

February 2023

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Recommended Citation

Jabeen, Neelam (2023) "The Heart Is Not Hopeless: Pakistani Television Drama, Patriarchy, and Activism," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss1/6>

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The Heart Is Not Hopeless: Pakistani Television Drama, Patriarchy, and Activism

By Neelam Jabeen¹

Abstract

A Muslim society that interprets feminism as anti-Islamic may not accept overtly feminist maneuvers to challenge patriarchy. However, there are subtle ways of steering out of the Islam vs. feminism dichotomy. What triggers anti-feminists are phrases like women's rights, female emancipation, and women's freedom since all these are interpreted as the agenda of the West and hence are considered anti-Islamic. In this paper, I argue that since feminists are fighting against all forms of oppression and have joined forces with other forms of activism such as child protection, human rights, animal rights, rights of the underclass and minority groups, and rehabilitation of runaways, exposing oppression and fighting against it should not be perceived as the agenda of the West. Television drama can be used as an effective medium to educate people along these lines. In this paper I use an Urdu drama serial *Dil Na Ummeed To Nahi* (The Heart Is Not Hopeless) written by Amna Mufti as a case to show (a) how various forms of oppression are connected and (b) how patriarchy that lies at the root of oppression can still be challenged without overt feminist activism in a Muslim society such as Pakistan where feminism is considered anti-Islam.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, Television Drama, Pakistani popular culture, Intersectional oppression, Domestic violence, Child abuse, Sex Trafficking

Introduction

Pakistani society is fundamentally a patriarchal society that empowers men and represses women. Women are considered to be an asset, just like wealth and land. More land, more wealth, and more control over women are the parameters of male power (Chauhan, 2014, p. 57). The unequal power relations between men and women create oppressive structures that are not only repressive for women but for all those who are disempowered, including children, the elderly, the underclass, and non-human animals. All societal norms and values and even religion are interpreted in ways that favor patriarchy, ultimately connecting all forms of oppression. Galtung (1990) refers to this type of oppression as cultural violence: "By 'cultural violence' we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence--exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics)--that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (p. 291). He further contends that "patriarchy ... combines direct, cultural and structural violence in a vicious triangle. Direct violence, such as rape intimidates and represses; structural violence institutionalizes; and cultural violence internalizes that relation, especially for the victim, the women, making the structure very durable" (1996, p. 40). It is important to reiterate here that the oppressive structures not only victimize women but all the disempowered members of the society. All those who are to be excluded from power are feminized—women, children, the elderly (men and women), the underclass (men, women, and hijras), and the non-human.

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Feminist activists in Pakistan, as elsewhere, advocate for the rights of women. Proclaiming to be a feminist in Pakistan, however, is not easy. A feminist may easily get labeled as “an agent of the West,” “liberal aunty,” “*desi* liberal,” or “*mombatti* mafia.”² These terms clearly show the antagonism that feminists have to face from the majority of the population. The easiest way to ‘other’ feminists is to portray them as anti-Islam. “Currently there is no identifiable Islamic feminist movement in Pakistan,” although there are some feminists who “may identify with or participate in secular activism and would resist any wilful or political Islamisation of state and society but do not advocate for avoiding faith-based approach to women’s personal empowerment. This self-proclaimed secular feminist movement in Pakistan does not resist Islam, just an Islamic state” (Zia, 1998, p. 26). The feminist movement in Pakistan is also criticized for making this compromise as it weakens the resistance against Islamist activism (p. 26). The *raison d’être* of the secular feminist movement in Pakistan was the dictatorial regime of General Zia ul Haq (1977-88) “who made women direct targets of a misogynist state under his purported Islamisation project” (p. 27). The activism of the women’s movement against the Islamisation of the state, and its denial of women’s freedom, was then interpreted as anti-Islam. Hence, the dualistic construction of Islam vs. feminism was born.

It would seem logical that Islamic feminism could be a solution for feminists in a Muslim majority country that could reconcile the basic principles of both feminism and Islam. However, this is not as simple as it may sound. Islamic feminism that challenges the male interpretation of the religion (Zia, 1998) would provoke greater resistance than secular feminism. One of the basic tenets of feminism is rejection of patriarchy, but Islam as a religion has largely been used as a tool to uphold patriarchy. Reinterpretation of Islam from a feminist perspective would mean challenging an entire world view. Pakistan hasn’t given rise to any indigenous Islamic feminist movement so far. While there are many who wouldn’t want to be labeled as feminists, Islamic or secular, they are nonetheless trying to find another way to steer women out of oppression.

General Zia’s regime not only is responsible for the Islam vs. feminism dichotomy but also impacted Pakistan television. Urdu drama as a significant source of entertainment has remained within certain codes that were defined during Zia’s period. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s democratic regime (1973-77) before Zia’s dictatorial rule is considered to be the golden era for Pakistani television for its “unrestricted live news coverage and drama serials that provided social critique” (Kothari, 2005, p. 293). However, Pakistani drama has never seen the same freedom after Zia came to power. As Kothari writes:

Since most of these serials are written by women, with leading characters that are women, catering specifically to an audience of women, the concept of *zanaana* [pertaining to female] embraces both production and reception of these stories. Therefore, Urdu drama serials negotiate the position of women from within an Islamic framework. Depending upon the writer, one finds different degrees of subservience and subversion of Islamic interpretations of women’s roles. (p. 293)

Working within such restrictions, writers face the challenging task of creating content that questions patriarchy. Pakistani television has produced several drama serials that engage with issues of women’s rights but have never presented anything that would directly challenge patriarchy, since that would be considered synonymous with challenging Islam.

