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The Icons Speak Out: An Iconographic Analysis of Pakistani Animated TV Series Burka Avenger

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the non-technological aspects of Pakistan's 3D animated TV series Burka Avenger. It explores whether Burka Avenger created a new perspective of the social and cultural ideology in Pakistan or instills the stereotypical ideas. For this purpose, the iconographic analysis of Burka Avenger is done while using Panofsky's (1972) approach of this method. The iconographic analysis of different characters and places is done in three steps; pre-iconographical description, Iconographic analysis, and Iconographical interpretation. The iconographic analysis reveals that Burka Avenger mainly promotes stereotype indoctrination while depicting good and bad elements in Pakistani society. Themes of Banana State, Culturally Accepted Women's Empowerment, Feudal-Clergy Nexus, and Class Divide are explored through iconographic analysis. This series also presents a unique notion of feudal-clergy nexus that exploits masses and works for their nefarious purposes. The findings of this study pave the way for the elimination of disparities and stereotyped views depicted on screen.

Keywords: Animated movies; Iconographic analysis; Stereotypes; Ideology

Introduction

The animation is the metamorphosis of the written and oral medium. Animation continues to provide intriguing examples of cultural production in the contemporary day. Animation research has lately exploded in popularity. A substantial amount of theoretical and historical work is being created (Bendazzi & Halas, 2017; Wells, 2009). However, research on animated films is scarce in Pakistan. This gap in knowledge offers an opportunity for research in historical and theoretical contexts of Pakistani visual culture.

According to Wells (1998), animation has been largely ignored by cinema academics and discourses in both English and non-English languages. Bendazzi (1994) claims that animation as an expressive medium is linguistically, technically, and aesthetically independent, and so requires a treatment distinct from other cultural products to comprehend the gender roles, identity formation, and ideologies inherent in animated material.

This paper aims to understand the non-technological aspects of Pakistan's 3D animated TV series Burka Avenger. It explores whether Burka Avenger created new perspective of the social and cultural ideology in Pakistan or it instills the stereotypes.

Animation and Ideology

The concept of ideology has gone through many transformations and has been extensively theorized. Turner (1999) defines ideology as a "theory of reality" that is ingrained in all cultures and drives our binary perceptions of good/evil, right/wrong, us/them, and so on. He claims that while ideology does not have a physical form, its tangible repercussions can be seen in all social and political structures, from the class structure to gender relations to our understanding of what defines a person.

Mitchell (1986) also presents the Marxist perspective of ideology as a fictitious consciousness, a symbolic representation that reflects a historical position of class dominance. It refers to a set of ideas and activities that are perpetuated by institutions that replicate and legitimize the ideological status quo within cultural settings and social practices. Anthropologist Geertz (1976) observes that "ideology," which was once thought to be a collection of intellectualistic and impractical

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but idealistic political proposals, has come to be associated with integrated assertions, theories, and goals constituting a politico-social program, often with the implication of factitious propagandizing.

Animated storytelling is frequently directed at children and contributes to the development of a child's view of the world, their role within it, and their values and self-identity (Zipes, 2011). Children's gender schemas and actions are significantly impacted by the gendered content they see (O'Bryant & Corder-Bolz, 1978; Graves, 1999; Hedrick, Brookes & George, 2008). As a result, one may understand the importance and impact of animated films in our societies. According to Wells (2008), animation best detects and depicts "in-the-making" codes and circumstances, and best exhibits the "mixed traffic" of cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary ideas and representational form, making the animation a rich field for iconography study.

In this study, ideology is perceived as a set of predefined thoughts forming a discourse. Scholars in Pakistan ignored animation and ideological representation. This study addresses this gap and determines the extent to which Pakistani animated films are used to build reality and ideology that supports the status quo.

Animation in Pakistan

A massive invasion on Pakistani culture has been witnessed in recent years in the form of animated films. This flourishing part of media expansion is rapidly giving a drastic acceleration to represent the issues in a better way regarding our country's cultural phenomenon. Various studies critiquing oligopolies like Disney and Pixar on shaping the gender roles, identity and values of children, especially in the advent of globalization (Hine et al., 2018; Light, 2016; Saladino, 2014; Wiersma, 2000). However, there are far fewer studies on smaller production firms and other modes of animation, and the need for cultural significance and precision are a frequent argument among scholars (Yoon, 2008) and local auteurs, as it is relevant to their contribution within particular cultural contexts. Animation in Pakistan is a new form of modern media. This new form is gaining prominence and increase in number on Pakistani mainstream broadcast media and gaming aimed at young people.

