

**Urban Women Rebels:
Voices of Dissent in Urdu Popular Fiction**

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Working Paper Series # 92
2004

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A publication of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI).

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Urban Women Rebels: Voices of Dissent in Urdu Popular Fiction

Kiran Nazir Ahmed

Man is said to have language by nature. It is held that man, in distinction from plants and animals, is the living being capable of speech. This statement does not mean only that, along with other faculties, man also possesses the faculty of speech. It means to say that *only speech enables man (human) to be the living being he is as man (human)* (my own italics)¹

Abstract

The purpose of my paper is to bring forth and highlight, 'alternative' stories, written predominantly by and for women, that are published in Urdu popular digests. This is a particular narrative of dissent which questions socially constituted ideals for women, deals with 'serious' issues such as the value of women's economic empowerment, preference for sons over daughters and child sexual abuse.

I do not make the claim that (a) popular digests for women have become progressive and there is a 'revolution' of sorts taking place in them. Instead, I assert that (b) all the stories printed in these digests do not propagate socially constituted ideals, 'voices of dissent' are also present. Therefore the conception of women's popular digests in Urdu, as only catering to a demand for easy reading and reinforcing the gender status quo is not true.

I have divided this paper into six sections. The first section puts the paper in context by portraying the significance of this topic. The second section illustrates the hierarchical distinction between literature and popular literature. The third section examines the two studies that have been conducted on Urdu popular fiction for women. It concludes that they only portray the majority viewpoints, minority viewpoints are ignored. The fourth section presents a brief historical background of women's digests. The fifth section discusses the viewpoints of the editors of the two publications selected for this paper. The last section presents extracts from stories, which depict women's recognition of injustice and a questioning of socially constituted ideals.

Significance

I find these 'voices of dissent' to be significant and worthy of analysis. This is so because:

- First, popular digests are commercial ventures, so their printability depends on how well they will sell. The fact that stories that present an alternative view are printed demonstrates that there is a demand for them, which in turn implies that the acceptability of alternative views is increasing. The market for digests written predominantly by and for women, in Urdu, is huge. There are over a dozen monthly publications for women today: *Hoor, Kiran, Anchal, Khawateen Digest, Pakeeza* being some of the major ones. Circulation figures vary from 7,000 to as high as 130,000. Publication of stories with alternative views in digests which are mainstream and not specifically geared toward reform

1 Heidegger, Martin. "Language " Poetry Language Thought. P.189

shows that narratives of dissent are being heard. In fact the increase in the proportion of such stories indicates that the demand for such stories is not only present but increasing.

- Second, fiction lets one redefine boundaries and portray socially unacceptable views of reality. It is a means of expression, which is relatively unfettered from socially constituted ideals. Ours is a conformist society, and fiction enables women to present views that are socially unacceptable.
- The third and perhaps most important reason is that the voices of Pakistan's urban middle class rebels need to be privileged and magnified. As I will later show, the methods of analysis used by studies conducted on Urdu popular fiction are such that only the majority points of view are privileged. The voice of minority which rebels against socially constituted ideals is neither registered nor analyzed. The importance of registering alternate views stems from the fact that:
 - a) English has become, more or less, a global language. Urdu is not widely spoken or understood. The access, 'gateway' that the rest of the world will therefore have to stories written by Pakistan's urban women will most probably be the secondary research on them in English, or their translations in English. This leads to an added responsibility in terms of bringing forth all the voices.
 - b) These stories go beyond socially constituted ideals and in bringing forth imagined or lived experiences of domestic violence, economic empowerment and other such issues, present a more 'real' grasp of the life of a Pakistani urban middle class woman.
- Fourth, language serves the dual function of 'tool for expression' as well as shaper/grid, through which we view reality. Its role as an expression of our thoughts and feelings is obvious enough. Its role as the grid or shaper of reality is much more complex. While it would not be possible to do justice to this notion in one or two lines, the idea does need to be presented here. Basically, words shape our reality, for instance words like wise or fool, divide reality into a binary concept when it is much more complex than this. A wise man can be unwise and a fool can be wise. Instances of manipulation of the power of words by the State are common enough. The War of 1857 is a "mutiny" in British text books and a "war of independence" in Pakistan's textbooks. In women's popular fiction too, there are certain subtle manipulations that can be gauged. One example is that of the word "*majazee khuda*" (second to God). This term has been used in a popular *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet, these are not always authentic). It states that God revealed to Mohammad (PBUH) that if He were to allow a human being to prostrate before anyone aside from Allah, it would be for wives to prostrate before their husbands, hence husbands should be second to God for wives. In the August 1978 issue of *Pakeeza*, this was the title given for writing short stories on. All the three selected stories propagated this notion. The point here is that words shape our perception and the way we deal with reality. Language is important, and fiction, since it is an expression that entails use of language, is a powerful medium. It not only expresses the writer's imagination but also shapes the reader's perception of reality.