² A term used to refer to those who hold candlelight vigils for individual cases of rape, murder, and other kinds of social injustices.

Dil Naummeed to Nahi/Heart is Not Hopeless

For this paper, I have chosen a Pakistani drama serial *Dil Naummeed to Nahi* (translated to The Heart Is Not Hopeless), written by Amna Mufti and produced by Kashf Foundation and MD Productions. I use this serial as a case study to show: (a) how various forms of oppression are connected and (b) that patriarchy that lies at the root of oppression can be challenged without overt feminist activism in a Muslim society where feminism and feminists are considered anti-Islam. Although the drama serial selected for the study is a Pakistani drama, it is relevant for every society that uses religion to uphold patriarchy and justify oppression. My rationale for the use of this single drama for the study is based on the claim that there are hardly any dramas produced in Pakistan that cover such a variety of crucial themes that this particular drama covers. Different dramas have covered some important themes individually but not collectively. *Kashkol* (Beggar's Bowl) was aired in 1993 and exposed the beggar mafia in Pakistan. Kashf foundation is known for producing dramas based on social causes. *Rehaili* (Freedom) (2013) was based on child marriage. *Udaari* (Flight) (2016) highlighted a taboo topic—child sexual abuse. Several dramas have been aired since the inception of Pakistan Television (PTV) in 1964. With mostly female central characters and a female target audience, the dramas have covered themes that deal with women's rights. However, “hegemonic limitation of a woman's agency is both celebrated and critiqued by Urdu serials, providing viewers with both identification and escape” (Kothari, 2005, p. 296). Kothari cites the example of a famous drama serial *Aanch* (Stain) (1993) that shows a female protagonist leaving her unhappy married life, becoming independent, and yet returning to her husband. Aroosa Kanwal, in her article “Transphobia to Transrespect,” studies the role of two Pakistani Urdu drama serials *ALif Allah Aur Insaan* (Alpha, Allah, and Man) (2017) and *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (God is Mine Too) (2016). She argues that these serials “reimagine and reconstruct *Khwaja Sira* [hijra] subjectivities” and she traces the shift from a dehumanization of hijras in Pakistan to their re-humanization through such drama serials (p. 949). *Dil Naummeed to Nahi* is the only drama in Pakistani television history that deals with a plethora of social issues and taboo topics and has connected these all with patriarchy, while avoiding the common strategy of making a bargain with patriarchy.

In this paper I claim that Amna Mufti in her drama serial *Dil Naummeed to Nahi* (The Heart Is Not Hopeless) hits hard by exposing various forms of oppression in a Pakistani society (which could stand in for any South-Asian society). In one intricately woven plotline, the serial exposes patriarchy as the root cause of oppression and shows the escape route. Interestingly, there is nothing new or unusual about the story, or the multiple stories of the different characters we come across, nor are the issues that she highlights probed for the first time. What makes the work worth studying is the treatment of her major themes and the connections she builds between them. She has not only exposed the oppressive patriarchal structures of the given society but has also unveiled the causes and the outcomes of oppression. Her deep understanding of these causes and outcomes shows the audience a light at the end of the dark tunnel, hence the title *Dil Naummeed to Nahi* (The Heart Is Not Hopeless).

As mentioned earlier, the drama serial depicts various forms of oppression that include child marriage, child trafficking (for sex and for beggary), sex trafficking, domestic violence, prostitution, child labor, and child abuse. At the same time, it lays bare the corruption of certain institutions like the police that play a role in the perpetuation of oppression. In a well-knit plot, Mufti has connected all these various forms of oppression, the elements that perpetuate the oppression, the causes of these different forms of oppression and their outcomes. Therefore it is

necessary that all these aspects be critically analyzed together, and in connection with each other, so that the escape route that Mufti suggests at the end may be comprehended. There are clear lessons that Mufti tries to teach through each of the major incidents. It is through these lessons that she achieves what overt forms of feminist maneuvers have not been able to achieve in Pakistan and many other Muslim societies.

The drama intricately weaves the stories of multiple characters that are somehow related. It is not chronological so there is back and forth movement in time. There are two households in a village in Punjab: that of Allah Rakhi (who becomes Sumbal in the later setting), an 8 or 9 year-old girl; and Jamshed (who becomes Jimmy in the later setting), a 10 or 11 year-old boy. Their stories are set in two times—2008 and the present. There is another household, that of Naseem Zehra, another 8 or 9 year-old girl, living in Lahore. Her story is set in 2012 and the present. Then there is a brothel (*kothi*) in Lahore; the plotline in the *kothi* is set in the present but there are references to the past as well.

