The Nation and Its Burka Avenger, the ‘Other’ and its Malala Yusafzai: The Creation of a Female Muslim Archetype as the Site for Pakistani Nationalism

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The Nation and Its Burka Avenger, the ‘Other’ and its Malala Yusafzai: The Creation of a Female Muslim Archetype as the Site for Pakistani Nationalism

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Over the last decade, the global community has seen the emergence of a new faceless and desexualized Muslim female archetype. In world media, she often serves to embody a site for the contest of divergent politics of Islam and is represented differently depending on how and by whom the archetype is appropriated. In Pakistan, state-sponsored nationalist narratives in the 21st Century are pointedly opposed to US-hegemony in the region, while also opposing religious extremism. As Pakistan appropriates this archetype to form a unique conception of its identity, as expressed through domestic media, religious nationalism and gender are blurred into the same fixed category. In order to assess the impact of this Muslim female archetype in Pakistan’s current struggle for identity, it is first important to evaluate westernist discourse characterizing Muslim women in a particular way. Pakistani appropriation of the archetype is in response to a particular characterization of Muslim Pakistani women by the West, best exemplified by the romanticization of the Malala Yusafzai’s affliction in western media. Just as Mother India became a symbolic site for state-sponsored Indian nationalism in response to western criticism, Pakistan’s nationalism is centred on a desexualized female form symbolizing religious tradition and thus affording legitimacy to Pakistan in the historical context of US domination and western-hegemony. Particularly since September 11, 2001, this archetype has been used by western media to justify particular assumptions and generalizations about the status and plight of Muslim women the world over. This paper explores the problem of how Pakistani nationalist narratives appropriate and redefine the symbolic meaning of the Muslim female archetype, reimagined for the nation.

Historically, Pakistan has suffered the failure of various attempts at state-sponsored nationalism, the results of which have been continuing sectarian violence as well as turbulent waves of resurgent religious extremist and regional/ethnic nationalist movements that threaten state sovereignty.2 It has been argued that Islam, as the sole source of legitimacy for the Pakistani state, has shaped an

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“insufficiently imagined” nation. However, this understanding is complicated by the context of modern geopolitical Islam, wherein Pakistan has been forced to clearly define the boundaries of the nation as it is torn between traditionalist Islam and western modernity. In male-dominated and Punjab-centric Pakistani politics, the need for unifying an ethnically and ideologically divided state comes as a response to US hegemony that, which is most clearly demonstrated through western representations of Muslim women in Pakistan.

In Pakistani political culture, because gender and religion have been merged into a single archetype, Muslim women become the sites of nationalist discourse. While held up by western media as evidence of the need for liberating the oppressed third world Muslim woman, Pakistani women are also symbolically appropriated by the nation as a means of demonstrating its ability to protect its honour. As described by Miriam Cooke, the “Muslimwoman” is a faceless figure, simultaneously desexualized, dehumanized and glorified in the role of representing her community. Whether veiled or unveiled, she is defined by her transmission of either the patriarchy of western modernity or that of traditionalist Islam, becoming a damsel in distress who needs rescuing and protection.

In this polarized struggle, between traditionally ascribed gender roles in South Asian society and western modernity which celebrates women’s sexual and social emancipation, a body of knowledge has been constructed on Muslim women across the globe that has manifested itself in the almost reflexive link between Islam and women’s subjugation. As asserted by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her fundamental 1984 work, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” ethnocentric western feminist writings “discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular ‘Third World Woman’... [which] carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse.” In the case of Pakistan, because there exists a world economy and political order that is dominated by a new form of western dominance through US hegemony, the effect of such a discourse is necessarily central to the nationalist question as it has played out within the existing framework of international power politics. The conjoined depiction of Muslim as ‘Other’ and Pakistan as part of the ‘Third World,’ results in the formation of a Third World Muslimwoman who carries this dual categorization and historical formation of imperial knowledge as a burden hindering the deconstruction of homogeneous narratives.

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9 Ibid.
Representing the face of western discourse on Muslim women is the glorified figure of Malala Yusafzai, “the girl who stood up for education and was shot by the Taliban” in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The remarkably unilinear characterization and iconic status awarded to Malala by the west culminates an ideology that originates in patterns developed in Pakistan’s colonial past. She has all but been declared a saint by every major newspaper and magazine in the western world, and by glorifying her, these media representations also typify a dehumanized and one-sided archetypal form of Muslimwoman that vindicates a particular western-sponsored narrative for this strategically located political region. Further to the point, Malala’s image reinforces US hegemonic status and the need for western-led ‘emancipation’ of the Muslim world from within.