Literature Popular Literature

The power of literature/fiction is more or less accepted. However, there seems to be a hierarchy of sorts in this. Literature is, for the most part taken seriously, while popular literature is seen as being 'light' and frivolous.

For instance Anwer Sajjad, a prominent Pakistani writer, sees the introduction of popular digests as a 'plug' for the vacuum created because of increasing greed for material wealth. He argues that after the

1958 Martial Law of Ayub Khan, subtle changes took place in our society. Through the introduction of the bonus voucher scheme, allotments, and prize bonds, people were directed toward material gains.

When people had a connection with literature they had a connection with their minds and spirits. In this vacuum where the relationship with the spiritual values of life was coming to an end, and a relationship with only a single value of earning wealth was being nurtured, it occurred to some shrewd individual that this emptiness could be filled in by stories which led the reader into the world of fantasies...The digests wiped out the important political and social issues and a wave of popularity spread itself from one end to the other. And according to Marx, this is supposed to be among the biggest of conspiracies, when the public is transformed into a passive consumer public, so that they should become incapable of thinking or taking any action².

While I do not agree with his analysis, it at least carries some explanation for the perception of popular fiction as pandering to our desire for escapism.

Robert Briggs's work seems particularly relevant in understanding this hierarchical distinction between popular literature and literature. He draws on Lumby's analysis. Lumby argues that the distinction between Literature, with its concern with worldly matters, and popular culture as the satisfaction of a frivolous desire for mindless entertainment, is based on an older distinction between the public and the private spheres.

<u>Public</u>	<u>Private</u>
High culture	Popular Culture
Reason/Law	Desire
Politics	Morality
Work	Leisure
Seriousness	Frivolity

According to Lumby, this distinction is based on 'exclusivity', as in the Greek 'agora' or the Roman 'forum', where adult males could meet and discuss Politics and Philosophy. Women were excluded from such gatherings. The parallel institution we have in the East would again be the market place, where women go only if necessary, loitering is not looked upon with favor, while men have no such social pressure.

These distinctions present a gender hierarchy:

<u>Public</u>	<u>Private</u>
High culture	Popular Culture
Reason/Law	Desire
Politics	Morality
Work	Leisure
Seriousness	Frivolity
Men	Women

Lumby goes on to argue that the reading of popular literature in its contribution to debate on contemporary social situation can actually be seen as a feminist challenge to the public private distinction³.

2 Salim, Ahmad. *Culture and Commitment*. P.18

3 Briggs, Robert "Reading Desires" www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/online/arts/h290/docs/desires.com

Studies on Popular Digests for Women

In Pakistan, in recent years, there have only been two studies on popular fiction for women. One was led by Seema Pervez at the National Institute of Psychology (hereafter referred to as NIP), and the other by Tasneem Ahmar of Aks: a research, resource and publication center on women and media⁴.

The study carried out by NIP covered the period from 1975-1978 and was published in 1984. They selected five magazines for analysis: *Pakeeza Digest*, *Khawateen Digest*, *Akhbar e Jahan*, *Akhbar e Khawateen* and *Hoor*. Five issues were randomly chosen from each monthly and 10 issues were selected from each weekly. Thus a sample of 15 monthlies and 20 weeklies was taken from the issues of the five magazines selected⁵. A random sample of 80 stories was then selected and analyzed.

This study concluded that the image of the women characters was more or less the same in all the digests. The general image was of a girl who wants to be near to her significant others. She wants to be friendly and loyal, but has a strong feeling of inferiority. She accepts her weakness and other's criticism. She is resigned to her fate and in spite of the strong desire to affiliate with people she is hesitant in establishing relationships. She calls for help and wants to be protected and loved. The attitude of the 'press' towards her is merciful, protective and generous.

The analysis showed that the most popular central idea was that marriage or romance is the most important aspect of a woman's life. Fifty-one out of the 80 stories revolved around this basic idea. In a majority of stories the woman was portrayed as passive and fatalistic. Other people take decisions for her, if she ever does her decisions are in accord with social expectations. The female protagonist behaves in an emotional way, and failure in love destroys her whole life. At times she is forcefully deprived of her rights and sometimes she herself surrenders in the face of social injustice. She is the one who sacrifices when demanded by society and occasionally feels disgusted at her decision. She takes some steps to satisfy her ego, but most of the time they are based on irrational decisions⁶. This study does point out that there are stories that illustrate that reality is different from fantasy, and it is difficult for men to accept their wife's superiority. However this is not elaborated upon.

Tasneem Ahmar (1997) also presents the same findings. Although she too points out that 'serious issues' are also sometimes discussed, but this point is not elaborated upon.

