analyses Pakistani TV dramas to explore the relationship between language and gender in a postcolonial society. The binary logic of state hatred against English as a former coloniser's language dictates that the question of language becomes even more complicated when it interacts with the larger question of gender in a postcolonial state like Pakistan. This can be witnessed in contemporary TV dramas in the country. This paper looks at two such dramas to contend that English language in these dramas is associated with the "bad woman" and Urdu with the "good woman." The study uses textual analysis for the analysis of Pakistani TV dramas *Humsafar* (2011) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012). The study concludes that there is a causal relationship between the perception of women as "good" or "bad" and their use of language in these dramas.

Keywords: Language Politics, Pakistani TV Dramas, Postcolonial, Women's Representation

Introduction

The role of women in Pakistani TV dramas over the last two decades has evolved in response to global concerns driven by the form of the post-9/11 world. However, one constant is depicting 'bad' women and 'good' women through dress and language. Framing this paper within the politics of language in the postcolonial state, we argue that language and gender are inextricably connected within the psyche of the postcolonial state and subject. Women without agency are idealised in these dramas. By studying the female characters in *Humsafar* (2011) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012), this paper shows that these dramas are rooted in the postcolonial logic of hatred against anything western.

Language in the postcolonial state is a highly divisive concept. From the Achebe-Ngugi debate to Braj Kachru's work, the role of English has been a contentious issue in all postcolonial societies. It leads to the creation of schizophrenic selves in postcolonial subjects. An interesting application of this linguistic compartmentalisation is in the way that English-speaking and Urdu-speaking women are perceived in Pakistan. This perception is mirrored on the screen as well, with women being represented in line with the linguistic binaries existing in the audience's mind. As part of the "outer circle" of linguistic development in English, Pakistan has had a frayed relationship with English.

The search for identity in this age is as much about framing ideas of the self as it is about ideas of the self as viewed by others understood through identifying with people and groups portrayed on television. They provide an aerial view of the current, could be, and/or would be realities. This process requires depictions of the various social groups on national television, which is done mostly through stereotyping, albeit often exaggerated and rooted in commercial fantasy. The dichotomy of good and evil has existed since forever but exploring it through gender on Pakistani television is an interesting new phenomenon. Pakistani TV dramas have consistently been structured around the good and bad division

observed in men and women as an attempt to portray their presence in our society although it is not unnoticed that these stereotypes are also in place to formulate or tweak the audience's consciousness in one direction or another. The essence of tv dramas lies in communication i.e language. All emotions, thoughts, ideas, customs are expressed through language. These dramas are dominated by Urdu but all regional languages occupy some space even if it is limited to airing within their regions. Following this, it is fair to say that the influence of language on the concepts of good and bad is undeniable.

Literature Review

Helene Cixous (1981) reminds us that for Freud and Lacan, woman is supposed to exist "outside the Symbolic," which means she is "outside language, the place of the Law, excluded from any possible relationship with culture and the cultural order" (Cixous 46). Sanam Saeed's character is a CSS officer herself so her ability to empower herself is a threat but since she inhabits the symbolism of Urdu and dupatta she does not pose a threat because she has been interpolated as a subject of patriarchal hierarchy.

This paper is focused on the categorization of good and bad women that have been illustrated in Pakistani dramas for decades. It further draws attention to the role of the English language in the characters portrayed over the years. It is a language that a significant group of people in the country would argue comes with inherent liberal ideas amongst other characteristics. I highlight this because exploring the notions of 'liberal' derived from the colonizer's language is crucial. It becomes more pronounced when female characters start being formed and consequently seen in a different light simply through association with or acquisition of English. Pakistani dramas revolve around simple binary divisions of good and bad, entertaining very few grey areas. Hence, this paper delves into the role of English in the construction of Woman as 'good' or 'bad.' How does this language influence the typical binary domains or stereotypes defining Pakistani women?

Since language performs the role of representing society in various contexts in TV dramas, it is accompanied by various complexities that need to be addressed in the same conversation. In Pakistan, English is considered to be the language of the elite, so naturally, the question of class cannot be avoided. What role does class play in the influence of English on these constructions of women? In addition to this, how does it cause a diversion in the formation of identities? We use *Humsafar* (2011) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012) as primary narratives in traversing all the above-mentioned contentions, especially those regarding English as a category in the construction of a woman's image.

As this is a topic with little to no existing research or specified texts, I have had to develop my arguments through literature that relates less to the contention directly and deals more with general ideas surrounding it. *Women and TV Culture in Pakistan: Gender, Islam and National Identity* by Munira Cheema is a text with an in-depth analysis of the shift in gendered content following the liberalization on TV introduced by General Pervez Musharaff in 2002. She emphasizes the fact that it is through television that most Pakistani women have access to the public sphere hence it is important to study the impact of depictions of gender issues on the viewers. This text is integral in formulating arguments regarding the navigation of gender roles, identities, and religion through media (Cheema, 2018).