Child Marriage and Sex Trafficking: Causes and Outcomes

The young girl protagonist Allah Rakhi is married off as a child, an obvious child marriage case that resembles several such cases happening daily in the country. Mufti treats this case not as most would simplistically want to see it, that is, a drunkard father selling his young daughter in exchange of money, or alternatively, a poor father compelled to take the decision because he cannot feed his large family. Instead, Mufti sheds light on the deeper causes of this particular case, a network of oppressive patriarchal structures that work in unison. There are several causes that contribute to Rakhi's fate. To fulfill the dowry demands of their elder daughter Sadia's husband-to-be, Rakhi's parents pledge their donkey named Tomato to a female money lender named Somi Khala as it is "not unusual for the father of the bride to find himself in the straitened circumstances and to resort to borrowing important sums to meet these obligations" (Korkson, 1968, p. 697) The borrowed money gets stolen by some young boys in the village, so Rakhi's father sells the donkey that is already pledged. They marry their daughter off without fulfilling the major demand of their daughter's in-laws, and their daughter is then thrown out the same day for bringing shame to her husband by not bringing a motorcycle as *salami* (wedding gift from the bride's side). Rakhi's brothers steal their beloved Tomato without telling their parents. Devastated, the parents have to think of something to save their sons from police custody for stealing the donkey, and their elder daughter from getting a divorce for lack of dowry. With all the pledge money gone and no way of returning the money, the money lender then suggests that they should marry the young Rakhi off to her nephew in exchange for a handsome amount of money. In this way they will be relieved of the debt they incurred for Sadia's wedding. Because of two social evils—dowry and usury—Rakhi's parents are left with no choice but to marry off their young daughter.

The money lender not only exploits the needs of a poor family by offering a loan on interest but is also involved in sex-trafficking. She had eyes on Rakhi the day Rakhi's father Maheed went there for the first time for the loan. She obliquely suggested to Majeed that Rakhi was already marriageable. Knowing full well that Majeed would not be able to return the loan money and the interest, she traps him by first making him pledge his donkey and then suggesting Rakhi's marriage to her so-called nephew who is involved in sex trafficking. Rakhi's child marriage case then morphs into sex trafficking where she is sold in a brothel by her so-called husband on the same day she gets married. By detailing the causes (dowry and usury) and the outcomes (child marriage and sex trafficking of girls and women), Mufti exposes the network of

oppressive structures that create a vicious cycle for the vulnerable that they cannot escape. Rakhi's parents are not to be blamed as much as the system that pushes them to such lengths. A patriarchal society that supports the repression of the underclass by compelling them to conform to these social norms is the major culprit. A society that considers an unmarried girl a burden and divorce a taboo has the capacity to indulge in several other evils, just as Rakhi's parents did—in dowry, usury, and then in child marriage. There are always such agents that take advantage of such repressive norms and add to the oppression and exploitation of the underclass, like the female money lender Somi Khala.

Another significant issue is also highlighted from Rakhi and Sadia's marriage cases. Sadia has internalized that getting married is important and the only way to a happy life. She threatens her parents that if she is not married off to her fiancé, she will commit suicide. She tells her younger sister Rakhi:

زندگی وہ ہوتی ہے جسمیں گوٹے والے کپڑے ہوں۔ لمبے لڑ والا شیشے والا پراندہ ہو۔
ریشمی کپڑے اور چمکیلی جوتی ہو۔ تجھے پتا ہے شادی کے بعد میاں بڑا دیہان رکھتا ہے، اور شام
کو واپس آتے ہوئے برفی اور پتیسا بھی لے کے آتا ہے۔ اور کبھی سر میں درد ہو تو خود ہی دبا بھی
دیتا ہے۔ بڑا دیہان رکھتا ہے میان۔ تجھے پتا ہے لال رنگ کی جرابیں بھی لا کے دیتا ہے۔
تجھے کس نے بتایا؟
یہ ساری باتیں لڑکیوں کو خود ہی پتا ہوتی ہیں۔

*zindgi wo hoti hai jusmein gotay walay kapre hon, lambay larr wala sheeshay
wala paranda ho, reshmi kparay aur chamkeeli jutti ho...tujhe pata hai shadi k
bad mian barra dehaan rakhta hai, aur sham ko wapus aate hue barfi aur pateesa
bhi le k ata hai, aur kabhi sar mein dard ho to khud hi sar bhi daba deta hai,
barra dehan rakhta hai mian, tujhe pata hai laal rung ki juraabein bhi la k deta
hai” Rakhai asks: tujhe kis ne bataya” she responds: “ye saari baatein larkion ko
khud hi pata hoti hain.*

Life is where you get fancy clothes and shoes, and fancy hair accessories. You know, after marriage, the husband takes care of you and brings sweetmeats in the evening when he comes back home. And if you have a headache, he presses your head and is very caring. And you know, he also gets you red socks. (Episode 4)

Sadia romanticizes married life and thinks that she can escape its realities. Rakhi then tells Jamshed, the male protagonist, that getting married can change a boy's fortune as he gets a motorcycle as *salami*. Through this plot, Mufti sheds light on the ways young girls and boys internalize the vicious customs of the society.