Much of the material in these magazines is written in an intensely emotional idiom. The style may well appeal to readers thirsty for pulp entertainment but it also drives home a quintessentially conservative message. Whether deliberately or unintentionally, this literature strips women of their individual identity. They are shown to exist solely through their relationship with men, whether as wife, daughter, cook or mother...*although writers do occasionally discuss topics such as domestic violence and sexual harassment, most paint pretty pictures of female fantasy.* (My own italics)⁷

The methodology employed by the two analyses discusses only the majority view points. One digest has on average 10-13 short stories; the 10 stories that are frivolous get analyzed, while the three stories, that present an alternative view are sidelined in the conclusion of such studies. The 'voice of dissent' with its

4 For coverage of news relating to women see Aks' publication, Changing images.

5 See appendix 2 for a table on themes of the contents of short stories researched by NIP

6 Pervez, Seema. NIP Monograph #8, p.50-51

7 Ahmar, Tasneem. "Pulp Fiction". The Herald, Dec 1997. p.112-113

discussion of serious issues is drowned in the ‘voice of majority’. The ‘positive’ stories are noticed but are not given any importance. These studies look *only* at what the ‘majority’ is saying. This amounts to reductionism and labeling. The message that comes across is that the portrayal of women in these digests is conservative and since these digests print what readers want to read, therefore urban middle class women want to see themselves in this manner.

The identification, recognition and resistance to injustice that comes across in the ‘stories of dissent’ are not brought forth. As a result, the idea of the urban middle class woman as being complacent with her role in life is reinforced.

Like many other travelers he (Kinglake) is more interested in remaking himself and the Orient, dead and dry – a mental mummy, *than he is in seeing what there is to be seen*⁸. (My own Italics)

Historical Background

Specialized periodicals for women came on the scene after the war of 1857 as a result of Sir Syed’s reformist movement. Sir Syed published a journal, *Tehzeib-ul-akhlaque*, aimed at improving the morale of Muslims. Its column writers stressed the need for educating women. In 1898 a weekly geared exclusively for women, called “*Akhbar-e-tehzeeb-e-niswan*” began to be published. Maulvi Mohammad Mumtaz was its founder and his wife, Mohammadi Begum, was its chief editor⁹. In 1908 Maulana Rashid ul Khairi brought out the first issue of *Ismat*. Another journal for women *Sher-e-madar* was published by Syed Mumtaz Ali.¹⁰ These digests catered to a very small section of the total population. In 1924 merely 137800, four out of thousand, women were literate. Till the 1960s there was little change. Aside from the older more established ones, most digests remained gender neutral, and would only have a small column or a section geared toward women readers.

With the passage of time the number of literate women increased and economic pressures led to an expansion in the number of working women. As a result, in the 1960s and the 1970s new digests began to be published. According to advertising expenditure data, the number of magazines published in Pakistan, increased from 214 in 1993 to 406 in 2000. The majority of these were in Urdu and were women’s magazines¹¹.

The two digests selected for this paper began to be published about 30 years ago. The first issue of *Khawateen Digest* was published in April 1973, and the first issue of *Pakeeza* came out in April 1974. The format of both digests is more or less the same. There are 10-13 short stories, one or two episodinal novels, a section on beauty tips, one section titled ‘diary’ in which readers send verses from poems, or extracts from books; one section on psychological advice, one section on health advice, and one on show business news. *Pakeeza* also has a section on religious advice. In the 40 digests selected for this paper, I could not find a single short story or episodinal novel written by a man, all of them were by women. However, the possibility of men writing under pseudonyms cannot be ruled out. The writers write as a hobby, and are quite ‘in touch’ with the readers, who send questions about the writer’s own life. In fact there seems to be a kind of intimacy, readers send in news about their family life, a brother’s marriage, a

8 Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. p.193

9 Ahmar, Tasneem. *The Herald*. Dec1997,p.113

10 Ibid. p.113

11 Asdar, Kamran Ali “Digest Culture: Reading Pakistani Domesticity” (p 77-88) *Pakistan Perspectives* July-Dec 2002

niece's illness, and writers are willing to respond to questions about what they were given for *moonh dikhai* (gift given at marriage by the husband). Perhaps, the most astonishing aspect of these digests is the number of readers they have. *Pakeeza* has a readership of 70,000 and *Khawateen Digest* has a readership of 130,000.

Views of Editors

Pakeeza's editor, Anjum Ansar, has been working in this position for 16 years. She asserted that over the past five or six years the stories that are being submitted revolve around the problems one has to encounter after marriage. Previously most of the stories were romantic and ended in marriage. Readers too seem to be appreciating these stories more, and seem to want more 'real life'. In response to a question on economic empowerment she had an interesting observation that six or seven years ago, mothers of prospective grooms would, in their letters, ask her to find them girls who are pretty and well versed in housework. The demand would be for a '*gharailoo*' (homely) girl, now however they ask for a working woman who would be able to contribute to the household expenses. With regard to media policy, she said that nothing had been given to them in print, and the changing regimes had little effect on their digest since they try to steer away from political matters. She added that the editors exercised censorship by removing lines they found obscene. Censorship also extends to stories or paragraphs that go against basic human rights such as rights of minorities. In this context, she also mentioned that she had readership amongst religious minorities in Pakistan, especially among the Hindus in interior Sindh. This is a credible claim since letters written by girls with Hindu sounding names get published. She also noted that over the years there has been an increasing interest in religion and spirituality. In response to which a regular advice column called "*roohani mushwaray*" (spiritual advice) has been introduced, to give advice to women to help them with their problems. This section is specifically for Muslims, minorities are excluded.