Cultural ideas are intended to be taught to Pakistani children by storytelling, as animated film has a strong impact on how the cultural world is imagined and depicted. An auteur's original concept and script deals with the ideology instilled by existing societal perceptions. Alternatively, it also promotes the auteur's intent, agenda, and motives. These stereotypical ideas and personal agendas affect children's perceptions.

According to Wells (2002), animation is the most significant form of creativity in the twenty-first century. From major films to primetime sitcoms, and from television shows to cartoons available on social media platforms, animation as an art, a method, technique, and application impacts many elements of visual culture. In a nutshell, animation can be found everywhere.

Animation and Cultural Ideals

Modern technology used for creating, capturing, and distributing images enables film, television, and the Internet to use images to convey their messages. Many research studies have shown that visual images are used as a medium of transmitting ideological content which indicates seeing comes before speech (Amores, Calderón & Stanek, 2019; Schwalbe, Silcock & Keith, 2008; Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998).

Several authors accurately point out that a kid looks and understands things before he can talk. They further argue that representation, visualizing, and seeing are ubiquitous components of the process by which most human beings grow to know the universe as it is truly for them. (Berger, 1992, 1997; Panofsky, 1972). Indeed, it is estimated that we absorb over 80% of our knowledge through our eyes (Berger & Heath, 2008).

Films are instilled with various messages and mythologies that have an effect on viewers all over the globe. We may not realize it when viewing a movie because we are still looking at portrayals of specific individuals and the cultures in which we exist (Berger & Heath, 2008). As a result, iconography shown on screen needs a visual and semiotic interpretation during a film reading.

Films can be used to effectively construct and express ideologies; however, we can understand what kind of ideologies are being disseminated by visuals. Ideology refers to the representation reflecting the desires of those in positions of authority. Ideology, in particular, serves to legitimize the potential societal inequality. Iconological research is not used on animated films in

Pakistan, so this research is the first attempt to fill a gap in the specific scholarship. In this way, this research is an investigation into how ideologies are portrayed in Pakistani animated films.

Iconography

Increasingly advanced digital media devices are demonstrating and facilitating the move from mono-modal texts to multi-modal texts, which mix picture, sound, animation, and textual language (Jowitt, 2006; Kress, 2003). As a result, rather of utilizing the written word as a synonym for text, a multimodal notion of text as a cohesive unit of meaning in communication is merged in the comprehension of texts, with modes encompassing a number of socially and culturally impacted instruments (Bezemer & Kress, 2008).

Some experimental researches concentrate on the digital aspects of animation and, some look at the physical aspects of the process (Fleer, 2017; Petersen, 2015). Wolterstorff (2015) developed a useful method for dealing with a picture of another human in a debate on iconography. He claims that a digital representation of a human being corresponds to the prototype in which it is already linked in meaningful ways. He distinguishes between an individual's rendering and a person's representation. When he talks about rendering, he implies that the image is created using a single entity as a source. As a result, the model and the created/generated character have a clear and intimate relationship. A character's designer or producer tries to capture (the model's) distinctive appearance.

In his book Buddhist Iconography of Northern Bactria, Abdullaev (2015) discusses various elements of the cultural component of Northern Bactria, where Buddhism was the primary religious expression in the early historical period. Making an assemblage using various archaeological finds in the context of art history is a challenge. Sartini (2015) classified specimens of New Kingdom 'Black' coffins into three developmental stages and provided 10 precise dating factors based on iconographic research. Her article, however, is devoid of pictures (Dodson, 2020). COVID-19's iconography in Hong Kong shows how gendered topics defy stereotypes, and how they continue to broaden and evolve in a context shaped by a tapestry of patriarchal Chinese identity, immigration, capital transfer, and political tensions being constantly (un)woven (Wu, 2021).

Christian artists in Egypt utilised the visual potential of their icons in the post-revolutionary era by adapting traditional iconography to the portrayal of victims of communal killings in order to "earn social importance and cultural amplification" (Bartmanski, 2011, p. 220). Artists who intended to set traditional iconographic topoi, such as the tales of the Life of Mary, within the 'social context' of their period released several cycles of religious icons in Egypt, notably in the twentieth century (Moussa, 2016, p. 157).

