



Dramatized Representation of Empowered Women: An Analysis of Hum TV's *Bilquees Kaur*

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Abstract:

This paper is a discourse analysis of Hum TV's soap opera (Bilquees Kaur) and a document: an opinion-based email by the playwright, which examines the representation of Pakistani women in the public and private spheres. This particular series was chosen because of its focus on middle-class women, most notably on the representation of a woman working outside the confines of her family home and the issues surrounding changes within the family structure as a result of her circumstances. It is a chronicle of her struggle for empowerment in a constricting society. The present study is primarily carried out with the objective of exploring the notion of women empowerment being portrayed in the dramatized entertainment of Pakistan Television.

It is a case-discourse analytical enquiry being conducted on an Urdu drama that was telecasted on Hum TV namely, Bilquees Kaur,

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by adopting discourse analysis research design. The present study used qualitative research methodology in which an interpretive perspective was adopted to elucidate the interpretations of the concept of dramatized women empowerment that is portrayed in Art and Literature, particularly Drama.

Key words: Women Empowerment, Pakistani drama, HUM TV, Bilquees Kaur, chronicle of struggle, constricting society

Ontological Underpinnings:

Adopting an interpretive perspective and using qualitative research methodology, the paper seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the construct of 'Women Empowerment'. Deciphering the multifaceted semantic interpretations of the construct as portrayed in the dramatized version of reality is facilitated by focusing on the unique case of *Bilquees Kaur*. Hence, in a microcosm, it becomes representative of the whole entertainment world and its attempt at raising voice and building opinion about women empowerment.

Introduction:

This paper intends to establish a linkage between the issues of women empowerment and the contribution of different social factors, institutions and the civil society, to achieve a respectable status for the female population, within various sectors of the Pakistani society. The entertainment world is one such ideological state apparatus that highlights the concept of empowered women. Pakistani women share 59 percent in the total population of 184 million (*Economic Survey of Pakistan*, 2012-13), but are relegated to a secondary role, due to the growing gender disparity. Although, in some places, women's status as equal members of society has been marginally acknowledged, there is a considerable gender disparity against

women, a dominant factor in hampering women empowerment. Despite of various legislative and executive measures of the federal and provincial governments in the past, regarding gender issues, the Pakistani women are still facing all kinds of discrimination. The main reason is that even today, when the requirements of the society and women have changed drastically, the patriarchal mindset, outdated traditions and cultural norms continue to hold their ground. As a result, women's participation in the social, economic and political spheres has been substantially curtailed. It is this kind of gender disparity which raises many questions, particularly when it comes to granting equal status to the deprived women. This study relates with the portrayal of women empowerment in Pakistani entertainment world.

Significance of the study:

Dramas depict a reality that is sometimes contradictory with the actual social reality. The study examines the portrayal of women empowerment in dramatized entertainment of Pakistan and this would assist the media policy makers in playing their part in empowering women. It would offer a food for thought to the future researchers to explore the construct of women empowerment in the real world as it was depicted or exposed in dramas like *Bilquees Kaur*.

Statement of the problem:

The concern of the paper is the portrayal of women empowerment in Pakistani drama.

Objectives of the study:

1. To explore drama as a medium of portraying the notion of women empowerment.

2. To redress a case for women empowerment using the medium of drama.
3. To portray women as lead protagonists and as a symbol of women empowerment.
4. To gain an emic perspective of the life of an empowered women as portrayed in the drama and also to get view of the authorial intentions.
5. To examine the concept of 'dramatized women empowerment'.

Literature Review:

Understanding Power

At the core of the concept of empowerment there stands the idea of power. The possibility of empowerment depends on two aspects. First, empowerment requires that power can change. If power cannot change, if it is inherent in positions or people, then empowerment is not possible, nor is empowerment conceivable in any meaningful way. In other words, if power can change, then empowerment is possible. Second, the concept of empowerment depends upon the idea that power can expand. This second point reflects our common experiences of power rather than how we think about power. To clarify these points, we shall first discuss what we mean by power.