Amtul Saboor has been working as the editor of *Khawateen Digest* for the past 25 years. She shared Anjum Ansar's view that changing political regimes had little formal impact since political issues were not covered. She emphasized that readers have a certain trust in these publications, so even advertisements have to be handled responsibly. She gave the example of an advertisement agency, which wanted them to print the ad of a certain facial cream. They were paying a hefty amount, but since the cream was relatively expensive, the staff took a stand and decided to withhold the ad till they had tried the cream themselves. The product did not live up to its promise and the ad was not printed.

Something that came across in conversations with both the editors, was a defensive tone. Both stated that their task was to 'educate' young girls and they did whatever was in the girl's or women's best interest. One factor behind this could be the initial abuse and suspicion they had to face in their early days.¹² Another could be that they need to differentiate their publications from the other monthlies that have soft porn and violence, hence the insistence at decency. Yet another reason could be the 'Urdu medium-English medium' class divide we have in Pakistan. An 'English medium' asking questions about an Urdu publication usually raises suspicions of the publication being debunked.

Another interesting aspect was the 'flavour' each editor lent to her digest. As stated earlier Anjum Ansar has started a column on spiritual advice. Though it does not list her name up front, she disclosed that she was the key person behind running it, and got this information from books published on "*Ahadith*".

12 Ahmar, Tasneem "Pulp Fiction" Herald, p.114

Anjum Ansar considers religious knowledge to be important, and she tries to put in lessons wherever she can. She cited the example of a story, in which a mother is seeing off her two daughters who are using public transportation alone for the first time. Anjum Ansar added a line about the mother reciting “*ya hafeezo*¹³”, since this particular name of Allah is believed to protect one against accidents. Amtul Sabur, on the other hand, considers spiritual advice columns as a commercialization of religion, and strongly asserted that her publication did not have one. In terms of editorial changes she gave the example of a story in which the writer had shown the lead protagonist running into a *faqeer* (beggar/spiritual wise man) who gives her advice. She removed this section, since it could have reinforced the idea of going to *faqeers* for spiritual advice, who more often than not, charge a fee for their services.

Perhaps, the very fact that voices of dissent still manage to ‘get heard’ despite editorial wariness at being termed anti status quo and the overall low key tilt of these digests, speaks volumes for the resilience and sheer relentlessness of our urban rebels.

Voices of Dissent

I now present extracts from stories, which reflect a questioning of existing social norms. The extracts are relatively long. The aim is to present some sense of the ‘tone’ these stories have as well as to provide ‘evidence’ in support of my claim that there is an alternative ‘world view’ present in popular literature for women. The methodology for selection was fairly simple. I selected 40 digests from two publications, *Khawateen Digest* and *Pakeeza*, and went through each story. The ones that seemed ‘dissenting’ were then selected and quoted. Instead of what most seemed to say, the dissenting voices were selected and brought forth. These stories reflect a consciousness of injustice and resistance towards it.

*Feminist consciousness is the belief that personal problems result from unfair treatment because of one’s group membership rather than from lack of personal effort or ability*¹⁴

Preferential treatment for sons

Story 1:

Context: Rehmat Ali had internalized the social ‘bias’ of daughters being a burden and sons an asset. He brought up his children working on the assumption that his son would take care of him in old age and daughters would have to be married off and ‘given’ to someone else. His three daughters never received his attention. He was focused on his son, Saad, who was going to a very good school. He never forgot to attend his parent teacher meeting, or check his progress. In case of the daughters however he could not recall which grade each of them was in. When his eldest daughter, Samina stood first in her Matric exam, he was amazed to see her photograph in the newspaper. Her name ‘ Samina Rehmat Ali’ made him realize the honour she had brought to his name. For a second he was ecstatic. However that was only for a second. The thought that even though his daughter was talented, the benefit of this ability would be to some other family not theirs, depressed him.

As years went by, his daughters started a tuition center and not only took care of their own expenses but also contributed to the household. The son on the other hand, was a spoilt brat, and left for Canada after

13 This is one of the 99 names of God, literally The Protector.

14 Ethel Klein, quoted in Klatch, Rebecca “The Formation of Feminist Consciousness Among Left and Right Wing Activists of the 1960s” in *Gender and Society* Vol.15, Dec2001. p.795

taking the family's savings with him. Rehmat Ali had a heart attack, and woke up to find himself in the hospital.