The "social life" of icons, according to Alexander et al. (2012), is not limited to "representing, reflecting, refracting" the social context in which they are formed (p. 3), and they are also "construct different sorts of bridges [between] the past and the present" (Zeubravel, 2003, p. 7). Other studies look at the process of generating an animated storyline in a larger sense, depending on both non-visual (writing a screenplay and props) and digital (collecting still pictures for animated sequences, recording music, and editing) techniques (Fleer, 2018; Leinonen & Sintonen, 2014; Letnes, 2014; Palaiologou & Tsampra, 2018; Undheim, 2020). Some work has also been done from the perspective of semiotics, but art researchers and communication scholars–seldom use iconographic analysis to analyze animated films particularly in developing countries.

Visual objects, films, and animations have all been studied in scholarly circles, and theoretically and technically successful research discoveries have also been achieved, but there is a dearth of debate on the link between visual representations and animations. Jia (2014) talks about how visual symbols are used and how important they are in animation creation. She makes constructive ideas for the logical use of visual symbols by analyzing the features of visual symbols and scene design in animation development. As a result, the present research attempts to bridge a knowledge gap, particularly in developing countries.

This study explores the animated world of social imagery related to the ideological discourse as a form of social formation that is built, maintained and mediated by the media, and how it provides cultural symbolic models, patterns of behavior and social organizational cues to a viewer/user. These elements collectively act as a world making medium. Therefore, the current study examines such ideologies inherent in the storyline, characters and images of animated series Burka Avenger.

Method

Iconographic Analysis

Pakistani animated TV series Burka Avenger was chosen for this study because of its widespread popularity and its emphasis on social concerns and delivery of information in an interactive and enjoyable manner. Burka Avenger was named one of the most influential fictional characters of 2013 by Time magazine (Alter & Dockterman, 2013).

This research offers an iconographic analysis of the first episode of Burka Avenger while using Panofsky's (1972) approach of this method. Panofsky (1972) believed three levels in reading images. The *first step* (also known as the 'primary' or 'natural' level) is concerned with the perception of context. Both factual descriptions of what we see and expressional meanings drawn from the visual are included in this degree. We quickly give the work significance by connecting it with our own personal actual experiences. The second level (referred to as the "secondary" or "conventional") involves a more in-depth analysis of the behavior or evidence mentioned in the previous level. The image's creative themes and visual codes interact more successfully when we have a prior grasp of concepts and conventional context, helping us perceive the actions occurring in the image. Unlike the previous two levels, the third level (known as the "intrinsic" level) communicates information that the picture maker is not aware of. This level uses what we know about the world and connects the artifacts or codes in the work to reveal the underlying "basic mindset of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical inclination - subconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work" (p. 7). For Panofsky, is the ultimate goal of iconography.

In "Iconography and iconology" Müller (2011) highlighted Panofsky's framework and various forms of meanings, while interpreting art through his framework that Müller employed to analyze the Renaissance art. The framework has since been popular among social scientists engaged in finding distinctions of meanings while exploring images.

For the iconographic analysis of Burka Avenger, this study has followed three steps (Müller, 2011)

1) *Level 1*: Pre-iconographical description (factual descriptions of what we see, as well as expressional meanings drawn from the visual)

2) *Level 2*: Iconographic analysis (investigating how concepts and specific themes are depicted in the visual arts.

3) *Level 3*: Iconographical interpretation (discovering the intrinsic meaning that how historical and socio-cultural developments are reflected in a representation).

Results and Discussion

The iconographic analysis of different characters and places is done following three steps as discussed in method section.

Halwapur

Level I: Halwapur is a living place in Burka Avenger. The background houses and mosque's minaret are used to symbolize middle-class architecture in Pakistan.

Level II: Halwa (sweet dish in Pakistani culture and mythology) is used as an offering and sent to mosques on Thursdays, which is considered a sacred day in Islamic faith.

Level III: It is negatively associated with *mullahs* (Muslim clerics) in vernacular culture and often described as a tempting food for them signifying their greed. The female protagonist is in conflict with the extremist *mullahs* who are in alliance with the patriarchal and corrupt aristocracy and they strongly oppose the cause of women education. According to them, women should stay home, perform domestic chores and give birth to babies. It is only purpose what women could offer to the society they live in.

Figure 1. Aerial scene of Halwapur, a living place of Burka Avenger.

Kabaddi Jaan and Jia

Level I: The design of the characters of Kabaddi Jaan and Jiya includes circles and round forms and less triangular forms.