Prostitution and Sex Trafficking: Causes and Outcomes

Prostitution has been a recurrent theme in many of the films and dramas produced in Pakistan. However, talking about sex trafficking is a taboo in Pakistani society. No wonder that there were complaints to PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) that advocated for banning the drama serial, after which PEMRA issued a notice to the makers of the drama for “objectionable content in the drama serial” (Kiran, 2021). The brothel in Mufti's drama does not romanticize and glamorize institutionalized prostitution, as some of the dramas like *Khuda aur Muhabbat*, *Raqse Bismil*, and *Deeware Shab* do. Instead, it brings to the fore the

dark and ugly reality of institutionalized prostitution. Surayya Aunty's brothel is not a typical brothel but is a *kothi* (warehouse) located in the posh area of the city and is run by girls trafficked from different parts of the country, like Allah Rakhi who becomes Sumbal after being sent there. These girls are abused and tortured by the male guard of the brothel and drugged by the doctor who works for Surayya Aunty to make them submissive. The drama recounts the murder and suicide of some of the girls who resist prostitution and abuse or who try to escape. Through the brothel, the networks of the police, medical doctors, and local pimps are also exposed. Surayya Aunty, who is the head of the brothel, is only an agent who was also once similarly trafficked and sold to a brothel. The real custodian of the brothel is an influential male character who remains hidden from the audience. His lack of a name and face symbolizes the anonymity of such figures in the society who use people like Surayya Aunty and the guard Ikram.

Through Naseem Zehra's household, Mufti sheds light on some more causes and outcomes of patriarchal oppression. Her father Qazi Jalil is an orthodox Muslim who considers emancipated women to be a threat to the morals of a society. Under the influence of his friend Naeem Sherwani, he doesn't allow his daughters to continue their school education. His elder daughter Naseem Zehra is an avid cricket-lover who wants to play for the country. Qazi, however, considers girls' sports as "*be-hayai*" (obscene) and "*fuhashi*" (shameless or lewd). The repressive environment of the household forces the girls and their mother to find ways of studying and playing cricket secretly on the rooftop in the absence of the father. The lack of her father's support forces Naseem Zehra to find ways to run away to play cricket for the country. In the quest, she falls victim to a racket that traffics girls abroad. However, she is rescued and sent to a shelter home. Linked to Naseem Zehra's story is the story of Ayesha who also wants to become a tourist and see the world. She also ends up in the *kothi* where she commits suicide. In both these examples, Mufti not only highlights the issue of sex trafficking but also points toward the causes. Patriarchal oppression of females at home is shown to be the root cause of both the girls being trapped. Lack of support at home for women to chase their dreams forces them to find ways that lead to blind alleys. The reason for these girls falling victim to fraud is also their lack of exposure to opportunity in a repressive patriarchal household. Had Naseem Zehra been allowed to continue her education at school and college, instead of homeschooling, and if she had her father's support, she might have made better choices to chase her dream. Similarly, had Ayesha had her brother's support and guidance, she might have fulfilled her dream and still be alive.

Qazi's household and Surayya Aunty's *kothi* are examples of places that function by silencing girls and repressing their dreams and desires. When young Naseem Zehra asks her father:

ابو آپ کو میرا کرکٹ کھیلنا اچھا نہیں لگتا؟
Abu apko mera cricket khelna acha nahi lagta?
 You don't like me playing cricket, father?

He responds:
 لڑکیاں سوال نہیں کرتیں
Larkian sawal nahi kartin
 Girls don't ask questions. (Episode 2).

Then she asks her mother why girls can't run if they have legs, just like boys. Her mother also tells her that girls don't ask questions. Naeem Sherwani—Qazi's friend—further strengthens Qazi's conviction by saying:

لڑکیوں کو سوال کرنے کی عادت نہیں ڈالنی چاہیے۔
larkion ko sawal kerne ki adat nahi dalni chahiey
Girls shouldn't be taught to ask questions. (Episode 3)

Similarly when Sumbal asks questions about another girl who is sent to a psychopathic client who abuses her, she is drugged into silence. By constantly being rebellious and by being tortured for that, Sumbal becomes a symbol for other girls who dare not behave like her: “While silence is maintained in the resignation of individuals, it is also more explicitly and deliberately maintained through structures and cultures of coercion and fear” (McAlister et al., 2021, p.10). Ramsha and Ramla are two other names that are used as examples in the *kothi* for those who disobey. Both of these girls were tortured and murdered. A girl or a woman who asks questions is a threat to the status quo and male power. Religious and other social norms are interpreted so that women are made to internalize their inferiority and silencing.

To keep women in the domestic sphere, there has to be a narrative that ensures that women conform to the rules set for them. Sherwani delivers a speech among his friends on the importance of feminization of girls. One of his friends adds:

جب کسی لڑکی کو اپنے لباس سے زیادہ گیند بلے کا شوق ہو گا تو آخر کار ایک ایسی نسل وجود میں آئے گی جو دوپٹے اور ستر پوشی کہ اپنی راہ میں رکاوٹ سمجھے گی۔
Jab kisi larki ko apne libas se zyada gend ballay ka shoq ho ga to akhir kaar ek esi nasal wajood mein ae gi jo dupattay aur satar poshi ko apni rah mein rukawat samjhe gi.

When a girl cares for her bat and ball more than her clothes, she will be responsible for a generation that will consider shawl and modesty a hindrance in her way (Episode 4).