'Saad' even after all that had happened he could only repeat this name.

'Who is Saad?' The doctor asked.

'My brother, he's in Canada, my father misses him very much'. A voice was telling the doctor, he could not tell if it was Samina, Sara or Maria.

'Your son is away, but you should be grateful to your daughters. It's because of your eldest daughter that you're alive today. You had a major heart attack but she managed to get you to the hospital very quickly'.

For the first time in his life, he brought up his trembling hand and stroked his daughter's head. He would have gladly slapped anyone, who claimed that daughters were a burden¹⁵.

Story 2

Context: A woman had two daughters and a son named Nadeem She gave preferential treatment to her son. Her son however ended up neglecting her in old age, while her daughters took care of her. One day her daughter in law accused her of stealing money and Nadeem failed to defend her.

'How could she say that, wasn't Nadeem Bhai there?'

'He was standing there when this happened.'

'What?'

Suddenly Rehma (the younger sister) started crying and told her sister what had happened.

'I had snatched morsels from your mouth, to feed him; this is why I'm being punished. Please forgive me God I'd forgotten that everyone has his or her own place, and rights. Forgive me for not fulfilling your rights'. Amman was mumbling¹⁶.

Story 3

Context: Najma's mother gave preferential treatment to her brother, Akhter. She had to help out in the kitchen while her brother was given time to study.

After a few days both took their exam. Najma stood first in her class, and showed the report card to her father. He was very happy. Her mother was happy too, however she also expressed her wish for her son to have the same kind of marks, since he was a boy and studying was very important for him. '

Najma got married, and had two children of her own, a boy and a girl. She was determined to change the way she was raised and tried her best to provide her daughter with the same opportunities her son had. Her husband passed away and she moved in with her parents. However she realized that her mother was repeating the same pattern, and giving preferential treatment to her grandson. She then decided to move out and go back to her husband's old house, even though it entailed difficulties for her.

'Najma, I'm very grateful for what you've done for us. Once Akhter comes back from England, life will become very easy for us'.

'Amman you still expect him to be obedient?'

Yes, a bad son and a bad coin never go to waste'.

15 Rahat, Humera. "tuhfa" Khawateen digest, Sept 2000 p.156

16 Ismail, Farzana. "Harfe dua hai roshni" Khawateen Digest July 2002, p.196

Akhter never turned up, and Najma supported her parents in their old age¹⁷.

*Only when women begin to identify unfair treatment of themselves as women can they begin to formulate a conscious reaction to these individual incidents and feelings.*¹⁸

Appeasement Vs Assertion

Story 1

Context: A family was discussing their daughter's decision to not leave her husband and in-laws' house, despite their ill treatment.

“We were humiliated yesterday because of her refusal to come with us. It's not really her fault either. We ourselves teach our daughters to give preferential treatment to their in-laws, to consider them as their 'real' family. Her mother in-laws' arrogance and cruelty is in part because of her own submissiveness. Why would the abuser stop if the abused does not even protest”¹⁹.

Story 2

Context: Abeer was insecure because she came from a lower income group than her in-laws and did not have any family left to support her. Her solution was to appease and 'lie low'. However, she stayed unappreciated and more or less unhappy with her situation. A houseguest, Zaid, pointed out to her that her attitude was to be blamed for her unhappiness.

Zaid: 'Learn to give some time and importance to yourself'.

'What do you mean?' Abeer paused between putting *parathas* in the hot pot. She could not understand what he was trying to say.

'What do you like to have for breakfast?' Instead of explaining, Zaid asked another question.

'Anything' she had never really done anything special in this regard, and would quickly eat whatever was available. The morning rush left little time for actually sitting down and having breakfast. She ate to fill her stomach since she needed energy to complete her daily tasks.

'Anything- you mean you don't like anything in particular, or rather you don't consider yourself important enough to have any definite likes and dislikes... an egg that someone didn't eat, toast that's been left, why should it be put in the dust bin, so you eat it. Am I right? This is the importance that you give to yourself'.

'But what does it matter?'

'It matters, it matters a great deal. Others will learn to give importance to us, only if we consider ourselves to be important. Last night you made cream coffee for Faizan, cold coffee for Sapna, black coffee for me – and what did you have?'²⁰.

17. Naseem, Waheeda. "Paraya Dhan" in Pakeeza June 1973, p.84

18. Klatch, Rebecca. "The Formation of Feminist Consciousness among left and right wing activists of the 1960s" *Gender and Society*. Dec 2001. p.795

19. Mumtaz, Zuhra. "Shareek e safar" *Khawateen Digest*, Nov 2002, p.222,

20. Amna, Naseem, *Khud he dareecha kholain gay* *Khawateen Digest*, July 2000

Story 3

Context: A young artistic girl got married to a man who was physically and verbally abusive. Initially she tried to resolve the situation.

‘Tell your brother he needn’t come here anymore, this is a house not a hotel’.