"Contested Images of 'Perfect Women' in Pakistani Television Dramas" by Ayesha Ashfaq and Zubair Shafiq considers the vital role of TV dramas in shaping societal beliefs and attitudes. The article identifies the attributes essential to the image of a perfect woman who is naturally placed in juxtaposition to the bad woman. A woman's place in society as shown in these drama serials is rather conditional and one-dimensional (Ashfaq & Shaft, 2018).

Moreover, Barbara Stern's article titled "Vulnerable Women on Screen and at Home: Soap Opera Consumption" delves into how the conveyance of women in soap operas is designed in unrealistic ways. They disregard the existence of women in the real world and instead draw attention to unreasonably exaggerated images. The compartmentalization of women as 'good' and 'bad' is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan but has been influenced by the acquisition of English over time, primarily portrayed through TV dramas. These effects can be observed in the subtleties of behaviors and storylines surrounding the female characters. Firstly, it is necessary to establish the general beliefs regarding the two categories unique to women. These images tend to be an unrealistic attempt to capture how a woman exists in these spaces (Stern et al. 2005). In condensed words, a traditionally good woman is someone who fulfills her role as a good daughter, sister, mother, and wife. To act in these roles, a traditionally good woman is portrayed as weak, suppressed, and voiceless. What makes her perfect is if she chooses to stay within the boundaries of these traits. That is to say, she accepts and does not question her role as inferior in the societal hierarchy. She is a traditional woman. One such example is of Samrah who remains a victim of abuse at the hands of her merciless husband till death consumes her as seen in the drama serial "Qayamat." Along with this, the image of a good woman will literally be chadar-clad as she remains someone who abides by traditional Pakistani clothing limiting herself to the *zenana*. In the end, she is the *bechari* (helpless). It is her helplessness that is her appeal, after all.

In contrast, the bad woman embodies the 'evil' attributes: viciousness, cunningness, ruthlessness. By way of being an untraditional woman, she is the 'modern' woman. Often adorned with the label of 'liberal,' this woman is seen in Western clothing, has mobility, makes decisions for herself, works outside the house, and is generally independent. More often than not, fitting the context of closely-knit familial relations, these women are driven by the motive of ruining the life of the *bechari* heroine. She falls into the category of someone who is anything but humble, noble, virtuous, and honorable. These distinctions are elaborated by classifications of villain and heroine, oppressed and oppressor, negative and positive, etc. In the recently popular drama *Hum Kahan Kay Sachay Thay*, Mashal carries forward this rhetoric.

Another important ground that expands on this variance is the relationship these categories of women have with religion. To be a good woman in Pakistani dramas, it is a prerequisite to be strongly affiliated with religion- this aids the image of traditionality and nationalism. Meanwhile, a woman on the other end of the dichotomy will be disconnected from religion- this is frequently used as a reason to explain the entirety of her 'negative' character. A significant component of the *sharafat* of the good woman is embedded in religiosity. Good women are automatically deemed to be higher spiritual beings due to the deeper connection with the *haqeeqi*, the spiritual as compared to the bad woman who has a stronger connection with, and/or is more comfortable existing in the *majazi* or the material world. In so many words, one of the reasons behind the confinement of women to the spiritual realm (within the *chaar deewari*, the four walls of the house) is to uphold the goodness in them by way of the *pardah* and domesticity. The characters of Kashaf from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* and Khirad from *Humsafar* are excellent examples of this, for they abide by their domestic role while also observing the *pardah* inside as well as outside the house.

The case of *sharafat* concerning women is age-old convoluted by the likes of Nazir Ahmed. For example, the character of Naima in *Taubat-al-Nasuh* is undesirable for she is "strikingly irreligious and hence misguided" (LAL). This early notion of the good woman was drawn upon through the delineation of the two main characters in *Mirat-ul-Arus* on the basis of "hunar aur salika (talent and proficiency), adab (good comportment), qa'ida (the right way), and nekdili (kindness)" (LAL). Alongside this, for him, the familiarity with Urdu and Persian were key components of *sharafat*. It is important to note this because it strengthens the argument that association with other languages, notably English, is an attack on this phenomenon as it is meant to hold the western ideas not suited to our cultural

needs. Perhaps the infiltration of English rids Woman of the attributes that have been mentioned above.