Their conversation hints toward the concept of “چادر اور چار دیواری / *chadar aur char diwari*” meaning a shawl and four walls. This phrase refers to the ways of confining women to the domestic sphere. Cases like that of Ayesha and Naseem Zehra getting out of the four walls of the house and becoming victims of the sex trade serve to authenticate the concept of *chadar* and *char diwari*. Mufti, however, deals with these examples in subtle ways. Qazi shouts at his wife when he learns that Naseem Zehra never reached Dubai and has been duped. He tells her this outcome is the reason that he wanted to keep the girls home. The patriarchy use such instances to gain further submission as “random acts of male sexual violence against a few women scare more women into submission” (Sharlach, 2008, p. 97).

Through Naseem Zehra's episode, Naeem Sherwani's character represents a patriarchal society that seeks its strength by repressing and silencing women. An educated and emancipated woman becomes a threat to patriarchy as she may question and challenge the status quo and the authority of the male. Males like Naeem Sherwani assume their power from their masculinity that can only render them power when masculinity is considered superior to femininity. Femininity for them is synonymous with weakness, helplessness, submissiveness, and docility. When a woman tries to get out of this prescribed feminine role, she becomes a threat to the

male's superiority, so the male takes every measure to keep the woman repressed. Sherwani is a widower and has no children. He asserts his superiority by pushing Qazi, Naseem Zehra's father, to be strict with his wife and daughters. Through his voyeuristic gaze, Sherwani calls Qazi's attention to his daughter's clothing and gait. It is under Sherwani's influence that Qazi first objects to his daughter's school letting the girls play sports, and then holds a protest against a school principal for letting the girls play under a trained female coach. He goes as far as burning the fairy tale books of his young daughters as they might teach them to have dreams of their own. Like Rakhi's parents, Qazi is also conditioned by the patriarchal repressive structures that harm him more than benefit him. In order to fit in the system, he keeps on taking measures that add to his own misery. He even agrees to marry his daughter to his friend Shewani just so that he will be relieved of the burden of a daughter. As the outcome of this extreme oppression, his wife agrees to Naseem Zehra's plan of running away to join a cricket club in Dubai when she eventually falls victim to a sex trafficking racket.

Mufti has amply foregrounded how a naïve girl with no exposure to the world can harm herself and others. Sadia's insistence on marriage ruined the entire family including herself. Had she been an educated woman who knew her worth, she would never have associated her happiness with a man for whom she is nothing more than a commodity. Jamshed's mother could be a better mother if she knew that she was not incomplete without a man. Girls in the *kothi* are made to internalize that this is their "*qismat*" (fate) and that they are still better off than many other girls. The doctor tells Sumbal that Auntie cares for them and their well-being, and that the world outside is cruel. Sawera who was brought to the *kothi* as a 5 or 6 year-old child spent all her life there, first in child labor and then in sex trade. Sawera tells Sumbal to be happy with the lifestyle they are given and that they are better off than many other girls, and instead of trying to escape or change the status quo, she should accept her "*qismat*." Sumbal in response says:

قسمت کا لفظ تو ہم جیسیوں کو بیوقوف بنانے کے لیے بنا ہے، ورنہ باقی لوگ تو اپنی قسمت خود لکھتے ہیں۔

Qismat ka lafz hum jesion ko bewaqoof banana k liey bana hai, warna baqi log to apni qismat khud likhte hain.

The word fate is only made to befool the likes of us; others write their own fate. (Episode 3)

Domestic Violence and Child Abuse: Causes and Outcomes

Domestic violence and child abuse is another major issue that Mufti highlights. The male protagonist Jamshed, aka Jimmy, faces domestic abuse at the hands of his single mother. Again, this is not a typical case of domestic violence that we are used to seeing in dramas where the mother neglects or abuses her child because she has been through the same. Jamshed's mother is a woman who becomes bitter after the death of her husband because the society she lives in never lets her have confidence that she is enough to raise a child single-handedly. She considers it an impossibility and consequently takes out her frustration on her son. The major cause of her bitterness is her economic condition. She has no financial support and earns meager wages. She regularly beats Jamshed who is also regularly punished by the school master for petty reasons.

When two village boys (who steal money of Rakhi's father) ask him to accompany them to the city, he agrees in an attempt to escape daily beatings of his mother and the school master, and to get a job and earn money so that his mother would be pleased with him. The boys leave him in the city, and he ends up with Baba Ranjha who is involved in institutionalized beggary.

Ranjha tries to train him in begging and stealing and then eventually gives him to a family as domestic help for a handsome sum of money. Jamshed is abused there as well. A neighbor named Tariq Mehmood, aka TM, who is an activist for child rights, observes Jamshed being maltreated, intervenes, and threatens the family to involve police in this child labor and child abuse case. The family lets him take Jamshed with him, and he brings him up as his own son as Jamshed refuses to go back home. Jimmy later grows up to be an influencer and runs shelters for animals and women. Jimmy's episode reveals the causes and the outcomes of all that he had to suffer as a child. His mother had internalized that a single woman is incomplete and incapable of even raising her child. It is the same oppressive society that forced Rakhi's parents to sell their young daughter in marriage to save the elder daughter from getting divorced. A woman is considered complete only when she has a husband; otherwise she is worthless. Jamshed is in turn forced to flee domestic abuse and falls victim to further abuse. Jamshed's mother goes mad, her house is sold by thugs, and she dies. Oppressive patriarchal structures are responsible for the fate of the son and mother more than their own actions and decisions.