Power is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests (Weber 1946). Traditional social science emphasizes power as influence and control, often treating power as a commodity or structure divorced from human action (Lips 1991). Conceived in this way, power can be viewed as unchanging or unchangeable. Weber (1946) gives us a key word beyond this limitation by recognizing that power exists within the context of a relationship between people or things. Power does not exist in isolation nor is it inherent in individuals. By implication, since power is created in relationships, power and power

relationships can change. Empowerment as a process of change, then, becomes a meaningful concept.

A brief exercise makes the importance of this discussion clear. For most people, the words that come to mind when they think about power often revolve around control and domination. Focusing on these aspects of power only, limits our ability to understand and define empowerment.

The concept of empowerment also depends upon power that can expand our second stated requirement. Understanding power as zero-sum, as something that you get at my expense, cuts most of us off from power. A zero-sum conception of power means that power will remain in the hands of the powerful unless they give it up. Although this is certainly one way that power is experienced, it neglects the way power is experienced in most interactions. Another brief exercise highlights the importance of a definition of power that includes expansion. Related to this, the following questions should be answered: "Have you ever felt powerful?", "Was it at someone's expense?", and "Was it with someone else?"

Grounded in an understanding that power will be seen and understood differently by people who inhabit various positions in power structures (Lukes 1994), contemporary research on power has opened new perspectives that reflect aspects of power that are not zero-sum, but are shared. Feminists (Miller 1976; Starhawk 1987), members of grassroots organizations (Bookman & Morgen 1984), racial and ethnic groups (Nicola-McLaughlin & Chandler 1984), and even individuals in families bring into focus another aspect of power, one that is characterized by collaboration, sharing and mutuality (Kreisberg 1992).

Researchers and practitioners call this aspect of power "relational power" (Lappe & DuBois 1994), generative power (Korten 1987), "integrative power," and "power with" (Kreisberg 1992). This aspect means that gaining power actually strengthens the power of others rather than diminishing it, as

it occurs with domination/power. Kreisberg has suggested that power defined as "the capacity to implement" (Kreisberg 1992, 57) is broad enough to allow power to mean domination, authority, influence, and shared power or "power with." It is this definition of power, as a process that occurs in relationships, that gives us the possibility of empowerment.

Understanding Empowerment

Empowerment is a construct shared by many disciplines and arenas: community development, psychology, education, economics, and studies of social movements and organizations, among others. How empowerment is understood varies among these perspectives. In recent empowerment literature, the meaning of the term empowerment is often assumed rather than explained or defined. Rappoport (1984) has noted that it is easy to define empowerment by its absence but difficult to define it in action as it takes on different forms in different people and contexts. Even defining the concept is subject to debate. Zimmerman (1984) has stated that asserting a single definition of empowerment may make attempts to achieve it formulaic or prescription-like, contradicting the very concept of empowerment.

A common understanding of empowerment is necessary, however, to allow us to know empowerment when we see it in people with whom we are working, and for program evaluation. According to Bailey (1992), how we precisely define empowerment within our projects and programs will depend upon the specific people and context involved.

As a general definition, however, we suggest that empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important.

We suggest that three components of our definition are basic to any understanding of empowerment. Empowerment is multi-dimensional, social, and a process. It is multi-dimensional in that it occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, and other dimensions. Empowerment also occurs at various levels, such as individual, group, and community. Empowerment, by definition, is a social process, since it occurs in relationship to others. Empowerment is a process that is similar to a path or journey, one that develops as we work through it. Other aspects of empowerment may vary according to the specific context and people involved, but these remain constant. In addition, one important implication of this definition of empowerment is that the individual and the community are fundamentally connected.

Women Empowerment:

Are women really empowered? This seems to be the question of the decade as this decade saw the rise of many women and the fight for equality seemed to dim in the face of the new empowered female citizens of our nation, state, family. But like a day that has its dawn bright and clear and its dusk as well, the dawn of the empowered women had a stronghold that seemed to slacken in the dusk. The female populace is still facing barriers in the society in every sphere and this barrier strengthens its vice like grip through many forms of violence, atrocities and inequalities against women.