Wiping her tears she consoled herself, everything will be okay. Soon after marriage everyone encounters such problems but with time we will both adjust. But then again knowing the kind of a person he is I’m the one who will have to adjust.

The following lines are from a fight she has when she tried to write poetry.

‘Why can’t you turn off the light? Are you trying to write a letter to some previous lover?’

‘Is this all you can think of? I have the right to be in this house and to use its things; I’ll keep the light on if I want to. Do whatever you want’.

‘No, you do not have any rights over anything’. He started tearing up the pages she had written on. ‘*Shareef* (decent) women do not write such stuff’.

‘No, you want to trample on my self- respect but I will not let you do that’.

‘Remember I’m your husband’.

‘I will accept whatever is reasonable, but this is unreasonable. Why are you so scared of my poetry - You’re scared because if a woman want to realize her capabilities, you push her within the four walls of your home portraying this as your manhood. You want to end her individuality, rust her capabilities and trample on her personality, because you fear that she would leave you behind’.

Eventually she left him and went back to her parent’s house. Over there she encountered the social pressure of staying separated. Her husband then wrote her a letter asking her to come back. She decided to go back to him, thinking that it was her fault to have expected too much. Going back, however, proved to be a mistake as he got her to sign off all her dowry over to him, and divorced her.

She was prepared to sacrifice her individuality, her self and yet she had not gained anything. ‘Why did I believe him, why did I come back? If I had not been here, he would not have been able to strip me of all I had left. This was my fate, but in this sinister drama who was the villain, the cruel man who had exploited and abused me in every possible way, or the two women (her mother-in-law and sister-in-law) who are silent at the treatment being meted out to another woman’.²¹

Women standing up for women

Story 1

Context: A man who had married again despite his first wife’s resistance, decided to divorce his second wife.

Husband: ‘You should be happy; I’m doing exactly what you wanted all along’.

First wife: ‘This is not what I want, this is what you want. And I will not let you get away with this. You cannot tread on women’s self respect as you please’.²².

21 Aizaz, Iffat Gul “Dard ka fasla” Pakeeza, ugust 1978

22

Child Sexual Abuse

Story 1

Context: Seema was, as a child, repeatedly told by her mother that once she got married her husband would take care of her. Her father was an alcoholic and regularly beat up both his wife and daughter. After learning that his wife had tuberculosis, he considered killing her to be a better alternative than spending money on medicines. One night as he tried to kill his wife by hitting her with a heavy object, his 14 year old daughter, killed him. She then ran off to her mother's cousin to confess and ask for help. He promised to help her and managed to convince everyone that the father had died accidentally. He increased his interaction with this family and promised the girl that he would send her sister to school, and pay for her mother's medical expenses if she agreed to having sexual relations with him.

Uncle: 'We could reach an agreement'.

Seema: 'Don't forget what I'm capable of; I've killed my own father.'

Uncle: 'You fool, I'm not going to rape you. I won't force you into anything. I just want a deal. I'll bring you your mother's medicines and send your sister to school. On the other hand if you don't agree with me, this society as well as your own mother and sister will never forgive you- and maybe you'll be hanged'.

Seema was trying to hold back her tears, there might have been a disabled day waiting for her outside but to her the night of sorrows seemed endless²³.

Story 2

Context: A young girl was molested by her stepfather. She tried her best to not stay at home without her mother and other siblings. This was taken as a sign of her defiance, rather than as an expression of her fear. In any case, regardless of her mother's displeasure, she would always manage to avoid being with her step- father. She not only successfully handled her stepfather, and discouraged his advances, but also made it clear to him that he did not intimidate her. One day he walked into her room as she was asleep. She woke up and threatened to tell her mother. He in turn told her that her was powerless since she was scared of being divorced. Her mother overheard this conversation and tried to quickly arrange for her to be married off. She got married but never expected her husband to show any affection, or give her any importance. Things changed when her husband's cousin came to stay, and her husband began to openly flirt with her. A houseguest made her realize that appeasing was not going to get her anywhere, she had to assert herself. She started asserting herself and things changed for the better²⁴.

Adultery

Context: A woman with grown children, whose husband was settled in the United States, began a relationship with another man. The following lines are from the letter her friend wrote to her husband,

Khalil Gibran asserts that in judging a woman who has been 'dishonest' to her husband, it's the husband's heart and soul that should first be judged²⁵.

23 Hassan, Nadia "Raath", Pakeeza, October 2002, p.63

24 Amna, Naseem 'khud he dareecha kholaingay' khawateen digest july 2002.

25 Nighat Seema 'Rozan' Pakeeza, aug 2000 p.184.

Domestic Violence

Context: Asifa got married to her cousin Sharjeel. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law 's behaviour towards her was anything but ideal. Her husband too, started testing her limits, as he began abusing her physically at the slightest of excuses. The following extract is from an incident, where she wanted to attend her cousin and best friend's wedding. Her in-laws, knew how badly she wanted to go, and deliberately decided to not attend the function before 10 p.m.