Jamshed's episode also sheds light on the child labor issue in the country. According to the only National Child Labour Survey done in 1996, "about 3.3 million Pakistani children are trapped in child labor, depriving them of their childhood, their health and education, and condemning them to a life of poverty and want" (UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/child-protection-0>). Besides being involved in other kinds of labor such as in brick, carpet, and coal industries, underage girls and boys are kept as domestic help in big and small cities in bonded labor. Because of the advance payment that is deducted monthly from the salary, the parents cannot claim the child back unless the entire advance payment has been adjusted. During this time, the child is made to do all the household chores including washing, cleaning, and entertaining the young children usually of their own age. They even get punished for not doing the work properly. The government has set an age limit for domestic workers, and it is a punishable offense to disobey the law, yet the affluent do not obey the law.

Through Jamshed's episode, Mufti also criticizes the education system, especially in rural areas. According to a report on education in Pakistan, Robert Hunter (2020) from World Education Services in *WENR* writes:

Problems in Pakistani education are manifold. They range from dysfunctional and dilapidated school facilities that lack sanitation or electricity, to underqualified teaching staff, widespread corruption, and tens of thousands of "ghost teachers" that sap public payrolls by not showing up for work. While most of these problems are worse at the elementary level, where most of Pakistan's students are enrolled, they have ripple effects for the entire education system and depress enrollment rates at all levels.

The incompetent schoolteacher in the drama not only beats the boys but also stresses rote learning and provides no opportunity for creativity. In the first episode, the school teacher is seen beating Jamshed mercilessly for not regurgitating the essay on "My Pen" exactly the way he had wanted him to. Jamshed is a brilliant boy but the system does not allow him to continue his studies and get higher education and a good career, unless he goes to a better school in a city. Hunter (2020) rightly observes:

Failure to integrate the country's legions of youngsters into the education system and the labor market, on the other hand, could turn population growth into what the *Washington Post* called a "disaster in the making": "Putting catastrophic pressures on water and sanitation systems, swamping health and education services, and leaving tens of millions of people jobless"—trends that would almost inevitably lead to the further destabilization of Pakistan's already fragile political system.

Through this comparatively short episode about the school in the village, Mufti in subtle ways points toward the consequences of a failing school system in rural areas. The dropouts of the school, like Jamshed, become victims at the hands of the likes of Baba Ranjha. It is only when Jamshed is adopted by TM that he gets a good education and a career. This also highlights the disparity between the rural and urban school systems, and between public and private school systems. In a brief, subtle moment, Mufti also brings up the importance of co-education in society. When Qazi, Sherwani, and some of their friends go to the small private school in the city where Qazi's daughter studies, in order to complain about girls' sports and co-education of girls and boys, the principal of the schools tells them that she herself was educated in a girls-only school and knows the repercussions of such segregated education. She tells them that just as at home, girls and boys are brought up together, and similarly, at school too they should be educated together so that they know how to live in a society comprised of both men and women (episode 4).

At several places in the drama, Mufti highlights the role of a state institution—the police force. The corruption of the institution is reflected in many situations. When Rakhi's father goes to the police station to beg the officer to release his sons for the theft of the donkey, the police officer pays no heed. The police officer only releases his boys after taking a bribe from Somi Khala who happens to visit the police station at the same time when Majeed is there. Some police officers are also accomplices in Baba Ranjha's beggar mafia and in providing him boys that he can use in beggary. Another more disturbing aspect of the institution and the juvenile jail is the sexual abuse that the young boys face at the hands of older boys. The police are proven to be an institution serving the oppressor when a police officer calls Ikram after Sumbal and another girl seek help after escaping the *kothi*. Instead of protecting the girls, the officer makes sure that they are put back where they were trying to escape from. Malik and Qureshi (2020) in their article "A Study of Economic, Cultural, and Political Causes of Police Corruption in Pakistan" claim that "corruption in Pakistan is a politicized, institutionalized, and legitimized phenomenon (p. 2). Among several causes they identify, one is low wages. To fulfill the day-to-day needs of their families, some police officials "engage in corrupt transactions for survival" (p. 7). Another important reason is the influence of political figures. The police officials are "'expected to oblige politicians because the politicians take offence if the police fail to do so.'" The transfer and postings of the police officers are, therefore, a politicized activity" (p. 11). By showing the police's role in perpetuating oppression, Mufti highlights how the state becomes an agent in maintaining hierarchical structures of oppression. Liaisons between the police and the agents of oppressive structures, like Somi Khala, Baba Ranjha and Ikram, show the networks through which oppression and corruption thrive.

Exploitation: Children, Women, Land, Animals

Mufti has shown the exploitation of children, women, land, and animals at the hands of patriarchy. Children are the underclass of society, oppressed more than adults. One example from the drama is that of Rakhi. She is sold in order to save her elder sister's marriage. Naseem Zehra's younger sister also narrowly escapes her bad fate when Sherwani suggests that she should be given to him in marriage after Naseem Zehra disappears. Baba Ranjha exploits children who run away from their families, mostly because of domestic abuse. He uses them for beggary and theft. Police also support Ranjha and return to him the boys who get caught while stealing. In poverty-ridden societies, children are a burden on the meager income of a poor family. Their schooling and food are a burden. A young girl is comparatively a bigger burden than a young boy. Since girls are not expected to earn money, they are perceived as a sheer burden until they get married. Boys on the other hand are expected to earn so they will not be a perpetual burden. Young Jamshed always feels pressured for not being able to earn money. This dynamic unveils the deeper causes of patriarchal oppression. When it comes to economic survival, only those who can contribute economically are instrumentally helpful. Children and girls have no instrumental value unless they earn.