Similarly, she epitomizes both the underlying assumption of the primacy of western modernity and the extremely politicized depiction of Muslim women as oppressed by patriarchal Islam. As she says in her book, I Am Malala, “any of the girls in my class could have achieved what I have achieved if they had their parents’ support.” Although this is by no means an attempt to devalue her accomplishment of raising global awareness for the very real problem of women’s education in Pakistan, which is extremely admirable; it is of critical significance that the way in which Malala is portrayed by media be scrutinized. For example, Marvel Comics has recently embodied the western conception of a modern Muslim feminist, in an all-too-similar female superhero, “Kamala,” the 16-year-old American-Pakistani immigrant trying to forge her identity in a secular society as a student and a teenager. Thus, Malala has been caricatured as the conflated image of Mariam Cooke’s ‘Muslimwoman,’ derived from westernist conceptions of the ‘Third World Woman.’ As implied above, Malala may as well remain anonymous when interacting with these two monolithic categories of rationalizing assumptions that support the ideology of ‘freeing’ the third world while also illuminating the larger historical trend of western dominance.

Consequently, Malala is not a Pakistani hero but a western one who reinforces a certain narrative justification of US hegemony from within the Islamic world. For this reason she cannot be written into Pakistan’s anti-US/pro-Islamist political culture and nationalism, despite claims that she “belongs to Pakistan.” While Glamour magazine heralds Malala as a “Glamour Woman of the Year” alongside characters like Lady Gaga and Barbara Streisand, the Washington Post describes Malala as one of Nelson Mandela’s “heirs” because she is a “symbol of freedom.” Conversely, Pakistan labeled Malala

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11 Ibid., 217.
“a tool of the West.” In fact, Malala’s book was banned in Pakistani private schools shortly after being released, clearly demonstrating how Malala has become the face of a western version of this Muslimwoman archetype.

The trend of anti-US sentiment in Pakistan began to bubble to the surface at the outset of the American War on Terror, which many Pakistanis were against. It gained momentum recently, after the unilateral decision by the US to murder Osama Bin Laden on Pakistani soil. In fact, Robert Hathaway has observed that despite political linkages developed between Washington and Islamabad after 9/11, “Pakistan today is a scary place for Americans [as] polls suggest that it is one of the most anti-American countries in the world.” The Pakistani state faces the dual problem of maintaining friendly relations with this extremely powerful hegemon and mollifying public sentiment in the Muslim population of Pakistan who are generally opposed to the perceived villainization of Islam.

Accordingly, when confronted with western modernity and American anti-extremist (which sometimes extends to anti-Islamist) imperatives, the Pakistani state has needed to defend and define its legitimacy in terms of Islamic nationalism as it has done historically. And yet as Farzana Shaikh argues, the central problem “at the heart of Pakistani nationalism [has been] the relationship between ‘being Muslim’ and ‘being Pakistani’ [which] was never completely overshadowed.” In order to reconcile this conundrum, the Pakistani state is forced to simultaneously assert its sovereignty over a distinct territory and facilitate the centrality of Islam in the political sphere and daily lives of Pakistani citizens.

With reference to this, the religious nationalism that underpins the formation of the Pakistani State tended to focus on the absolute necessity of conjoining religious and political life even before Independence in 1947. As Amina Jamal observes in her 2009 article, “Gendered Islam and Modernity in the Nation-Space: Women's Modernism in the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan,” the women belonging to this political party “consider the cultivation of personal and public morality as the answer to Western imperialism and Western encroachments in local/national space ... [similar to other] Islamist movements which have linked internal reform with opposition to Western imperialism since the nineteenth century.” In Pakistan, the Muslimwoman has been appropriated by women and men to be used for legitimating and focusing attention on a counter-hegemonic nationalism that has been ongoing in the broader historical context of western dominance.