'What kind of a bargain is this? Even after giving everything, a woman still stays so cheap that she's not even able to get a little happiness in exchange. What kind of a selfish market is this of a man's world where a woman's sincerity, her hard work count for nothing. Sharjeel in marrying me, had gained a beautiful, faithful and sincere wife, but what had I gained? Why have I reduced myself to this? Why do I let everyone in this house make a fool out of me? Even Sharjeel has gone to attend the ceremony, leaving me at home. I only need to tell my family about what's going on, and my in laws will quickly straighten up. Why am I so cowardly?' All these thoughts were running through her mind, as Sharjeel barged in.

'Do you think you can intimidate me by bringing in our grandfather?' He pushed her up by her arm. 'Answer me. Have I stopped you from going to your cousin's house. Poor Asifa, can't even attend the wedding properly because she's stuck with a cruel man'.

He slapped her face.

'Your father calls me a cruel man'. He continued slapping her face, as she started screaming. Asifa was boiling with rage.

'Get away from me, you animal. You consider yourself brave because you can hit a woman'.

She ran into the bathroom and locked herself up. She only opened the door as she heard Sharjeel pleading for forgiveness.

She was a fool to have forgiven the cruelty and abuse inflicted on her, because of the repentance he had shown.²⁶

Women's earning capacity

Story 1

Context: A housewife was economically dependent on her husband, Ansar. She then began teaching and earned Rs. 2000. Her husband borrowed it from her to contribute to the monthly "committee", and told her that he would return it once he got back the money he had loaned to an office colleague. Guests arrived unexpectedly and she asked her husband to give it back so she could meet the new expenses incurred because of the guest's arrival.

Husband: 'I've been working for eight years now, and have been giving you every single penny I earn. I don't gamble, I don't smoke and I don't drink. Whatever you cook, I've been eating willingly – you've brought in 2000 for the first time, and are now trying to make me feel inferior'. He threw the money at her.

Wife: (thinking to herself) '*Dadi* (paternal grandmother) you used to tell me that a man's income no matter how meager is blessed, and a woman's income even if it is made through honest means can not suffice. But you failed to me that the money a woman earns is so worthless that it can be thrown to the ground and spat on'.

26 p.215 Zuhra Mumtaz, Shareek e safar , August 2002, khawateen digest.

She picked up the currency and started weeping. ‘Ansar every time there has been even a small increase in your pay, I’ve expressed gratefulness. I’ve always held the money you gave me with respect, and I’ve always spent it as a sacred trust. I’ve spent hours worrying if even a penny has been wasted because of my or the children’s negligence. I’ve always thought of your tired being every time I’ve spent it. This is the respect I’ve given to the money you earn – and you, you’ve thrown the money I earned. Isn’t my hard work, hard work?’ She kept questioning herself²⁷

Feminist consciousness is developing a radically altered consciousness of oneself and of others and of social reality...women have long lamented their condition but a lament pure and simple need not be an expression of feminist consciousness, as long as their situation is apprehended as natural inevitable and inescapable. Women’s consciousness emerges only when there exists a genuine possibility for the partial or total liberation of women²⁸.

Story 2

Context: Sara started her career as an assistant commissioner. She had her office during the day, she spent evenings with her friends, and at night she studied for her M Phil exam. Her life was busy and happy. She then met Talha, who seemed to cherish her abilities, and she got married to him. Gradually her husband began to control her, and insisted that she leave her profession.

Talha: ‘I want to see you as a complete housewife’.

Sara: ‘So you want to see me as a *Naik Perveen* (Ms Piety), whose only concerns revolve around her house, what’s to be cooked in that house and her children. True, there are many women in our society who spend their lives doing this, and this is valuable in its own way. But I’m not like that. If God has given me additional capabilities why shouldn’t I put them to use. What’s the point of spending so much time and effort in getting all these qualifications, if the only matter I’m supposed to use my mind for is what’s to be cooked for dinner’.

Eventually she agreed, thinking that compromising would help in reducing their marital tensions. Instead, life became more difficult for her. Talha’s complaints didn’t stop, their focus became different as he began to find fault with everything she did around the house.

After four years of marriage the effort to please Talha, and become his ideal wife had left her exhausted, and she began to re examine the choices she had made.

After marriage, housework and home should be important for a woman, but her own self should not be sacrificed either. Every woman has her own individuality and this individuality should continue. The house, husband and children should all be given attention, but a woman should also have her own identity. It’s not enough to be recognized as someone’s wife, or daughter or mother. ‘Who was I before this marriage, and who have I become now. What did I get in return? I’ve tried everything eastern women are supposed to try to keep the sanctity of the house, but everything has failed, and I’ve been left with nothing’.

