

# The Socio-Cultural Identities of Local Films and Reception on Global Platforms

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** The revival of the local film industry with the introduction of digital technologies in the past two decades marks a shift in the local film culture of Pakistan, and a few initiatives have been taken to create a socio-cultural impact through this medium. Local films represent the socio-cultural identities of society; however, their reception on global platforms needs to be investigated.

**Methodology:** This research paper analyses the storyline and depiction of socio-cultural issues in a selected Pakistani film; “Dukhtar” and debates the strengths and challenges of the content to find a path to the OTT platforms.

**Findings:** The subject matter of “Dukhtar” is similar to a Netflix production; “Bulbul”, and the content analysis of both films, provides some interesting findings about the cultural, economic, and social depiction.

**Conclusion:** The outcome of the research suggests that the combination of creative input combined with innovative ideas and updated digital technologies will foster local films on the global platforms to earn creative capital.

**Keywords:** Local Film, Socio-cultural Identity, Creative Economy, Global Platform, Digital Technology.

## Introduction

The revival of Pakistani cinema is related with the creation of new media environment with the introduction of digital technology. Other factors are the issue of licenses to private television channels in 2002, the grant of screening of Indian films in 2007 and the rise of multiplex. The development in technology transforms the films in digital cinema while engaging in contemporary forms of distribution and exhibition. Although on a smaller scale, these digital cinemas are grown rapidly in Pakistan and the number of cinemas related to digital technology have increased roughly to three times in 2018 than the cinemas in 2016 (Hamid, 2020). Along with technological development, creative and innovative ideas are required to enhance productivity in film sector and will be helpful in facilitating the expansion of viewership beyond the local boundaries. The entertainment industry, particularly the film sector, plays a significant role in shaping cultural narratives and capturing audience attention. Further, the globalization has not only increased competition but also increase cultural exchange and interconnectedness among different regions and societies worldwide. Through effective marketing strategies, distribution networks, and localization efforts (such as dubbing or

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subtitling), movies can reach diverse audiences worldwide, contributing to their global popularity and success (Rasheed, 2022).

Pakistani film “Dukhtar” is an international coproduction, premiered at the “Toronto International Film Festival” in 2014. It is written and co-produced by Afia Nathaniel highlighting the subject of child marriage, issue of honor being linked to women and role of a woman as a mother in a conservative society while saving her daughter. The story revolves around a mother, who tried to save her young daughter in a male dominant society while escaping from rocky roads of Attock district to the plains of Punjab on truck. Another film is chosen for the comparative analysis named “Bulbul” on the same topic of child marriage but produced by Indian film industry and premiered by global platform Netflix. In general, Pakistani films follows the same trends, format and patterns of Indian films but lack competition with the quality of Bollywood films. The Indian film industry holds an outstanding production record globally. Indian films in similar genres are gaining recognition and achieving significant success in the movie business, attracting substantial audiences (Rasheed, 2022). Similarly, entertainment industries of other countries are also earning profits by airing their productions on the global platforms. For the purpose, a critical analysis is created between the above-mentioned two films to analyse the limitations of Pakistani films and to suggest recommendations to gain international audience.

### ***Aim of the Research***

This research aims to examine the potential benefits of Pakistani films in exerting cultural influence on diverse societies and the promotion of local films on the global platforms like Netflix. The main objective is to examine the capacity of the local film and how its content and presentation can attract the regional and international audience to enhance the creative economy.

### **Literature Review**

In the age of globalization, the entertainment industry can be seen as the most influential medium of art. Globalized platforms are representing content from diverse societies, and this content is affecting the lives of people and introducing culture and societies of those not directly related to everyone lives. Film sector is helpful in introducing certain socio-political ideologies in societies in a very subtle way and is also helpful in expanding the human emotional and psychological understanding and critical thinking. Moreover, films are powerful source to preserve, promote and propagate diverse cultures. In contemporary world, entertainment industry has the capacity to bring people together and can change the lives and thinking process of viewers, thus its importance cannot be ignored (Ullah, Zhu, Hayaty, & Liu, 2021).