Level II: It indicates that these are positive characters. Their garments are of subtle hues as well. The styling and creativity of Jia's character have deeper meanings to it. The fusion of *burka* (veiled) and power is contradictory as modern-day liberal forces persuade women to shun religious conservative norms to feel empowered.

Level III: The scriptwriter and director have portrayed how women feel empowered remaining in their own cultural and religious habitat. Moreover, nail polish on the nails of Burka Avenger symbolizes the feminine trait, which reinforces the stereotypical gender roles in our society.

Figure 2. Characters of Jia (Burka Avenger) and Kabaddi Jaan (Mentor) in the first episode of Burka Avenger.

Immu, Mooli, and Ashu

Level I: Immu, Mooli, and Ashu whose round faces and character design are indicative of innocence and positivity. Their spiky and triangular hairs indicate of naughty, fast but positive characters. This film uses bright and grey colors, and round circular forms in features and physique.

Level II: The use of triangles is to depict sharpness and intelligence. The costumes are subtle, light colored and simple.

Level III: Dress of characters indicates that these characters do not belong to the upper strata but rather middle class.

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Figure 3. Characters of Immu, Mooli and Ashu in Burka Avenger.

Vadero Pajero

Level I: The design of Vadero Pajero includes a sharp pointed nose, pointy moustache tips and a chin, rotund belly, and weak muscles in the physique. Bright colors are used for this character. There is a dollar sign gold necklaces around his neck, a gold bracelet, and gold rings. His sideburns and shoes have a triangular form.

Level II: The use of triangular form for this character is to depict his sharpness and intelligence. Vadero's pure white garments, a textured brown silk waistcoat, and gold accessories show him a feudal lord and politician in Pakistani society. It is an evil or negative character who eats a lot, and is over fed.

Level III: It indicates that this character belongs to the upper strata of Pakistani society.

Figure 4. Character of Vadero Pajero in Burka Avenger.

Munshi

Level I: The design of this character is triangular with triangles in his garments as well. His garments are simple and dull.

Level II: His character indicates cunning, clever, negative and poor traits.

Level III: He belongs to the lower middle class in Pakistani society.

Figure 5. Munshi in Burka Avenger.

Baba Bandook

Level I: Baba Bandook wears a turban with a snake on it, black gown, and big bead necklace. He has a goat too. There is a band around goat's neck.

Level II: The get-up of Baba Bandook represents him as an evil character. Black is considered the color of evil since ages, whereas a turban is a symbol of pride and power in a typical Pakistani culture. The snake on turban shows venom inside Baba Bandook.

Level III: The presentation of evilness and cleverness attached to the clergy in the series have the same stereotypes and ideology which is also shown in other forms of media content in Pakistan.

Figure 6. Baba Bandook in Burka Avenger.

Themes

After the iconographic analysis of Burka Avenger, different themes were identified that emerged from the connotations of descriptions and idiosyncrasies of icons in this TV series (see Table 1).

Table 1   *Themes in Burka Avenger*

Place & Characters	Description and idiosyncrasies of Icons	Connotations	Themes
1. *Halwapur*	**1.** *Soft Sweet Description*: Halwa is a sweet and soft delicacy found in Pakistani mythology and culture. **2.** *Class Representation:* In vernacular culture, mullahs (Muslim clerics) are negatively linked with this dish. **3.** *Avarice:* A delectable dish for mullah, symbolizing their avarice.	The notion of a state is introduced which is dominated by the clergy to fulfill their avarice.	**Banana State**

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2. *Jia*	1. ***Geometric shapes:*** Circles, round shapes, and forms that are less triangular. 2. ***Synthesis:*** Fusion of burka and power. 3. ***Feminine description***: The feminine characteristic is symbolized by the nail polish on Burka Avenger's nails.	The introduction of the superhero idea empowers women while denying the current notion of gender norms. It also portrays stereotypes of burka (veil).	**Culturally accepted women's empowerment**
3. *Kabbadi Jan*	1. ***Geometric shapes:*** Circles and round forms and less triangular forms 2. ***Dull description:*** The colors of the garments are subdued.	Mentorship is from mediocre and modest. It also depicts the stereotypes.	
4. *Immu, Molly, Ashu*	1. ***Geometric shapes:*** Innocence and optimism are represented by round faces and character design. The hair is spiky and triangular in form, and it is associated with mischievous, quick, and positive personalities. 2. ***Color combination:*** In terms of characteristics and physique, the picture uses bright, grey hues and spherical circular shapes.	With certain naughty colors, innocence and optimism are associated with the middle class.	**Class divide**
5. *Munshi*	1. ***Geometric shapes:*** His clothes are triangular and pointy with hints of triangles. His waistcoats are with pointed ends and a lot of triangular shapes. 3. ***Dull description:*** The clothes are plain and dull.	Cunning personality is connected with the lower middle class.	
6. *VaderoPajero*	1. ***Geometric shapes and Color combination:*** There are bright colors, a pointed nose, pointy moustache, and a chin. His dollar sign gold necklace, gold bracelet, and gold rings are all triangular in shape, just like his sideburns and shoes. He has also chubby stomach and weak muscles	Feudalism is portrayed with nefarious motives in mind.	**Feudalism**
7. *Baba Bandook*	1. ***Cultural icon:*** He wears a turban with a snake on it. In Pakistani culture, the turban is a sign of pride and authority. 2. ***Religeous icon:*** He has uneven wavy beard	The clergy poisoned society with venomous thoughts.	**Poisonous Clergy**