‘I’m going to start work again. There is a school nearby that I’m going to start teaching at- I’m going to work no matter what’.

27 Iftikhar, Faiza “sooraj key salthanath” Khawateen Digest, June 2002 p. 178-180.

28 Bartky, Sandra Lee 1990: 14

‘The day you start work I’ll leave you’, said Talha.

This time his threat had no effect on her. ‘The school is nearby and I can walk there easily’, she replied.

Talha tried everything from threats to pleading to get her to change her mind, but this time she was determined.

‘I have to work, for myself and for my children. If my spirit doesn’t get any fresh air, it’s going to die’.

Sara had regained her own sense of importance as an individual, and she was confident that she would be able to assert herself’.²⁹

Story 3

Context: Saima was under psychological pressure because of her husband, Wasiq. Her educational qualifications were higher than her husband’s qualifications, and he felt insecure because of this. Initially she tries to appease him and accepts all his decisions.

Women try their utmost to make their marriages work, and men instead of appreciating this, do not even acknowledge this effort. Before marriage, girls are pampered and loved by their parents, but once they get married they have to put up with undue criticism. Husbands in their ‘husbandness’, deny them due respect, because their own egos are too frail to handle a woman. In trying to get along with their husbands, women push their own intelligence, education and critical thinking to the background. In trying to make their husbands feel respected women accept each decision without any criticism. However, this policy backfires. The husbands not only get into the habit of leaving out their wife from decision making, but they also label her a ‘fool’, who has no understanding.

Saima then met another older woman who told her that going according to her husband’s wishes was not going to get her anywhere. Women who do this, get into the habit of sacrificing their own happiness for the sake of others. Husbands neither acknowledge nor appreciate those sacrifices. And the children too, who have seen their father degrading their mother, don’t respect either parent.

Saima began to take time out for herself:

‘What is this? Am I going to have to eat *daal chawal* (rice and lentils) for dinner?’ shouted Wasiq.

‘I’d gone for a hair cut’ she answered as if Wasiq’s anger was of no consequence.

‘Why isn’t my tea here yet?’

‘I was using a facial mask, have just taken it off. I’ll make tea for you now if you’ll take care of the baby’ she replied.

Wasiq lost his temper, and started his usual lecture about Saima’s laziness and inefficiency. Saima stayed quiet, and then calmly nodded her head in agreement. ‘You are right. I am not only lazy but also ill mannered’.

What could Wasiq say, everything he was planning on saying had already been said. Gradually he began to see that his criticism had no effect on Saima now. She was no longer afraid of his temper tantrums.

29 Chaudhary Shazia, p.253 *Khawateen digest*, August 2002

One day she informed him that she has found a job for herself. Wasiq was shocked and tried to dissuade her.

‘How will you work? Who will run the house?’

‘But you say yourself, that it’s the maid who runs the house, I don’t do anything. So, the maid will continue to run the house’, said Saima’.

The day Saima received her first pay cheque, without asking Wasiq, she hired a young girl to help her out with her children. When he asked her about it, she replied that since her pay was going into the new maid’s salary, so she didn’t feel the need to ask him.

Eventually her husband realized that he could no longer intimidate her, while she led a happy and busy life.³⁰

Conclusion

I have tried to show that there is a discussion of ‘serious issues’ and it has largely been ignored by the studies carried out on these digests. The next step would be to explore why there is this discussion. Why is it more acceptable to discuss issues of violence and class as familial struggles through stories. Is it simply the ‘security’ and possibility of creating an alternative reality offered by fiction writing, or is it something more complex. What are the other narratives of dissent and how are they different or similar to this particular narrative. What are the readers’ perceptions with regard to narratives of dissent, as well as ‘typical’ stories of romance.

Dissent by a minority, whether it is in the form of a protest against testing of nuclear weapons in a country where most of the population is celebrating this occasion, or a short story that speaks – out against child sexual abuse, needs to be highlighted. This paper is an attempt at magnifying one particular narrative of dissent in Urdu popular fiction.

Way and weighing
Stile and saying
On a single walk are found

Go bear without halt
Question and default
On your single pathway bound³¹

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Appendix

Digests that were included in this analysis:

Pakeeza June 1973
Pakeeza July 1973
Pakeeza August 1973
Pakeeza June 1974
Khawateen Digest November 1976
Pakeeza November 1976
Pakeeza December 1976
Pakeeza February 1977
Pakeeza June 1977
Khawateen Digest August 1977
Khawateen Digest August 1978
Pakeeza August 1978
Pakeeza November 1980
Khawateen Digest January 1984
Pakeeza June 1985
Khawateen Digest June 1985
Pakeeza August 1986
Pakeeza July 1987
Pakeeza June 1989
Khawateen Digest March 1999
Khawateen Digest July 1999
Khawateen Digest October 1997
Khawateen Digest June 2000
Khawateen Digest September 2000
Khawateen Digest December 2000
Khawateen Digest April 2001
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