The term Lollywood is coined after Hollywood and Bollywood and is the oldest film industry of Pakistan. Pakistan produced good Urdu films in the beginning, but political unrest effected the industry and after partition of Bangladesh, industry lost its Dhaka wing, which resulted in decline in production and in viewership. The continued political unevenness and implication of martial law of Zia regime worsened the situation resulting in shifts in censorship laws and regulations governing the film industry. This increased censorship limited the creative freedom of filmmakers and stifling the expression of certain political or social narratives. During the late twentieth century, the introduction of VCR in Pakistan can be seen as a significant innovative technological advancement introducing the films from all over the world to the local communities. It reduces the attendance of the people in the cinemas and further Zia regime also imposed registration laws on the filmmakers to be degree holders which enhance the decline. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the local film industry with the introduction of new talent tried to regain some attraction of cinema viewers (Parveen, Tariq, & Siddiqui, 2015).

In the twenty-first century, the experiences gained by globalization, neo-liberal capitalism and a rising consumer culture not only bring change in the society but also in the entertainment industry (Khdaier, 2018). The revival of entertainment industry of Pakistan during the Musharraf regime and after 9/11 is visible because of change in projected ideologies as terrorism has become a major topic in the films internationally. This revival brings drastic changes in the techniques and in the story line as social issues are projected. In

2007, a film was produced by Shoaib Mansur named “Khuda Ke Liye” encountering the misconception about Islam and Muslim community. In the following, another block buster Urdu film “Bol” opens a new chapter of success of Pakistani films. Later in 2011, few films are produced highlighting the social issues like extremism, women rights, male dominance, religion, and culture. It has started a new chapter of Pakistani cinema and films on various subjects with the use of technology are started to be made to hit the cinema halls (Yousaf, Adnan, & Aksar, 2017).

In short, the convergence of new technologies, innovative ideas, and creative storytelling in the entertainment industry has led to the production of blockbuster movies that aims to captivate audiences regionally and internationally. This phenomenon not only drives economic growth but also fosters cultural exchange and connectivity in an increasingly interconnected world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

With the help of the collected data from literature review and by analysing the selected films, the author has highlighted the socio-cultural and feminine issues in the society. Author has followed a theoretical framework following the content analysis and creating a relationship in the content of two films from adjacent countries on the similar topics but with diverse presentation.

### **Methodology**

Methodology employed is based on qualitative research combined with the comparative and content analysis techniques between a local film and a film premiered on Netflix on the same subject of child marriage. For the purpose, few books, and various articles on the Pakistani films have been consulted. Limited published data is available on the Pakistani films, but digital data is available which can be utilized by the researchers.

### **Significance of the Film Dukhtar, Premiered in 2014**

Film is considered a strong medium to bring change to society and to educate people regarding disbeliefs and false traditions in an entertaining way. Selected facts from the society are combined to arouse the emotions of the spectators while conveying a meaningful message (Yousaf et al., 2017). The selected film revolves around story of female highlighting the feminist issues prevailing in local societies. Under the feminist approach, the film examined the neglected perception of human life. The film aims to bring a change in the society by highlighting the issues of gender inequality and breaking the cycle of stereotype female representation in the local films. The studies on the previous female characters in Urdu and Punjabi films suggests that the depiction of women was influenced by the masculine prejudices and are not representative of real Pakistani women, but their portrayal is grounded on assumptions and suppositions (Yousaf et al., 2017). The selected film challenges the dominant ideology of patriarchy prevailing in the society especially in the remote areas of the country. Although premiered in 2014, the film is chosen for debate because it challenges the male chauvinism, argues the cinematic representation of female characters, project an ideology and finally plays its role in educating the masses.

### **Analysis of the Film**

“Dukhtar” is a drama/thriller film written, directed, and co-produced by Afia Nathaniel. The prominent stars of the film include Mohib Mirza, Samiya Mumtaz, prominent T.V actors and Asif Khan, Saleha Aref, Samina Ahmad, and Ajab Gul. An international co-production, the film premiered at the 2014 “Toronto International Film Festival” (Hamid, 2020). The story of the film revolves around the story of a mother and her 10 years old daughter, both escaped from their house to save her daughter’s fate from an arranged/underaged marriage to a tribal leader. The mother named Allah Rakhi (Samiya Mumtaz) herself is shown victim of early marriage at the age of fifteen to an older tribal group leader named Daulat Khan, role played by Asif Khan. She is shown a previous resident of Lahore, the city of Punjab province who moved to tribal area in mounts after given in marriage with the chief tribe. After two decades, her husband, the tribal chief is shown in need to make peace with his rival tribal leader named Tor Gul, role played by