Now that we have established an understanding of the identities of good and bad women, the implications of English in relation to it can be probed. My contention has been formed through the observation that the bad woman is often strongly connected to English. A common narrative upheld by the Pakistani audience is that English comes with inherent liberal values that do not align with our culture and are worse off if a characteristic of a woman. In view of the fact that these dramas predominantly focus on domestic themes (love and arranged marriages, relationships between spouses, relationships between mother in law and daughter in law) it would be wrong to use politically inclined definitions of the term 'liberal'. Instead, it needs to be operationalized to encapsulate the essence of the context in question in this paper. For a layperson, being liberal is associated with western ideologies whereby one diverges from the conventional ways of being. In addition to this, since they are considered a western import any beliefs or movements even loosely associated with the word liberal is disregarded as western conspiracies. In accordance with this, it is important to underscore the fact that this import of western ideas is made possible through the English language. So drawing on this further, the attributes of a bad woman are liberal, adopted through the English language resulting in them being outliers.

Material and Methods

To supplement my arguments this paper analyzes one of the most renowned Pakistani dramas, *Humsafar* (2011). This serial is about two people forced into marriage who despise each other due to conflicting perspectives. Although eventually, they reconcile after sifting through each other's beliefs. This is a primary source of my analysis considering it contains all-encompassing depictions of both good and bad women with nuances that allow me to study the effect of English in their formation. The character of Khirad as good is characterized by the reinforcing of the typically desired culture, values, and norms in Pakistani society. She observes purdah, wears shalwar kameez, offers her prayers, amongst other "achi bachi" things. Belonging to the middle class, her respectability is defined not only by her inclination towards doing the 'right' thing but also by the fact that she effortlessly maintains her honor in the public and private sphere. In stark contrast, there is Sara, the outspoken evil woman in the show defined as a working woman who hangs out with men, frolicking in Western clothes with complete mobility marked by her cunningness.

Results and Discussion

Although both of them are educated women, the differences are highlighted when the focus is shifted to the language they speak and are surrounded by. Keeping in touch with traditional values, Khirad speaks Urdu in all domains. Sara however is seen to be more comfortable with conversing in English, her interactions with her friends and family are also mostly carried out in the same manner. This prompts me to think that perhaps the matter is not simply about knowing a language, it is about acquiring it. The latter not only requires skill but is perpetuated by and is a result of a structure that helps maintain it. In the case of Sara, her language is a product of her probably elite schooling, her family's status upheld by western ideologies, and her friend groups that fall into similar categories. The emphasis on structure surrounding the characters is important for reasons I will delve into below.

As the defining arch of the drama is marriage, distinctions must be made between attitudes surrounding it. Khirad being the epitome of a good woman is actually the last to know about her future operating on the fact that she will not disobey any decisions made for her. Her contextual reasonings could never possibly justify her insubordination if there is any room to think let alone act on it. On the other hand, Sara has the autonomy to choose who she marries and has open conversations about the matter with her love interest, Ashar. And when her wish to marry him is not fulfilled, she has the power to exercise her agency

by going out of her way in hopes to secure him as hers. It is important to view these differences in light of the language-specific structures.

In regards to differences in behaviors, the good woman is respectful to the servants, cares more about izzat than money, is passive as she lets Ashar make all choices for her even as simple as what food to order. Expressly, she is not capable of independent thought. And she needs a man to at least articulate if not define everything for her. The feelings of superiority inherent to the character of Sara stem from her English medium education nudging her to despise all the good that defines Khirad. The evidence for this resentment is seen when she calls Khirad “chadar main lipti hui jahil aurat” and “jahil gaon ki larki”. Ashar himself uses phrases such as “choti si soch” and “mamooli larki” for her. These become integral points for they accentuate the claim that being educated does not become a common denominator when one group is heavily influenced by English- education alone does not give way to adopting a subculture with its way of thinking that is labeled as liberal, it comes from English.

Some other aspects up for analysis include the idea of self-love and also strong negative emotions like anger. The former might as well be one of the highlights of Sara’s personality with countless dialogues speaking of self. In comparison, Khirad, or the good woman in general is alienated from this concept partially because this segment of women lives to serve others, emotionally and physically, with little to no self-identity outside the realm of others. Language is perhaps an important factor in this regard because ‘self’ and ‘self-love’ are increasingly popular beliefs in English whereas in Urdu the concept of self or ‘khudi’ often has negative connotations. Moreover, generally, anger is accepted when associated with a man but it can be argued that it is not out of the ordinary when women like Sara express it. They too, like men are capable of independent thought which implies that they can hate, be vengeful, feel and express extreme emotions. Sara continuously exhibits bouts of extreme emotions with one instance of a suicide attempt in the name of love that is responded to with empathy and understanding by her friends and family. I am inclined to believe that these complexities exist due to the acquisition of English as the women who know it not only have certain ‘negative’ attitudes but are accompanied by flexibility in thought and structural power that is not necessarily a possibility when constrained to Urdu.