The term Empowerment holds different meanings to different psyches. This divergence, this comprehension of facts against fiction, this way of interpretation by people of various sects, associations and understanding can perhaps answer this quintessential question: ARE WOMEN REALLY EMPOWERED? (Pragyan Das 2012).

Bilquees Kaur (2012) attempts to put forward a case for women empowerment in the dramatized entertainment of Pakistan. This portrays all the aforementioned concerns.

Theoretical Framework:

A general overview of Theories of Gender and Feminism has facilitated the contention.

The Pakistani drama is also a form of entertainment-education because it is purposely designed to implement a distinct media message that is meant to entertain while educating the audience about specific social issues, to create favorable attitudes, and to change overt behavior (Singhal and Rogers 1999). Early feminist approaches in television were focused on the realism of women on the small screen compared to “real women”. They found that real women were “imperfectly formed, hard-working, multi-ethnic, and extremely various in contrast to the dominant ways in which they were represented,” (Brunsdon 1995). The concept of “heroine television” has been used to describe shows that have female characters that are living lives that could resemble the lives of their viewers. These characters work inside and outside the home, they may be dealing with relationships with men, and have children of their own. Essentially, they are “trying to cope” with real world issues and situations analogous to what “real” women face (1995).

Similarly, soaps in developing countries, like Pakistan, are attempting to create these positive role models that can educate their audiences about living life. They are women like the female protagonist Bilquees Kaur.

Research Methodology:

Research Design:

Discourse Analysis is adopted to explore the major concepts of the present study.

Population of the study:

The Pakistan Television: Urdu dramas are the population of this discourse analytical study. Dramas appearing on HUM TV are the study population.

Unit of analysis:

In this study, Hum TV dramatized women empowerment is the unit of study.

Gaining access:

Ms.Faiza Iftikhar, the playwright, was contacted. She was given a briefing regarding the research and her role in facilitating the process. She gave a positive consent and sent an opinion-based email. She was assured that the research would be used for academic purposes only.

Sampling frame:

The present study is a case study analysis. So the sampling frame for the present study consisted of one drama, namely, *Bilquees Kaur*; it was chosen using a purposive sampling technique.

Data collection:

For qualitative data collection, video recordings of this episodic drama from the net were used. The reviews were analyzed as well. To complement the process and to gain authorial in-depth insight, the playwright Faiza Iftikhar was contacted to write/sent an opinion-based email on her play and the idea of women empowerment, especially centering upon the female protagonist, *Bilquees Kaur*. The data was analyzed in the form of different codes, categories, ideas and themes centering upon the topic of 'dramatized women empowerment'.

Data analysis and Discussion:

The title of the play '*Bilquees Kaur*' is the name of the lead female protagonist of the play, around whom the plot of the drama revolves. So it can be stated that she is not a woman in person but a woman in effect. Therefore, she becomes the archetypal symbol of dramatized women empowerment in the worldliness of the text: the world of the play. The punch line of the play '*ravayaat aur ikdaar k bhavar main phusay ek khaandaan ki kahani*' highlights the central conflict of the clash of traditional values and power politics within the family by centering upon the character of the female protagonist.

Responding to my request, Faiza Iftikhar send an opinion based email, regarding the character of Bilquees Kaur, as it was written by her and enacted on screen. The text is used for the sake of analysis and to build up an in-depth perspective about the character. The text of the email is as under:

Bilquees Kaur always came across as a very dominating and controlling woman who would have done anything to make her kids stay under one roof. Bushra Insari played a Sikhni, who converted to Islam, married to a seemingly docile Muslim husband but also kept her sikh values intact, she does go to the gurdwara once a week to pray for her late parents. She also seemed like a very sensitive person who longed to be loved just like anyone else but there were many many times when bilquees just seemed like a very selfish person. She is just over-protective as she wants her children to do well in life. She is shown to be a controlling and oppressing mother and seems to have traditional views. The truth revealed in the end, in the serial, changed the way how we felt about bilquees altogether. The story may have had loopholes and the ending may have seemed rushed to many but overall bilquees kaur's character was a very unique one.