20 Shaikh, 594.
Undeniably, the most conspicuous evidence of this trend is seen in the increasing number of young women who are choosing to wear the hijab, defiantly appropriating this symbol of oppression (as seen from ‘western’ eyes) as the platform for exercising agency.\textsuperscript{22} For instance, Nilufer Gole notes:

> Veiling is a religious symbol inscribed on the body; it is carried personally but also conveys social information to others ... In wearing the veil (and, for men, growing a beard), individuals become overtly identifiable as Muslims and publicly assertive ... The Islamic headscarf is often treated as derivative of a layer of political fundamentalist movement in which women are supposed to be secondary, passive, and manipulated agents ... [but] the participation of women in contemporary Islamism is one of the most distinctive features of the movement, and veiling the most visible symbol of its public irruption... [so that] scholars are left with the puzzling issue of its voluntary adoption.\textsuperscript{23}

For Pakistani women, women who have become a part of the broader geopolitical and social movement of Islam, wearing the hijab offers a platform for legitimate agency within a community dominated by patriarchal values. In other words, appropriating the symbolic Muslimwoman for the nation’s women, it is possible to negotiate with patriarchy and achieve greater feminist agency.

Representing the conjunction of religion, gender and political-national commentary, musician-producer Haroon Rashid’s new Pakistani \textit{GEO Television} cartoon series features the \textit{Burka Avenger}. The \textit{Burka Avenger}, or Miss Jiya the schoolteacher, is a quirky burka-clad superhero who fights for the education of young girls using books and pens for weapons.\textsuperscript{24} She has sparked controversy in the global media primarily because of her clothing choice, but she represents the desired balance of Islamic tradition and the self-conscious need to modernize the nation. As she fights with corrupt and ignorant men, she maintains a safe physical distance from these “bad guys,” whom she never physically strikes or touches.\textsuperscript{25} Though actively combatting men in public, the maintenance of physical distance between the \textit{Burka Avenger} and the “bad guys” is a distinctive feature of the cultural context of her naissance. The use of the burka renders Rashid’s protagonist anonymous, literally covering her identity. Her physical/spatial distance from her opponents also serve to demonstrate her symbolic value, indicating that women’s participation in the nationalist movement is permissible and recognized only from within the cultural religious fabric of the Muslim nation.

Admittedly, the \textit{Burka Avenger} represents an important step on the path to achieving gender equality in Pakistan, but there is something fundamentally lacking in her faceless, two-dimensional characterization. In responding to such criticism of his female superhero’s burka-enshrouded identity, the show’s creator Haroon Rashid has argued that the burka as a disguise was not intended to be a religious symbol, but merely a costume, appropriated to hide her identity, and to give the show a “local

\textsuperscript{22} Afzal-Khan, 20.
\textsuperscript{23} Nilufer Gole, "The Voluntary Adoption of Islamic Stigma Symbols," \textit{Social Research} 70, no. 3 (2003): 816-817.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid}.
flavour.”

Going on to argue that Pakistanis would be more willing and able to relate to the Burka Avenger because of her conservative dress, Rashid compares her to what he calls the "objectified" and "degraded" female superheroes of the West. He affirms that his Burka Avenger is “not all about her sexuality” but “about her deeds.” The message is clear: a Pakistani Muslim woman has an important contribution to make to society, but she must honour religion and tradition to be able to act publicly and be taken seriously.

Interestingly, the Burka Avenger represents a double distinction, identifying what is Pakistani as both non-western and non-extremist/Afghani (the two are virtually the same in Rashid’s view). In the same interview, Rashid argues that hers is "not the [Afghani] burka that people associate with oppression," because it is highly stylized. Rashid also states as a matter of fact that in Pakistan, women wear the hijab and the burka by "choice."

Clearly, this interview demonstrates the creator’s own reasons for launching a female superhero who represents both social critique and the need for tradition simultaneously. While the success of the show demonstrates how many others share his particular view, and are calling out for change while also defending an Islamic identity, which has become central to the nationalist question in Pakistan.

This symbolic Muslim heroine has become the site for reclaiming Pakistani identity in the advent of Taliban insurgency and US military intervention. Directed as a challenge to the Pakistani state, this children’s TV show is part of a cultural movement in Pakistan that is urging the state to redefine itself as different from ‘back-ward and extremist’ Afghanistan, but also to reconcile western modernity with Muslim tradition from its subordinate position to US hegemony.