Banana State and Poisonous Clergy

The society of a banana republic is extremely stratified, with a large impoverished working class and a ruling class plutocracy made up of the country's commercial, political, and military elites (White, 1984). The notion is depicted along with clerics who govern the country in Burka Avenger. The clergy, according to *Baba Bandook*, offered poisonous notions and used these beliefs to dominate society. *Baba Bandook* demonstrates exactly what society thinks about the feudalism and clergy. He wears a turban with a snake representing an influential person within the community, and it is a figurative headwear indicative of clergy roles.

Culturally Accepted Women's Empowerment

Embracing or striving to seek out women's viewpoints, as well as boosting women's status via education, knowledge, literacy, and training, are all examples of women's empowerment. In the midst of social difficulties, empowerment equips and enables women to make life-changing decisions (Bayeh, 2016). They are able to reshape gender roles or other comparable duties, providing them with more freedom to achieve their objectives (Kabeer, 2005). Although the superhero concept is introduced in this TV series, it empowers women while rejecting the prevailing assumption that

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gender standards are being broken. Stereotypes are depicted in Burka Avenger. The woman's burka is worn by the female protagonist to conceal or disguise her identity. It promotes conservative society's prejudices and patriarchal beliefs even more. Further, burka (veil) is an extensively debated subject in relation to its representation of contemporary political scenarios in societies with substantial Muslim populations.

Feudal-Clergy Nexus

The nobility received land from the crown in exchange for military service throughout medieval Europe, and feudalism was the dominant socioeconomic framework. Peasants (villeins or serfs) were nominally forced to live on their lord's land and provide him with respect, work, and a share of the produce in exchange for military protection (Knowles, 2006). The connection of feudal lords (like the character of *Vadero*) and clergy (like *Baba Bandook*) is shown in Burka Avenger. It is shown that savage *Baba Bandook* backed feudalism, and patriarchy in complex powerful system in postcolonial landscape. It also shown in this series that feudalism is always defeated by the protagonist *Jia*, but every time feudalism emerges in another shape.

Class Divide

Different characters related to upper class (like *Vadero*), middle class (like *Kabbadi Jan*, *Immu*, *Molly*, and *Ashu*) and lower middle class (like *Munshi*) are represented in Burka Avenger. The upper class is represented as exploiter, the middle class as hardworking and humble, and the lower middle class as smart and mischievous. It is a stereotypical representation of different classes that shows the prevailing thoughts in Pakistani society, for example, it is shown that *Jia* representing the upper class, saves *Immu*, *Mooli*, and *Ashu* that belong to the lower middle class. The presence of *Baba Bandook*, and *Vadero Pajero* also indicates that there is a need to bridge the economic divide between different classes.

Conclusion

The iconographic analysis of *Burka Avenger* reveals the themes of *Banana State*, *Culturally Accepted Women's Empowerment*, *Feudal-Clergy Nexus*, and *Class Divide*. As created in the television series Burka Avenger, the clergy has a stronghold over society. To maintain control over society, they propagated poisonous ideas. Although the animated TV series featured stereotypical ideas prevalent in Pakistani culture, it presents a unique notion that the *feudal-clergy nexus* exploit masses for their nefarious purposes.

Future researchers should use iconographic analysis to uncover hidden themes in Pakistani feature films made in national language Urdu and regional languages (including Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, and Balochi). Analysis of these films produced during different political systems either democratic or dictatorial lay the groundwork for eradicating inequalities and unfair stereotypical beliefs portrayed on silver screen.

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