Land grabbing and urbanization of the rural areas is another issue that is highlighted in the drama. When Jimmy takes Sumbal to the village, on the way he tells her that Google doesn't show their village on the map. When they finally reach there, they don't recognize the place as there are no houses that remain from their childhood. Jimmy comments:

آبادی کا سیلاب کھا گیا ہمارے گاؤں کو
Abadi ka selaab kha gy ahamaray gaon ko
The flood of population ate up our village. (Episode 19)

Both of them learn that the lands their houses were built on have been sold and big farmhouses have been constructed on these lands. Not surprisingly, these farmhouses are owned by the same rich people whose money runs the brothels. Sumbal sarcastically comments:

یہ فارم ہاوسز... ہمارا پیچھا نہیں چھوڑتے۔
Ye farmhouses hamara peecha nahin chortay
These farmhouses don't let go of us. (Episode 21)

Jamshed's mother's house was sold by the same boys who had deserted him in the city. A parallel is drawn between the exploitation of the women's bodies and land at the hands of the rich.

Just like the parallel depiction of the treatment of women's bodies and land, Mufti also subtly hints toward the parallels between women and animals. The donkey named Tomato was like a family member who had to be sold for Sadia's marriage. Rakhi was also sold for the same purpose. After growing up, Rakhi tells Sawera:

ٹماٹو بلکل ہمارے گھر کے فرد کی طرح تھا۔ پھر پتہ نہیں کیا ہو گیا گھر والوں کو انہوں نے ٹماٹو کو بیچ دیا۔ اور جب گھر کے افراد بکنا شروع ہو جائیں نا تو سلسلہ رکنا نہیں ہے۔ اور ایک دن میں بک گئی۔

Tomato bilkul hamaray gher kay fard ki tarha tha. Phir ghar walon ko pata nahin kya ho gya, unhon ne Tomato ko beich dia. Aur jub gher kay afracad bikna shuru ho jain na to silsila rukta nahi hai. Aur aik din main bik gai.

Tomato was just like a family member. Then something happened to the family and they sold Tomato. When family members start getting sold, it doesn't stop. Then one day I was sold. (Episode 8).

Tomato was abandoned too when he grew old and useless, just like an old prostitute. Surayya Aunty is murdered when her services are not required anymore. Rakhi one day recognizes Tomato wandering in a graveyard and makes sure that he is taken care of. Tomato is then taken to the animal shelter that Jimmy runs.

Mufti also highlights the issue of rehabilitation of those girls who somehow are able to return to the family after kidnapping or after quitting prostitution to lead a normal life. It is not easy to just go back home and start over. A girl who has been away from home either willingly or after having been kidnapped has hardly any chance of being accepted by the family. She has been tarnished and brings disrespect to the family and the community. There are several references in the drama to the fact that the girls who run away from home or are abducted or trafficked have no home to go back to. In the last episode, when Qazi tells Sherwani that Naseem Zehra is returning back home, Sherwani exclaims:

!ساری رات گھر سے باہر رہنے کے بعد واپس آ رہی ہے

Sari raat gher se bahar rehne kay bad wapus aa rahi hai

She is returning back home after spending a night out! (Episode 24)

This statement clearly indicates that such a girl has no place back in their community and she had better not return at all. There are also some psychological aspects of rehabilitation that are highlighted. Sumbal is shown to be anxious and scared at Jamshed's place after she escapes the *kothi*. Since she was drugged regularly, it is difficult for her to remain calm even after reaching safety. She has trust issue and starts suspecting all including Jimmy and TM. When Naseem Zehra returns home, she is afraid that she will be killed alongside her mother and sisters. After threats of social and economic boycott and ostracization, Qazi is left with one option—to give his younger daughter in marriage to Sherwani. Instead he plans to opt for another extreme choice—burning all the family to death. It is only when Sherwani's true face is revealed to him that he thinks like a father for the first time and lets his daughter pursue her dreams.

Escape Route: Resilience and Partnership against Toxic Masculinity

Mufti has shown several resilient female characters who continue their struggle to break away from the shackles of patriarchy. Through this, Mufti suggests that “patriarchy is not a stable, all powerful system. Countless opportunities for resistance exist” (Becker, 1999, p. 26) Najma, Naseem Zehra, Sumbal, and Sawera continually try to escape and eventually find a way out. Najma—Qazi's wife—and Sawera assume silence just to keep peace at home and avoid conflict. Unlike Naseem Zehra and Sumbal, Najma and Sawera think more rationally and understand the situation deeply. They use their silence as a survival tactic and whenever they find a chance, they help others to escape, not fearing the outcome they would have to face. Both Najma and Sawera are tortured after they help Naseem Zehra and Sumbal escape respectively. Sumbal recalls how her own sister Sadia had become selfish and let Sumbal be married off so

that she could go back to her husband with a motorcycle as dowry. Sumbal, however, is not selfish, and she becomes a shield for another girl named Sadia who doesn't want to go to a client. Sumbal offers herself instead so that young Sadia could be saved at least once. Later, Sadia helps Sumbal escape by offering herself to Ikram to divert his attention. Such examples of sisterhood are plentiful in the drama. Mufti shows instances of women and girls helping and supporting each other as acts of resilience and resistance.