The need for this de-sexualized Muslim heroine, who is ultimately faceless, comes out of a historical context where a lack of coherent national identity in Pakistan is demonstrative of the ultimate failure of state-sponsored nationalism.

Likewise, the Burka Brigade in Lahore exemplifies another way in which the anonymous Muslim Heroine can simultaneously represent her religious tradition and a social wake-up call for the nation. As Fauzia Afzal Khan writes, the Burka Brigade operates as a kind of “moral police”, extolling a fundamentalist Islamic message for the reformation of Pakistani society, whose moral decay is seen as a consequence of “the Pakistani government [which] serves the interests only of an elite class [from whom] the ordinary citizens are getting no benefit –the necessities of life, justice, education –all these are denied to them ... [Therefore, their] only demand is that such a corrupt system be abolished.”

Though the women in this organization appear at the surface level to be controlled and dominated by men, as the “moral militants of the Lal Masjid clerics,” they are quite opposite to the stock image of a

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27 Ibid.


docile burka-wearing, brow-beaten housewife often conjured up by the stereotype. These women have an active role in ‘reforming’ society from within their religious identity. By way of example, Afzal-Khan describes how the Burka Brigade pulled off “a middle-of-the-night raid on a brothel... and abducted the operators along with two Pakistani male customers ... as a warning to curb further ‘sexual depravity’ in Pakistan society.” These women are another example of the Muslim female archetype, the Muslimwoman of Pakistani nationalism.

Ultimately, this ascribed role serves to protect women’s position within the family, and therefore family honour and the honour of the nation, while also providing a platform for political participation. Since the 19th century, the typical trend for women in the Muslim world has meant that greater social or political participation has destabilized the status of women in the household, and for that reason resulted in the exclusionary patriarchal practices associated with the Muslim world. By adopting the symbolic representation of the Pakistani Muslimwoman, whether as militants superheroes or as mothers, anonymity does afford greater agency for public action in the appropriation of this archetype and for enhancing women’s agency perhaps more generally.

Protecting the role of ‘mother’ is paramount in Pakistani society, and this role is the cardinal line limiting women’s agency in the nation space. Notably, one study investigating men’s views on intimate partner violence in Pakistan found that the majority of men emphasized the absolute importance of women’s role in the household and could not justify the idea that anything she does outside of the home stand in the way of this ‘natural order’ of things. In the words of, a real estate broker who aptly described the patriarchal perspective of women’s participation in Pakistani nationalism:

Woman’s main job is her role as a mother in the family. Mother is the nation-builder. It is her responsibility to educate and train the coming generation. Whatever professional achievements or career accomplishments she has, if she fails in performing her motherly responsibilities, she is a loser. It is not the failure of that particular woman; rather, it is the failure of society and the failure of the country. We should learn the lesson from the West, where mother has shunned her motherly role. These societies are dying. There is moral decay and demographic disaster.

If this were accepted as the limitation of a Pakistani woman’s agency, an ethnocentric western perspective would suggest that she is the subject of patriarchal oppression confined to her children and her home. However, viewed in light of the Burka Avenger and the Burka Brigade, women’s agency is understood in a different way. In order to protect her nation and its religious identity, a Pakistani woman is able to enter the political realm under the symbolic guise of the Muslimwoman archetype, and she is thus able to participate.

30 Ibid., 3.
31 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 255.
In the same way that Katherine Mayo’s criticism of Indian women’s living conditions resulted in the inversion of “Mother India” as “Bharat Mata,” who became the physical space for Indian nationalism, the Muslimwoman archetype represents the site of Pakistani nationalism. However, she is more than a mere passive object of discord, because she is claimed by real and fictional Muslim women alike, who capitalize on her monolithic status in order to fight western hegemony in Pakistani politics, as well as the perceived consequences of western modernity that divides the nation. Thus, the Burka Avenger, the Muslimwoman, and the Burka Brigade share in common the assumed identity of this homogenous caricature, through which real heterogeneous Muslim women are afforded some agency in the nationalist struggle for identity in Pakistan. In unifying the nation and in affording women greater legitimacy as political actors, perhaps this archetype will lead to the greater social emancipation of Pakistani women on their own terms rather than western-sponsored ones. Indeed, as part of anti-US hegemonic dominance, this trend as observed in Pakistan may impact the attitudes of other Muslim nations and diasporic communities in the west to afford Muslim women more political and social autonomy in many different societies.