Abdullah Jan and for the purpose, he wishes to marry his ten years old daughter named Zeinab to rival chief as a deal for peace, a tradition in Pashtun tribes. To save her daughter's life from the same fate, the mother flees along with her daughter from her house. From here the adventure begins as the henchmen of both the tribal chiefs are shown trying to find them on the dry, barren, dull and lonely mountain roads where mostly traffic is the movement of truck carrying goods. As it is obvious that she will be caught soon as a single woman with a girl, she manages to get a lift for her and Zeinab by telling a false story to a sympathetic truck driver named Sohail, role played by Mohib Mirza. When Sohail learns about the real reason of the Allah Rakhi's flight to Lahore, he decides to deliver the mother and daughter safely to Lahore by endangering his own life.

The analysis of the film suggests that the selected film portrays the liberal feminist theory and challenges the patriarchal ideology prevailing strongly in our society. The liberal feminism movement is about the rights of women including basic human rights, political rights, economic rights, reproductive rights, and self realization (Serva). Although previously women were not presented in strong characters in Pakistani films, but here the role Allah Rakhi challenges the patriarchy in an authoritarian and dominant way, representing the natural powers of a woman as a mother to save her daughter. Although living in a dangerous, brutal, and patriarchal social system, the mother decides to face all the hardships to save her ten years old daughter from a brutal social crime of marrying a minor girl to a sixty-year-old man. The strong representation of the female character can be seen as a positive change in the portrayal of feminine role as the appearance of the female lead is not to seduce the audience.

“Dukhtar” not only encompasses a social lesson but also the cultural highway life of Pakistan. The protagonists are shown taking refuge in a cultural truck as the shoot of the movie takes place on the rocky roads to Attock. It is the northernmost area of Punjab province where the smaller Pashtun communities are resident outside the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan (Punjab, 2024a). It is a natural highway and the only colourful element on the dull and dry roads is the depiction of vibrant, brightly painted and highly decorative trucks, highlighting the cultural significance of local art. Truck art has been recognized globally as the cultural identity of Pakistan and promotes the softer and positive image of Pakistan. The symbolism related to the truck and its driver is also noteworthy as the Sohail, truck driver is the only male character portraying the positive male image in a male dominant society.

Further, the styling of the dressing of the mother and daughter are simple and insignificant highlighting their less significance in the society and representative of their boundness and restricted lifestyle. Relating to the styling of the actors, there's a consistent use of braids, small and big ones. The specification of hairstyle is also the representative of the restrictions applied in the Pashtun tribes to the women. Similarly, the use of the term “moray” to address the mother also indicate the specific language of the tribe. Another noteworthy point is that despite being a tribal Pashtun area of Pakistan, there is a consistent use of radio to consume news. This depicts the culture of still using the old technological devices for information in tribal areas of the country where technology and modern devices are slow to flourish.

A change is visible in the background culture and crowded city life on approaching Lahore of the lead characters. Lahore is known for its cultural bazaars, multifaced crowds, historical buildings, and bewitching colours. It is also called the city of shrines as the mausoleums of Sufi saints and the celebration of festivals are the traditions of city of Lahore (Punjab, 2024b). Upon coming to Lahore, the shots include the colourful representation of stalls of food and jewellery, portraying the scene of a festival on the shrine of some saint. It also portrays the Sufi dervish dancing on the beat of the drum and engage in drum beating, a traditional beat or music engaged to the tombs of Sufi saints. These elements are used as representatives of the cultural night life in the old city of Lahore.

### **Film “Bulbul” on Netflix**

Bulbul is an Indian film released in 2020, directed by Anvita Dutt Guptan, produced by Anushka Sharma, and distributed by Netflix. Lead characters include Tripti Dimri and Rahul Bose in the era of late nineteenth century in the region of Bengal (Nahaar, 2020). A young girl almost eight years old named Bulbul having