Somi Khala and Auntie Surayya are female characters who are perpetrators of oppression. Such examples bring to light the fact that in a patriarchal society, it is less about male vs. female, and more about masculinity vs. femininity. Both of these women serve patriarchy, Somi Khala by behaving in masculine ways, and Auntie Surayya by having internalized the superiority of masculinity and inferiority of femininity. She considers female bodies to be commodities that men have a right to purchase. Majeed is a male character but the extent to which he is exploited is nothing less than the exploitation that his wife and mother face. Being a member of the low strata of the society, he is feminized and thus excluded from the power of masculinity. Somi Khala's example is also a critique of the "uncritical reversal" (Plumwood, 1993) where women assume power by rejecting femininity. Her demeanor and authoritative style help her enter the "masculine model" but don't serve feminism or women. Mary Becker (1999) in her article "Patriarchy and Inequality: Toward a Substantive Feminism" uses the term "relational feminism" to explain the problem that masculinity causes and its solution:

This approach [relational feminism] offers benefits to all members of society, not just women. Human beings, whether men, women, or children, do not flourish when hyper-masculinity is glorified and traditionally feminine qualities (such as care, caretaking, and valuing relationships) are denigrated. Nor do human beings flourish when all males are pressured to adopt hypermasculine attributes and repress feminine ones, and all females are pressured to adopt traditionally feminine attributes and repress masculine ones. Relational feminism has the potential to improve life for many people, not just women. (p. 22)

Through examples like these, Mufti problematizes masculinity and exposes how toxic that masculinity can be for the entire community.

Mufti does not portray Jimmy as a savior. Rather, Jimmy, TM, and Zulfi turn out to be those men who believe that a healthy society needs men and women as partners in the prosperity and well-being of the entire community. Different characters at different times are shown to help and uplift each other. As the title states, Mufti is not hopeless about anything. She believes that we must progress one step at a time, and the society is not very far from reformation. She shows culprits being punished and also shows people like Qazi being transformed. At the end, although Sumbal and Jamshed are shown walking hand in hand, they are not shown getting married. It is more important to show that marriage is not the solution for girls' problems. Naseem Zehra becomes a cricketer, and Sumbal and Sawera start working in the shelter home. They don't need husbands to lead a normal, happy life. They can find meaning in life without a man. This hopeful note at the end of the drama serial shows the solution to many problems that were shown in the drama. As already mentioned, patriarchy is the root cause of all the forms of oppression shown in the drama. Once, it is realized that there is nothing superior in being a male, and conversely, there is nothing inferior in being a female, most of the problems of the society will be solved.

Hope: Conclusion

Through characters like Jimmy, TM, Zulfi, and later Qazi also, Mufti helps the audience understand that patriarchy does not mean men in general. She raises awareness that patriarchy is a system, and helps audiences think about these questions raised by Allan Johnson (2005):

Do we have anything to do with shaping it, and if so, how? How do we participate in patriarchy, and how does that link us to the consequences? How is what we think of as normal life related to male privilege, women's oppression, and the hierarchical, control-obsessed world in which everyone's lives are embedded? (p. 27)

It is in realization of all these aspects that Mufti sees hope. She shows that oppression does not merely stem from an individual's actions but from a system that needs to be challenged and changed. Johnson (2005), in the section titled "Stubborn Ounces: What Can We Do" of his book *The Gender Knot*, suggests:

All forms of oppression draw support from common roots, and whatever we do that draws attention to those roots undermines all forms of oppression.... [I]f we identify the core problem as any society organized around principles of control and domination, then changing that requires us to pay attention to all of the forms of oppression those principles promote. Whether we begin with race or gender or ethnicity or class, if we name the problem correctly, we'll wind up going in the same general direction. (p. 244)

Mufti has brilliantly questioned and challenged several forms of oppression—child marriage, child abuse, domestic violence, sex-trafficking, institutionalized prostitution, institutionalized beggary, land grabbing—all stemming from one cause: patriarchy. Through her drama, she shows how to question and challenge all these forms since they are connected.

Mufti has strategically avoided showing anything that is too obviously associated with feminism in Pakistan which could flare anti-feminists to outrightly reject her project by labeling her as "liberal" or "*mombatti* mafia." On the contrary, she has directed attention to the causes and outcomes of oppression instead of presenting it as a feminist agenda. By showing the parallelism in all forms of oppression, and showing the connections between them, Mufti leaves no room for the orthodox to reject her project as an agenda of the West. By exposing oppressive patriarchal structures and their networks, Mufti educates her audience through examples that are found every day in the society. Where overt forms of activism such as seminars, walks, protests, and marches may fail in a repressive society, television drama has the potential to disseminate subtly feminist ideas to members of a patriarchal society that would resist overt feminism. This drama also serves as an example for all human societies who face similar issues by showing ways of creating awareness about the causes, outcomes, and escape routes from all forms of oppression.

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