Drawing attention to another infamous drama, *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012) the same binary of good and bad is evident in the female characters. The storyline follows similar rhetorics with Kashaf portrayed as a good woman. She too observes purdah and closeness to religion is inherent to her character. When admitted to a prestigious university, it becomes increasingly difficult for her to adjust to the elite social groups due to her values often causing a clash of thoughts with her peer Zaroon, who she later reconciles with and marries. The evil woman, Asmara is again someone who belongs only to the elite class and is in love with the male protagonist, Zaroon.

To draw on another similarity between the good women in both these dramas serials the idea of working for financial gain is brought to question. Khirad from *Humsafar* and Kashaf from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* both work out of necessity since neither of them has a male figure (father or brother) to bring in money. When this arch is juxtaposed with ‘liberal’ working women like Sara in *Humsafar*, it can be deduced that it is only acceptable for women to work in the absence of any other possible source of income. If done out of choice she quickly enters the realm of a ‘bad’ woman. However, regardless of the circumstances, it is still preferred for the woman to work from within the four walls of the house commonly through giving home tuitions, tailoring, etc. The limited the access or communication with the outside world the better. The importance of raising this point lies in the fact that it is Urdu that limits these characters to accept the boundaries of the House while English would possibly present greater opportunities allowing or even urging them to leave these confines.

The question of class becomes unavoidable when these drama serials often place gender in relation to class. The process of embracing English is associated with modernity hence widely adopted by the upper class while Urdu, the 'national language' is of lesser importance to the same group. This is interlinked with the ideas of the culture each language brings with it. English is considered the gateway to the west, not just in regards to culture but also in terms of simply keeping up with the modern world. Urdu comes with local traditions most of which have obtained a negative connotation over the years for not being modern enough. The ideas that can be expressed in English cannot be done so in Urdu, and arguably vice versa. Consequently, the infiltration of western ideals is restricted to only a certain group of people in Pakistan who are privileged enough to have access to this language in its entirety. This rather small group is at clash with the larger groups speaking either Urdu or other regional languages because they do not hold back when it comes to pointing out the regressiveness inherent to Urdu.

In both *Humsafar* (2011) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012), the good women are connected through the common ground of belonging to a lower social class. Their subservience is a result of the social structures that limit them to the ideas accessible in Urdu alone, regardless of their education. On the aspect of education, the conversation diverges to the kind of education that is accessible to social classes. The elite has the means to attain top-tier education delineated by English medium schools. The system-specific for them is designed in ways that give more importance to English as evident by Sara and Asmara. While Khirad and Kashaf are educated, it is restricted to a lower tier with barely any importance given to English. However, it is of use to signify the fact that Kashaf in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* later gets admitted to a prestigious university but is bound by the constraints of ideas instilled by her previous education when her ability to navigate social life is concerned. She appears for CSS exams and becomes an officer in DMG. This train of thought demands further analysis on the relationship between a good woman and the Nation regardless of the language or rather in light of the language they speak but it is out of the scope of this paper.

These points of analysis compel me to ponder over the role of identities in light of the English language. By now the polarization in roles that fit these categories of women is well understood. Therefore at this point making the argument that perhaps Urdu befitting the good woman helps in hiding identity as compared to English that prompts the bad woman to seek an identity, both perpetuating the binary, can be better navigated. Holding the preceding examples of characters and deliberations as evidence, one can deduce that the system that maintains the good woman category is designed in ways that continuously suppress and prevent them from exploring the self or the world for the fear that they may start questioning the looming authority. The restrictions that surround their key language, Urdu, become more obvious here as the ideas it represents have only gotten so far in time especially when it concerns women. English as the modern language though goes hand in hand with the most modern of ideas especially related to women and gender as a whole. The elasticity inherent to the latter allows the women to dissect certain structures in place which perhaps pushes them to deviate from the societal norms by wanting to seek identity of their own as well, adding to the classification of a bad woman. When in fact the traditionally good woman is indoctrinated to disregard any thoughts that might hint towards an unconventional identity or an identity that is not outlined for her.

On the contrary, detaching from the conversation of a good and bad woman, the influence of English on male characters is the polar opposite. Men like Ashar from *Humsafar* and Zaroon from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* are also educated men highlighted by their spoken English yet still no such categorization exists there. Instead, they are looked at in an even more positive light simply by way of the fact that their being progressive in their thinking adds value to the structure of society. And this is made possible by their active participation with the world outside of the four walls of the house. Moreover, it puts them higher up on the list of desirable suitors while it stands to be quite the opposite for women. This calls

forth and advances the idea that the liberal ideologies English brings with it are harmful to female dichotomies only because women are always expected to converge with the societal norms and values so the power structures can be upheld.

Conclusion

So, to conclude, this paper presents several arguments to outline the influence of English in the construction of Woman as 'good' and 'bad'. Engaging with TV dramas such as *Humsafar* and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* examples of various instances of factors at play including class are discussed. This paper leaves great room for future researchers to analyze and expand on various other factors accompanying English that together influence the construction of Woman in Pakistani TV dramas.

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