The aforementioned text and the 19 weeks episodes are analyzed to develop different ideas and themes centering upon the inductive and deductive codes related to 'dramatized women empowerment'. The codes are as below:

Bilquees Kaur: The product of her dark past

The drama revolves around the past and present of this one woman. Bilquees Kaur, who is a Sikhni by birth converts to Islam after eloping with a Muslim. The husband leaves her because he has courted her because of greed: Bilquees's share in her father's property is what fascinates her husband. He is a materialistic man. Eventually, when there remain no prospects of her getting any share in her father's property, her husband leaves her with children. He even asks her to convert back to Sikhism. That comes as a shock for the female protagonist herself. With the passage of time, she marries her children (mostly in her husband's family), settles her own business in America along with two of his sons. Bilquees Kaur is a tough and simple woman, who eventually admits her mistakes and regrets what she has done in her past. She is a very dominating mother who is not comfortable with her children doing things the way they want to. Her ego overshadows everyone else's decisions at home as she goes by the "my house, my rules" principle. She considers herself the lord and breadwinner of the house. An interesting twist to the tale is that in spite of her attempts to keep her children under control, her daughter runs away with a boy just as she did many years ago. Her daughter-in-law is shown to be a suppressed character who is pressured by her dominating mother-in-law, Bilquees. She once used to be a girl with dreams and hopes but is now a silenced woman with shattered ambitions. Her husband does not support her at all and she is just living her life as it comes without any expectations. In a review appearing on dramapakistani.net regarding the female protagonist Bilquees Kaur, it was stated that:

"Ill-tempered and stern as she might seem today, in some ways she is still trying to gain approval and acceptance. The very difficult time she had after her conversion still haunts her. Hence her push to get her children married into Iqbal's family, her visceral reaction to Anjuman's elopement, and her concern with *duniya kya kahegi*. One sees her getting worked

up every time she hears her children being referred to as *Sikhni ki aulad*. Even Iqbal, innocuous as he seems, has never hesitated to remind her of her elopement. One can only wonder as to what role all those experiences have played in her becoming the stern and dominating person she is today.”

It can be concluded that her past interpreted her present. Standing the test of time, she never lost her self-esteem and she gained empowerment.

Bilquees Kaur: The savior of traditional values and family

Her ‘iron-lady’ character was portrayed like a dictator and a tyrant. It came as a stylistic compulsion because the playwright wanted that the character of the female protagonist should strive to safeguard her values, keep her family intact and her children do well in life. Her family was full of selfish and lazy people. Her husband never contributed to the family’s income, her eldest son was not even taking the responsibility for his wife and spent his time and earnings in night clubs. The younger son was looking for an opportunity to dissociate himself from his family, the older daughter’s husband had a never ending list of demands, he eventually divorced her and the youngest daughter eloped with her boyfriend. Therefore, they needed a dominating person like Bilquees. To serve the authorial intentions, her character was empowered; it acted as a guardian of the value system.

Bilquees: the wife of a docile husband, her selfishness and her insecurities

The ineligibility of her husband to be the active bread earning member of the family, his cold and distant behavior and his inability to fulfill her marital responsibilities lead to the empowerment of the female protagonist of the play.

Bilquees: an oppressive mother, a victim of patriarchy, a rebel

Bilquees is a victim of patriarchy. Her family and her husband have deserted her in a constricting society. She was subjected to denial and dismissal. Her life has been hard. Therefore, she rebels against being a stereotypical woman and shuns off her womanliness. She emerges as an independent woman. The circumstances in her life have facilitated her transition from the age of innocence into an age of experience, the real world, the society. Eventually, she becomes more tolerant but never changes.

Conclusion:

Dramatized women empowerment is a social construct used by artists to serve their authorial intentions. Drama offers an arena to judge and question the idea of women empowerment. Dramatized women empowerment is portrayed symbolically through the character of the female protagonist, Bilquees Kaur.

Limitations, Suggestions and Recommendations:

Owing to temporal constraints, the present study focuses on one play and on the portrayal of one character as a symbol of women empowerment. Future researchers can use drama as a medium to highlight similar gender concerns in society and facilitate policy making; they can look for audience perceptions as well. The study would open novel investigation turfs especially for the entertainment sector of Pakistan.

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