a natural love for climbing trees and listening scary stories got married to a family of landlords as a tradition. It reveals that her husband is not a boy of her age whom she met in the Doli named Satya but with his crude elder brother named Indranil, role played by Rahul Bose. The above-fifty years old Thakkur has a twin brother, who is mentally and physically challenged but married to a beautiful women named Binodini to take care of him. After building characters, the film takes a leap of twenty years and in the first year of twentieth century, when Satya returned after studying law from London, learns about the mysterious deaths taking place in the village including the death of his mentally ill brother. The villagers believe that it is the task of a witch haunting the surrounding jungle, but Satya does not believe these tales and consider these acts murders by some man. In twenty years, Bulbul is converted into a beautiful young woman, whose husband has disappeared. As a victim of domestic violence and having unexpressed anger in her about the false traditions and boundaries for women, the Bulbul turns into the murderer of men; involved in the domestic violence against women but in the avatar of goddess Kali, which is known for taking an avatar of destruction to end the bad deeds. The innocent and uneducated villagers consider it the act and curse of a witch. The only positive male character in the film is the role of doctor in the village, who always help the Bulbul to cure her wounds.

The technical details of the film are brilliant, and film is meticulously shot. Bulbul arouses attention towards the feminist subjects including child marriage, domestic violence and life of a widow with an interesting comparison between the two female characters in the same Haveli. The character of Binodini is an interesting foil to Bulbul; entrapped rather than empowered and scheming instead of self-reliant. The film is more about the consequences of crimes against women and the dealing of a young women against these violences rather than a horror film.

### **Comparison between the Above-mentioned Films**

Both the films draw attention towards the violence against women and challenges the patriarchal ideology in societies of both the countries. But important point to note is that feminist issues raised in the Bulbul are depicted as the archaic issues of the society during the late nineteenth century before the enforcement of Indian law especially about the child marriage and appearance and life of widows but persists in the very remote areas. Similarly, the feminist issue regarding child marriage raised in Dukhtar is the problem prevailing in twenty first century in Pakistan. It suggests the need of educating people in Pakistan in a subtle way about these sensitive topics and films can be resourceful in this regard. Dukhtar is drama/thriller highlighting the role of a mother as a saviour of her underaged girl, whereas Bulbul describes the consequences of child marriage and domestic violence.

The use of modern technology in cinematography is brilliant in Bulbul and focus is on the dramatization through colours, lighting, and dark effects. However, this element is absent in Dukhtar. The dramatization of certain scenes that could be made bolder by use of elements like background music. In fact, there is not much use of background music in the entire movie, specifically not to enhance the scenes. The prime contrast between Bulbul and Dukhtar is that of dramatization. Even though both the movies have strong female centric stories with a social message, Dukhtar is more inclined towards a realistic approach while Bulbul has a glamourized one. This could be seen in the clothing, colour grading as well as in the selection of the locations.

Although realistic movies are also available on the online platforms, its important to note that these platforms target the youth and making the movie attractive is a prime factor. It is noteworthy to raise the social issues on the global platforms but in an attractive and attention grasping manner. One aspect that makes Dukhtar ideal for online platforms is its duration. Being only one hour and 33 minutes long, the movie is a quick watch. This aspect is ideal for online platforms. As the time has changed and world has become a global village, the positive representation of local cultures and traditions in an attractive manner will also be helpful to promote the films on the global level. The representation of cultural diversity has already gained popularity on OTT platforms, and films from diverse societies are premiered on the global

platforms gaining high reception globally. Pakistani films and entertainment industry should pay attention towards these OTT platforms to promote their cultural identity.

## Conclusion

No doubt, in the recent years, Pakistani media has extended its scope and content and has become vocal about the social issues and is focusing on the human rights. Audiences have also started paying attention towards these issues but along with the awareness of public through films, it is necessary to launch films on global platforms to earn creative capital. For the purpose, keeping in mind the role of globalization, it is suggested to focus on such stories or content to target the diasporic Pakistani audience in other countries. The casting of popular and globally known actors will also help to attract the audience. Another role of globalization is to strengthen the identity politics, so the promotion of colorful local culture and traditions and the use of cultural heritage as the real location of shoot will also be helpful in attracting the audience. As these platforms like Netflix are most used by youth all over the world, the glamorous appearance of main leads promoting the traditional dressing, jewelry, accessories, and style in an innovative way can also play a role in the promotion of the films. The most significant point is to introduce digital technologies to improve the quality of the films and to match international standards. Creative thinking and innovative ideas along with the use of latest technology will create more opportunities for the Pakistani filmi content to get realization on the global scale. Further, films production on a larger scale will not only attract the local, the diasporic but also the international audiences with diverse cultures.

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